

Zagat 2007 Restaurants Survey

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US diners eat out more and spend more with prices up 2.8%; service is no. 1 complaint, but tips grow anyway; Asian cuisines, hotel dining and sustainably grown foods are on the march.

Zagat Survey today released the results of its new 2007 America's Top Restaurants Survey. The guide, covering 1,389 eateries in 42 major cities, is based on 21 million meals experienced by over 123,000 surveyors.

It reflects a banner year for restaurant goers nationwide: Not only are restaurant openings far outpacing closings, but the past year's +2.8% overall average increase in meal cost is below the +4% rise of the Consumer Price Index. There is good news for restaurants too in that people are going out and spending more than ever, especially at the high end of the market where inflation was +6.9%.

What's Inside: The 2007 Survey not only lists the Top Food and Most Popular eateries in each of the 42 markets covered, it also points to a variety of national dining trends including America's rising taste for Asian cuisines (especially Japanese), an increase in culinary diversity, dramatic improvements in hotel dining and growing support for sustainably raised food. In addition, the 2007 Survey offers a plethora of data about meal costs, tipping, favorite cuisines, dining frequency and much more.

"As part of an ongoing revolution in American dining, this marks yet another year where restaurant quality, diversity and value have improved across America," said Tim Zagat, CEO of Zagat Survey. "No matter how you slice it, it's a good time to go out to eat."

Eating Out -- A Lot: Nearly 83% of respondents say they are eating out as often or more often than they did two years ago. And 67% say they are spending more per meal while only 4% are spending less. When it comes to dining frequency, Texas' cities led the nation -- Houston (4.2 meals per week), Austin and Dallas/Ft. Worth (each at 4.0).

Running close behind in a three-way tie (at 3.8 times per week) are Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and Miami. Hot on their heels are Atlanta and San Antonio (each at 3.7). New York trails at 3.3 (perhaps due to the high cost of dining there), but New Yorkers need not get an inferiority complex, since Boston comes in last at 2.7 times per week.

Dollars and Cents: New York City leads the way as the most costly U.S. restaurant city with an average meal tab of \$39.43. In second place is Palm Beach at \$38.56. By comparison, the national average is 17% lower at \$32.86, while the lower end of the spectrum is inhabited by cities such as Houston (\$27.04) and Atlanta (\$26.20). That said, the ultra high costs of dining in Tokyo (\$73.69), London (\$71.19) and Paris (\$65.85), make U.S. prices seem like a steal.

Tipping: While some other nations' diners pay much more for their meals, they are not big tippers. Americans, on the other hand, are more generous -- especially in cities like Orlando and Philadelphia (both 19.4%) and St. Louis (19.3%) where tipping exceeds the national average (18.9%). Inexplicably, West Coast diners tip less than those on the East Coast, up to a full percentage point less in San Francisco and Los Angeles (18.4%)

Slighting Service: Sadly it's the same old story across the country when it comes to service. Fully 72% of diners say service is the greatest irritant when it comes to eating out, while only 28% cumulatively cite other frustrations such as noise, parking, prices, and food quality. In New York, issues like Noise/Crowds (38%) and Prices (10%) significantly exceed the national norms. In contrast, the most important dining component, food is cited as a problem by only 5% of Zagat's U.S. surveyors.

Favorite Cuisines: Nationwide, Italian cuisine remains the number one preference with 27% of surveyors calling it their favorite. American food comes in second at 16% and French in third with 12%. Although individual Asian flavors cuisines score below 10% each, when combined, Japanese, Chinese and Thai run a close second to Italian cuisine with 25% of the vote.

Sustainably Raised Food: Reflecting the increasing interest in sustainably raised foods, residents of the West Coast -- specifically Portland (80%), San Francisco (74%) and Seattle (72%) -- say they are willing to pay more for it. Their counterparts in the rest of the country are not quite so green, e.g., New York (58%) and St. Louis (55%).

Distances Don't Matter: Despite the high price of gas during the past year, that alone is not enough to stop hungry Americans from traveling for a fine meal. In fact, 63% of respondents nationwide say they'd be willing to travel 45 minutes or more each way for a good meal. And 40% say they'd travel an hour or longer.

Reservations Online: Reserving online is steadily becoming more popular. On average, 78% of Americans still call the restaurant, however 8% are now using the Internet. It should be no surprise that San Francisco ranks the highest (33%) among those who make reservations online. Miami (2%) and Phoenix (3%) residents are far less likely to net seats on the Web.

Anti-Smoking: Ninety-seven percent of respondents said they would dine out the same amount or more frequently if smoking were prohibited. Even with smokers in the mix, 32% say they would dine out more if smoking was banned and only 3% say less. In other words, clean air is good for business as well as for health.

Restaurants Become Multi-Taskers: A new 'invention' being led by some of the nation's top chefs is the dual-purpose dining hall under one roof, i.e., where one space is formal with high tabs, and another is casual with lower costs. Following the lead of NYC's Jean Georges are Coi in San Francisco, Primo in Tucson, The Modern and Aquavit in New York and Joel Robuchon with two restaurants in Las Vegas.

Hotels Are Hot: More than ever, hotel restaurants are bringing in top chefs. It's a win-win-win proposition: the hotels boost their brands; the chefs benefit from favorable leases; and diners reap the ultimate reward -- mouthwatering meals. This trend, which has revolutionized dining in Las Vegas in the past few years, is accelerating in New York with Gordon Ramsay soon-to-open at The London NYC, Joel Robuchon's L'Atelier at The Four Seasons Hotel, Alan Yau's Park Chinois at the restored Gramercy Park Hotel, Laurent Tourondel at the Ritz Carlton, Alain Ducasse moving to The St. Regis, Tony Chi taking over at The Essex House and Geoffrey Zakarian's Country and Cafe at Country at the Carlton Hotel. In Atlantic City, the Borgata Hotel Casino attracted San Francisco's Michael Mina, Philadelphia's Susanne Foo and TV star Bobby Flay; not to be outbid, Caesar's Atlantic City imported Georges Perrier of Philadelphia's Le Bec Fin. Four top chefs, Mark Milletto, Douglas Rodriguez, Nobu Matsuhisa and Emeril Lagasse have respectively been imported by the Hotel Nash, Savoy, Shore Club and The Loews. And the trend goes on and on in city after city.

The 2007 America's Top Restaurants guide (\$15.95) was edited by Shelley Gallagher and Robert Seixas and is available at bookstores and other retail outlets, through www.Zagat.com or by calling 888/371-5440.

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