CHEF'STORE INDUSTRY REPORT:

Tech Trends Restaurants are Turning to in 2026

76 PERCENT OF OWNERS[1] IDENTIFYED TECHNOLOGY AS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

In 2026, technology is no longer a support function in restaurants. It is a core driver of efficiency, resilience, and guest satisfaction. With 76 percent of owners[1] identifying technology as a competitive advantage, its role in shaping operational performance is now industry-wide. As competition intensifies and margins remain tight, operators are investing in connected, intelligent systems that streamline workflows, improve decision-making, and elevate the overall dining experience.

THE EVOLUTION OF RESTAURANT TECHNOLOGY

The restaurant industry has long demonstrated an ability to adapt to change, with technology playing a critical role in that evolution. What began as basic digitization has progressed into more interconnected systems that influence nearly every aspect of restaurant operations, from front-of-house interactions to back-of-house decision-making. Each wave of adoption has been driven not only by innovation but by the industry's need to operate more efficiently, respond to guest expectations, and remain competitive in an increasingly crowded marketplace.

Early Digital Adoption

The introduction of point-of-sale (POS) systems in the early 2000s marked a fundamental shift away from manual processes, replacing handwritten tickets and spreadsheets with digital sales and inventory tracking. These systems improved accuracy, reduced errors, and gave operators their first real-time visibility into performance metrics.

By the mid-2000s, the rise of internet access and e-commerce paved the way for online ordering and third-party delivery platforms, allowing restaurants to reach customers beyond the dining room. This shift aligned with changing consumer expectations for convenience and accessibility, while also introducing new operational complexities.

Throughout the 2010s, digital adoption accelerated significantly. Mobile payments, branded loyalty apps, self-service kiosks, and QR-based menus became increasingly common as smartphones reshaped how guests interacted with restaurants. Data collection and personalization emerged as competitive differentiators, enabling operators to better understand customer preferences, optimize menus, and drive repeat visits.

THE CONTACTLESS PUSH AND BEYOND

The early 2020s marked a turning point as contactless technology rapidly moved from optional to essential. Digital payments, online ordering, curbside pickup, and contactless dining solutions were adopted at scale to meet safety requirements and shifting consumer comfort levels. What initially emerged as a short-term response quickly became a long-term operational standard.

As restaurants moved beyond crisis-driven adoption, the focus shifted toward integration and optimization. In 2026, restaurant technology ecosystems are increasingly designed to work together, enabling greater efficiency, real-time insights, and more consistent guest experiences, laying the foundation for the next generation of intelligent, data-driven restaurant operations.

TODAY, AND BEYOND:
5 RESTAURANT TECH TRENDS DEFINING 2026

As restaurant operators look ahead to 2026, technology adoption is increasingly driven by measurable impact rather than experimentation. Data from across the industry highlights the tools that are most effectively improving operational efficiency, elevating guest experiences, and protecting profitability in a challenging economic environment.

1. Fast Ordering and Payments

Speed and convenience continue to define modern dining expectations. In 2026, restaurants are prioritizing fast, flexible ordering and payment options that put control directly in guests' hands. Mobile payments, QR-based menus, and pay-at-the-table solutions allow diners to order and settle checks on their own terms. These tools reduce wait times, improve table turnover, create a more relaxed guest-first experience, and increase revenue.

Contactless menu usage has grown 433 percent[2] since 2021, and the market is expected to reach $5 billion by 2032[3]

72 percent[4] of operators who adopted kiosk ordering saw increased order sizes

Online ordering platforms increase order amounts by 30 percent[5], compared to traditional ordering systems

2. Personalized Experiences That Build Loyalty

As competition intensifies, personalization has become a critical differentiator. Restaurants are increasingly leveraging guest data and AI-driven tools to recognize repeat customers, tailor promotions, and deliver more relevant experiences across channels. In 2026, restaurants are using customer data to recognize repeat guests and automatically deliver tailored offers, inspiring operators to innovate and foster loyalty.

- 33 percent[6] of restaurant owners are using AI-based platforms to deliver personalized guest experiences
- 82 percent[7] of restaurant operators intend to increase AI investment to focus on customer experience and loyalty

3. Back-of-House Technology

Operational efficiency in the kitchen is becoming just as important as front-of-house experience. Back-of-house technology adoption continues to rise as restaurants seek greater consistency, cost control, and scalability. Data shows widespread adoption of automated inventory tools and significant sales growth among establishments using AI-based back-of-house technology.

- 96 percent[8] of restaurants implement automation tools for inventory tracking
- Establishments using AI-based back-of-house tech saw a 56 percent[9] increase in sales

4. Operational-Focused Platforms

Restaurants are generating more data than ever, but value comes from turning that data into action. In 2026, operators are investing in operational platforms that centralize insights across ordering, payments, labor, inventory, and reporting. Advanced analytics and AI-powered tools are transforming raw data into practical insights. Demand forecasting, menu performance analysis, and growth opportunity identification allow operators to make informed decisions quickly. Predictable analytics have been shown to:

- Reduce food loss by 40 percent[10]
- Diminish food costs by 15 percent[11]
- Boost forecast accuracy by 22 percent[12]

Restaurant owners benefit from systems that centralize ordering, payments, labor, inventory, and reporting, giving them confidence and control over their operations in real time.

5. Labor Technology That Supports Teams

Labor remains one of the industry's biggest challenges. With recruitment and retention continuing to strain operations, technology is playing an increasingly supportive role for both managers and staff. 77 percent[13] of restaurant owners say employee recruitment and retention remain challenging. However, technology is stepping in to help.

- Automated onboarding platforms can help restaurants reduce 60 percent[14] of their training and HR processes.
- Predictive scheduling platforms use sales forecasts, availability, and labor rules to build balanced shifts automatically. These tools can lower labor costs by 25 percent[15]

THE FUTURE OF RESTAURANT TECHNOLOGY

The next phase of restaurant technology is defined by intention and impact. In 2026, restaurant technology is about working smarter, not harder. Operators are prioritizing solutions that integrate seamlessly, support staff, and deliver measurable results. From front-of-house experiences to smart kitchens and data-driven decision-making, restaurants that invest in the right technology today are positioning themselves for long-term success.

Sources

1. https://www.dotsignage.com
2. https://www.startus-insights.com
3. https://www.startus-insights.com
4. https://www.getcraver.com
5. https://www.getcraver.com
6. https://www.startus-insights.com
7. https://www.tillster.com
8. https://reachify.io
9. https://reachify.io
10. https://www.restolabs.com
11. https://www.restolabs.com
12. https://www.restolabs.com
13. https://go.restaurant.org
14. https://www.restolabs.com
15. https://www.restolabs.com