

Outdoor Dining:

Best Practices and Key Insights



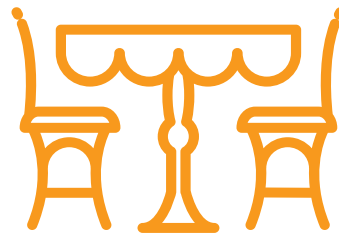
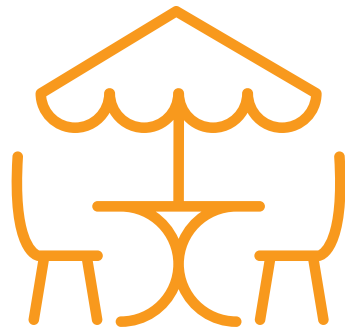
Thinking about developing an outdoor dining space at your business or expanding one you already have? You aren't alone! Many restaurants and foodservice providers are jumping on board as a way to create additional seating and provide a beautiful atmosphere for diners to enjoy. In this guide, we're sharing everything you need to know to make your outdoor dining space profitable and the place to be.

The Rise of Outdoor Dining

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many businesses to either temporarily close their doors or adapt to restrictions put in place by the government. For those in the foodservice world, capacity limitations were enacted to allow for social distancing. This meant only a small percentage of indoor dining tables could be occupied at one time. So, many foodservice providers got creative by setting up brand new outdoor dining areas so they could accommodate more patrons at once in an effort to keep their businesses afloat.

According to the National Restaurant Association's 2021 State of the Restaurant Industry report, approximately 62% of fine dining and 56% of casual dining operators chose to dedicate resources to developing and expanding outdoor dining since the pandemic began. In many cases, they took advantage of city programs that allowed them to occupy sidewalks, streets, and parking lots with their outdoor dining areas.

Even as restrictions are being lifted and COVID-19 cases are declining, many foodservice providers operators and patrons want to make outdoor dining more of a permanent fixture. Although it's certainly not a new concept, there's been a resurgence in the desire to eat outdoors and enjoy the fresh air.





The 5 Benefits and ROI of Outdoor Dining

If you're considering adding an outdoor dining area to your business, or expanding the one you have, you're likely aware of the added expenses you'll incur in the process. You'll need tables and chairs, lighting, and you may even want to build a dedicated patio for your outdoor seating. Before making such a big financial commitment, you might be wondering if it's going to be a worthwhile investment.

Luckily, there are a number of benefits to having outdoor dining at your establishment. And it's not just because it allows patrons to soak up the sunshine during the day and take in the view of the moon at night. Outdoor dining is valuable to patrons and businesses alike.

Here are some of the benefits:

Additional Seating for Patrons: Having extra seating will really come in handy, particularly on those busy nights at the restaurant or facility. You won't have to turn people away because you have a full house. Plus, it'll cut down on the amount of time people spend waiting for an available table.

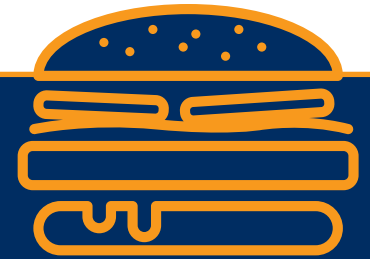
Increased Revenue: More seating at your organization means you'll be able to accept more patrons at one time. And when you can accept more patrons, you're likely going to see an increase in revenue since you should thereby see an increase in orders throughout a service. Not only that, but the sole fact that you have outdoor seating will attract people to your establishment, especially in the warmer weather months. Many people specifically look for this when searching for a place to dine out.

Opportunities for Events: You could make your outdoor dining area available to book for private parties, which can be another smart way to boost revenue. Alternatively, it's also the perfect space should you be interested in hiring someone to play live music. If people know a special event is taking place, they'll be more inclined to choose your business to grab a bite to eat.

Lower Stress Levels: Spending time outside can potentially reduce stress, as it helps to lower the heart rate and blood pressure. This is a winning situation for both your patrons and your staff. When the staff is less stressed, they'll provide better service. And when patrons aren't stressed, they'll be satisfied with their experience. It helps to add lots of greenery to your outdoor area!

Option to be Pet-Friendly: Should you want a way to make your establishment a pet-friendly facility, having an outdoor dining area is crucial. Patrons wouldn't be able to bring their dog into an indoor dining area, but it's perfectly acceptable outside as long as safety precautions are taken. This could easily attract people from off the street should they be walking by with a pet as there wouldn't be anything stopping them from dining with you.

Of course, there are a number of other benefits to having an outdoor dining space, but these are what we feel to be the top few. Now, the question is... Will outdoor seating actually provide ROI for your business? To help you determine if it's a smart move, here are a couple things to consider:



Your Reasoning for Adding Outdoor Dining: Understand why you want to incorporate outdoor dining in the first place. You may want to have more available seating so you can open up your facility to more patrons. Or you may want an alternative to indoor dining or a space for private events. Ultimately, you need to make sure you're getting value out of the space.

Determine if the Staff Can Handle Extra Tables: You can't just add extra seating for the sake of having it. Your kitchen and staff need to be able to handle having additional customers during a single service without getting overwhelmed. Talk to them before making any big decisions like this to ensure they're comfortable and feel capable of tackling the extra responsibility.

Ultimately, you have to make the decision that's right for your business. Think of the benefits of having an outdoor dining area and realistically consider whether or not it's something your team can manage.

How Different Industries Use Outdoor Dining

When thinking of outdoor dining spaces, the restaurant industry is probably the first to come to mind. However, there are a number of other industries that have taken a liking to eating outdoors.

Schools, hospitals, senior care facilities, hotels, and even food retailers

are creating their own outside dining areas for people to enjoy their meals in the fresh air.

For instance, schools are incorporating dining spaces in courtyards to give children a safe space to eat in between classes. Senior centers have created spaces that allow their residents to soak up some vitamin D during lunchtime. And even hotels are creating beautiful outdoor areas for guests to relax, eat, and enjoy the company of their friends and family while on a getaway.

These days, it's so important that we get out of the house or out of the office and into nature. It offers great benefits for our physical and mental health, which can truly transform our mood and outlook on life.



Designing Your Outdoor Dining Area

You certainly don't want to place a few tables and chairs outside and consider your space complete. Creating an outdoor dining area should be an experience. People want to eat outside to enjoy the atmosphere, whether they're soaking in the daytime sun or enjoying the lights at night.

To create a dining space that's not only aesthetically pleasing, but also comfortable and inviting, here are some tips that will make your outdoor dining area just that.



1

Attract Customers with a Sign Advertising Your Outdoor Space

Because having an outdoor dining area can be a major selling point for potential customers, especially when the weather is nice, it's smart to advertise this space with a simple sign. You can place a sign by your entrance, encouraging customers to ask for a table outside if they'd like to dine in the fresh air.

In the actual outdoor seating area, you can place another sign to showcase any specials of the day, your drink menu, or anything else you'd like to draw attention to. This is perfect for driving sales on certain items that you'd like patrons to try.



2

Provide Protection from the Weather

One of the most important steps to take when building your outdoor dining area is to make sure you offer protection from all kinds of weather. If it's in budget, a roof will shade patrons from the sun, preventing dreaded sunburns while customers enjoy their meals. Otherwise, you can opt to use tables that have umbrellas overhead. A roof or awnings will also come in handy on those rainy days.

When the weather gets cold, you'll need a way to keep your staff and diners warm. Do this by adding a fireplace or strategically placing a few heaters throughout the dining area. This should keep everyone feeling toasty and comfortable. Otherwise, it's hard to enjoy a meal if you're freezing.



3

Choose Comfortable, but Stylish, Dining Furniture

The wrong dining furniture can completely ruin the vibe of your outdoor dining space, so this isn't a decision that should be rushed. Plus, there are a few factors to consider in choosing the best furniture. First and foremost, you want to consider comfort to ensure your guests have a pleasant experience.

It's also important that the furniture you choose is durable because it needs to withstand daily use, as well as the weather. And of course, it should be easy to clean. There's a huge risk of spillage when people are enjoying food and drinks and you don't want your brand new furniture getting ruined. Also consider whether or not you're going to be moving this furniture for security reasons at the end of a shift. If you're going to be stacking chairs, they'll need to be lightweight and easy for your staff to lift and carry. You certainly don't want to risk any on-the-job injuries.

And finally, the tables and chairs you choose need to look good. Find something that fits the overall look and feel of your space. These days people are always sharing photos of their dining experiences on social media and a pretty location is going to get even more posts, likes, and shares.



4

Incorporate Greenery

As mentioned above, being outside in nature is great for reducing your stress levels. However, this is often hard to find when you're in the city surrounded by buildings and sidewalks. To make your space more inviting, consider adding some greenery. An assortment of lush foliage not only looks great but can also be used to create privacy between public sidewalks and your dining area. Add planters with various plants and succulents, as well as small trees.



5

Add Decorative Lighting for Ambiance

Since people will be enjoying your outdoor dining space in the evening hours, you'll want to make sure you have ample lighting. People don't want to dine in the dark! Luckily, you can get creative with your lighting options to create a space that's attractive and welcoming.

A popular option is to string lights overhead, illuminating the entire space with a warm glow. Alternatively, to create a more romantic feeling, you could have lanterns placed throughout the dining area and on each table.

How to Deal with Inclement Weather

When the weather is bad, many businesses choose to close their outdoor dining area to patrons. However, if they took measures to protect the space from inclement weather, it could stay open to those who would still like to dine outside. But the question is, how can you protect your patrons and your furniture from the elements? Here are a few tips you can use:

1

Provide Some Sort of Overhead Coverage

First and foremost, it's essential to have some sort of overhead coverage to protect those dining outdoors from weather such as rain. It's important to keep them dry and will prevent their food from being ruined. Luckily, there are a few options that you can go with to provide this type of coverage.

If your budget allows, you can build a full roof to cover the entire dining patio. Using materials that match the roof of the rest of your building will help it withstand rain, wind, ice, and snow. However, you can also opt for a fabric shade if you're looking for something more budget-friendly.

Another option is to use a retractable awning, which would allow you to have coverage from the weather only when you need it. This way, if you know there's rain in the forecast, you can open the awning before the rain begins, ensuring all of your patrons are protected.

2

Consider Installing Protective Sides

For businesses located in places that are prone to nasty weather, it would be wise to think beyond some sort of roofing. Protective siding can also be useful, blocking patrons and staff from the wind and potential flying debris. You certainly don't want anyone getting injured while they're dining with you.



3

Opt for Weatherproof Materials

When choosing the furniture that will go in your outdoor dining area, you'll want to go with something that will withstand the test of time and won't be likely to get damaged by the elements. Rain, wind, and snow can be hard on furniture, so you don't want tables and chairs that will need to be replaced after only a short period of time.

Look for furniture made from weatherproof materials. For instance, you may want to avoid metal furniture that could rust after being left out in the rain. Besides furniture, it's important to consider the flooring you use on your outdoor patio. Concrete is a great option because it'll be low-maintenance and will last a long time. Investing in better materials now is going to save you money in the long run.

4

Have a Place to Store Furniture

If you want to protect your furniture from the harsh weather (and from theft), it would be smart to have a place where you can store items when not in use. For example, you could store chairs or cushions to make sure they don't get damaged, blown away, or stolen. If possible, designate a storage space for all of your outdoor items that you don't want to leave outside. You may even opt to purchase a storage shed if you have space, giving you a secure location to stash everything when your business is closed.

5

Make Sure Furniture is Secure

If you aren't able to clear your patio and put furniture away before the bad weather rolls through, you'll need to make sure it's secure. It's a huge liability if your tables or chairs are blowing around in windy weather. And you probably don't want them to get damaged either.

Consider purchasing more permanent fixtures like hardwood tables and chairs or making concrete benches. You won't have to worry about them moving around. Plus, you can have cushions to make these hard seats more comfortable. Wrought iron furniture is another great option that isn't likely to budge on those windy days.



How to Keep Your Outdoor Dining Area Open in the Winter

If it snows in your area, you need to think beyond just those rainy days and figure out what you'll do when it snows. While you may think that people won't be likely to dine outside when the weather is cold, some people still enjoy being out in the fresh air. So, why not accommodate them?

There are a few ways you can make your outdoor dining area suitable for use during the winter months. Here's what you can do so everyone stays warm and enjoys their experience as the snow falls:

Provide Heating:



The most important factor in keeping your outdoor seating open during the winter is making sure your patrons are nice and toasty. If people are freezing while they're eating their meal, it's not going to be a pleasant experience. One option is to have a built-in fireplace that you can turn on. Alternatively, you can use infrared outdoor heaters to provide warmth, as they're more budget-friendly than running gas heaters. A fire pit is also a nice option that lends to the ambiance.

Offer Blankets:



If you really want to provide a luxury experience for your patrons, keep a few blankets on hand in case people get chilly. It's simple, but also a really nice touch that shows you care about them and want them to be comfortable.

Add Warm Drinks to the Menu:



It's always smart to add a few seasonal items to your menu. For example, when it's cold, a warm drink really hits the spot. Think about adding coffee, hot chocolate, or other warm beverages to your menu if you haven't already. This way, people can warm up with a good drink before or after their meal. Appetizers and main dishes that are served warm are also helpful.

Create Pods for an Intimate Experience:



During the COVID-19 pandemic, many businesses and restaurants created pods that allowed parties to dine together while being blocked off from other patrons. What was started as a way to keep people safe is actually a genius way to stay warm during the winter. Since these pods are enclosed, it keeps the cold air out and the heat in so guests stay toasty.



Just remember that your outdoor dining area doesn't have to close in the winter. Sometimes the most magical thing you can do is enjoy a meal and watch the snow falling around you. And what better way to experience that than being outside in the middle of it all?

Outdoor Heating and Fire Safety

While we're on the topic of keeping guests warm during the winter weather, it's crucial that we address some concerns that may arise around heating. The use of a fireplace or an infrared heater can be dangerous, so it's important to take proper precautions so no one gets injured.

First, if you're using a fireplace or a fire pit to provide warmth for your outdoor dining area, make sure no one is seated too close to the flames. You can purchase screens to place in front of the fireplace or over the fire pit to prevent anyone (especially children) from getting burned.

With electric heaters, you need to remember that they can cause nearby items to catch on fire. Don't place them too close to anything flammable, such as a fabric tablecloth or cushions. It's preferable to keep heaters in a corner, away from guests so they don't come into close contact with them. You may even want to remind guests not to touch the heaters, as they can sometimes be hot.



How to Keep an Outdoor Dining Space Safe



As you're creating an outdoor dining space, you also need to consider more than just fire safety. Depending on how close the space is located to roadways and sidewalks, you may need to add an extra layer of protection to prevent patrons from getting hurt.

For businesses in the city, outdoor spaces are typically along the side of the road. This means there are frequently people passing by on both bicycles and cars. And sometimes, accidents happen that lead to people crashing into the space where patrons are dining. To prevent this, it would be wise to set up some sort of barrier that would potentially stop someone from barreling into your business.

Fencing could work to keep bicyclists from crossing into your dining area. It may even be helpful to add lights or reflectors to your fence so it's more visible at nighttime. When it comes to cars, fencing isn't going to help, so you'll want something more substantial. Consider adding a brick or concrete wall as a barrier. While it won't stop cars entirely, it does add an extra layer of protection.

Why You Need Cleaning Supplies for Your Outdoor Space

Cleaning supplies are essential for all foodservice facilities. Staff should be sweeping, mopping, or vacuuming floors. They should be disinfecting dining tables and seats, as well as the kitchen and bathrooms. Nothing is more important than the safety of the staff and customers.

However, when incorporating an outdoor dining space into your facility's footprint, there are some other messes you'll find yourself cleaning up. And it just might require a few extra cleaning products. Here's why they'll come in handy:

Bird Droppings:



While it's not exactly a pretty thought, birds are likely to leave their mark on your outdoor furniture, so you'll want something to clean it up. It simply wouldn't be sanitary to leave it. Have disinfectants and fabric cleaner on hand for wiping up these types of messes.

Dogs:



If you choose to open your outdoor dining area to pets, you may notice hair that they've left behind. Use a broom or vacuum to clean it up so other guests don't find themselves leaving with dog hair stuck to their clothing. You'll also need something to clean up accidents should a dog use your space as their personal bathroom or get sick.



Dirt and Dust:



Outdoor spaces require even more cleaning than the tables and chairs inside because of the dirt and dust that can build up quickly. Debris can blow around in the wind, settling on your furniture. And in the spring, you'll be sure to notice a green layer of pollen if you aren't cleaning enough. A good cleanser is ideal for wiping down tables, while you may want a vacuum to suck up grime from any fabric furniture pieces. Even keep a hose nearby to rinse the floor after hours.

FAQ About Outdoor Dining

Finally, let's wrap up our outdoor dining guide with a few frequently asked questions that will prepare you for creating or expanding your dining area.

Is an Outdoor Dining Space a Profitable Decision?

Absolutely! If you have the room to create an outdoor dining area for patrons, it can be a great way to attract extra income. When the weather is nice, many people will pick a restaurant simply because of its outdoor seating. Plus, it gives you the ability to host more tables during a single shift. Just make sure it's something your kitchen staff and wait staff can handle.



What Can I Do to Improve the Atmosphere?

Choose comfortable, yet stylish, furniture that will make guests want to stay for a while. Hang lights to turn on as the sun sets or add lanterns throughout the space to create a more romantic vibe. Play music through speakers or have live music to get everyone feeling good. And make sure you take care of your guests by ensuring they're comfortable no matter the weather!



How Can I Make an Outdoor Space More Unique?

If you really want to make your outdoor dining area more enticing, consider creating an outdoor-only menu. This is something many restaurants have done to help streamline operations. With a simpler menu, patrons will spend less time mulling over what to order and more time enjoying themselves.

Use this as an opportunity to promote menu items that offer high margins. Be sure to advertise on your website and social media that you have an outdoor menu, so they know what to expect before arriving.

Contact Us



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There's no better time than the present to develop a beautiful outdoor dining area for your patrons to enjoy a delicious meal. But if you need some help getting started, there's no need to stress. Our team here at Hubert can assist with designing the layout of your space and sourcing products. Plus, we can answer any questions you may have.

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