



Full-service restaurants see the benefits of takeout

Better packaging and new prep and marketing strategies allow table-service operators to cash in on off-premises demand

Full-service restaurants have long been gathering places. They're not just places to refuel, but places to reconnect — to share a meal or some drinks, sure, but also to share stories, to have moments of genuine face time rather than FaceTime.

But sometimes, particularly now after the onset of the pandemic, people don't want to spend time in dining rooms. The convenience of off-premises dining has taken hold, and even as customers start to shed their masks and belly up to actual bars again, they continue to enjoy the convenience of more transactional, less emotional and less time-consuming meals that they can pick up or have delivered. And full-service operators that figured out how to compete with more traditional off-premises options during the pandemic now have entirely new revenue streams to capitalize on.

RPM Restaurants, a division of Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises in Chicago, already had robust catering programs at its restaurants — RPM Steak, RPM Seafood, RPM Italian and Pizzeria Portofino — but the surge in demand for off-premises options as the pandemic struck meant the group had to improve its game.

"It's how we survived for a couple of months," until dining rooms reopened, managing partner Kelly Clancy said. "It gave us an opportunity to dial in our carryout and make it the best we possibly could."

That included improving its packaging. Clancy and her team switched from plastic to recyclable aluminum containers that allowed customers to pop their pickups directly into the oven for reheating. The group also improved its reheating instructions, she said.

At Pizzeria Portofino, the team added artwork to the pizza boxes, making them more memorable and keeping the restaurant top-of-mind for the next time customers wanted pizza.

"I think we made a huge impact, and guests were able to see what the restaurants could really do," she said. "To this day a lot of the restaurants are still experiencing the largest carryout numbers that they've ever seen."

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