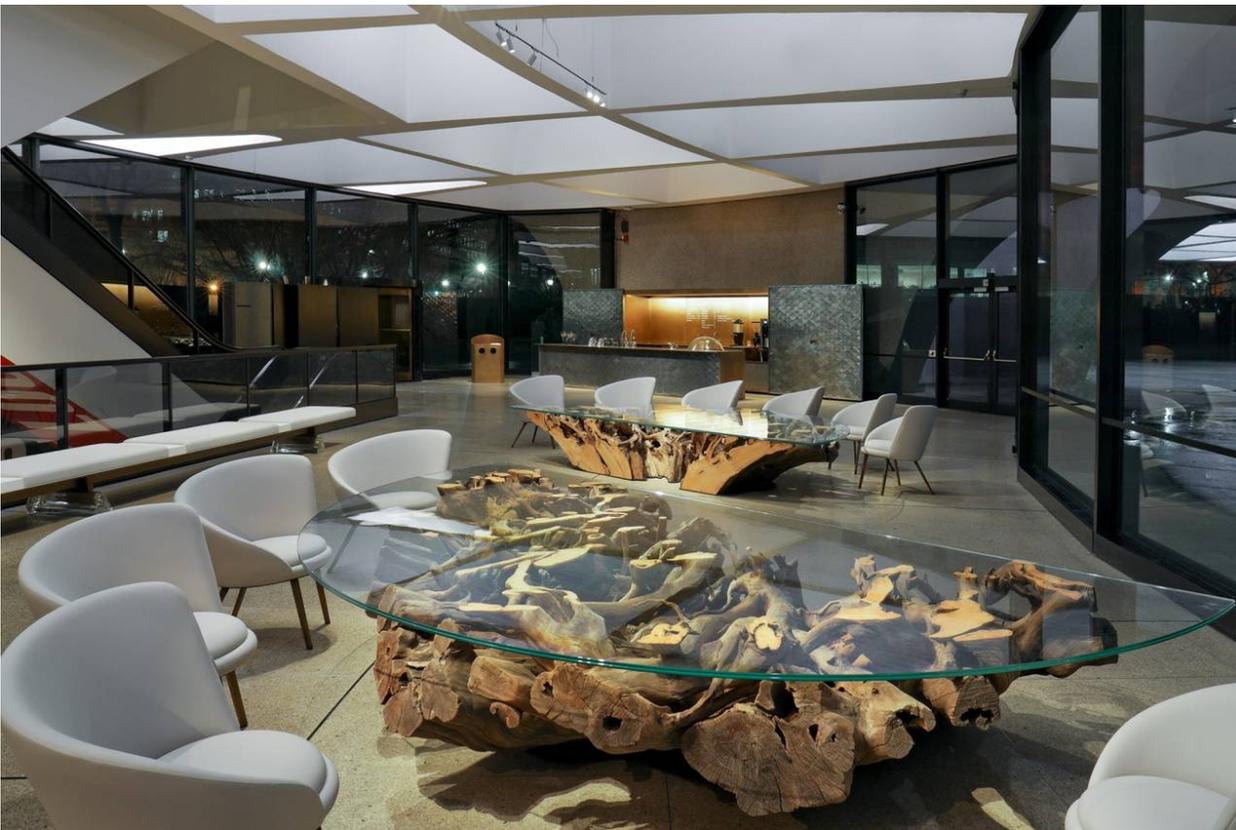


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What's One of the Hottest Attractions at Museums? The Restaurant

Museum restaurants increasingly boast award-winning chefs and out-of-the-ordinary food



Dolcezza cafe in the lobby of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. PHOTO: CATHY CARVER

By

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There was a time, not long ago, when museum restaurants were simply a place where you could grab something to eat while visiting the museum.

Now, museums may be the place you visit while going out to eat.

In recent years, major art museums across the U.S. have been ditching run-of-the-mill cafeterias and making way for restaurants that are destinations in their own right, with top chefs and unique menus regularly written up in Michelin and Zagat guides and reviewed in magazines such as Bon Appétit, Food & Wine and Travel & Leisure. The Museum of Modern Art's restaurant, The Modern, holds four James Beard Foundation awards and two Michelin stars, while the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's In Situ has a Michelin star.

These restaurants are becoming central to museums not because of the revenue they generate, but because of their potential to attract visitors.

Getting more people through the doors and keeping them there longer through food “deepens their connection with the museum,” says David Berliner, president of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, which opened The Norm, run by Michelin-starred chef Saul Bolton, in 2016. “We’ve seen more memberships since The Norm opened,” he says.

Many museums are vying for the same visitors, creating something of a food arms race. Here are four trends driving the museum-restaurant boom and pushing museum restaurants in new directions:



Croque monsieur from the David Bowie-inspired menu at the Brooklyn Museum of Art's restaurant, the Norm. PHOTO: BEN HIDER

Redefining ‘museum’ food

The most obvious change in museum restaurants is simple: They’re serving tastier, healthier and more out-of-the-ordinary food. They are offering dishes that are upscale, locally sourced, and prepared by

chefs who have gained a regional, national or international reputation. As Marcy Goodwin, a museum consultant in Albuquerque, N.M., says, people who like art tend to be foodies.

At San Francisco's Asian Art Museum's newly renovated cafe, Sunday at the Museum, the specialties include miso avocado toast on Japanese milk bread, soy-chili-garlic "Sunday" chicken wings, Deuki's classic Korean fried chicken sandwich and garlic prawn noodles. The adventurous new food service and menu has led to a 70% increase in restaurant traffic, says Jay Xu, director of the museum.

Better and fresher food, as well as healthier menu choices, are an important tool for getting people into the museum and keeping them there longer, museum officials say. The presentation of that food, both on the plate and in how the wait staff interacts with guests, also is important. Customers want the same feeling from the food that they expect to receive from the art.

Still, it isn't all haute cuisine at the revamped museum eateries. Providing something for everyone is crucial, officials say.

"We tried to take chicken tenders off the menu but couldn't," says Catherine Surratt, director of auxiliary services at the Cleveland Museum of Art, which opened the Provenance Restaurant and Provenance Café in 2012. But there is a push to make the chicken free-range and the milk organic, she says, because "that's really what parents want."

Broader view of profitability

Restaurants aren't usually big moneymakers for museums—but museum officials say they don't care.

The goal is to attract more visitors and keep them there longer—which eventually leads to more revenue, as well as more memberships. Andrew Simnick, senior vice president for finance, strategy and operations at the Art Institute of Chicago, says its restaurant and cafe are "revenue-positive, but that's not wholly the point." The point is to make sure that food is one more way that visitors enjoy their experience at the museum, he says.

Café Phipps, the restaurant at the Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens in Pittsburgh, "doesn't usually earn a profit, and making a profit isn't the goal," says Richard V. Piacentini, the conservatory's executive director. "The point is to be a visitor amenity," he says, adding that the number of visitors to the conservatory has increased fivefold since Café Phipps opened in 2005. "If we had bad food, people might not come," he says.

What tends to make more money for museums and their food vendors is catering—whether it is events for members and donors, or weddings and parties for outside clients.

It is the very rare museum that operates its own food service. Usually outside restaurateurs develop the concept and menu, assist in the design of the restaurant and kitchen, and manage the day-to-day operations. The restaurateur typically receives a base fee of 3% to 7% of total restaurant revenue and an incentive fee of 10% to 50% of net profits from the entire food service, including catering, says Bradley Muro, head of the hospitality practice at the New York law firm Danziger, Danziger & Muro, which has negotiated contracts between restaurant groups and museums.

"Restaurateurs love these deals because they provide reliable income at far lower risk than restaurants they own themselves," he says.

Food as exhibit

More museums see the cafes as an extension of their education programming and the exhibits themselves.

A recent Brooklyn Museum of Art exhibition of costumes, lyric sheets, album art, photographs and videos relating to singer David Bowie was augmented by four evenings of David Bowie-inspired food and drink at The Norm, at \$75 to \$95 a person. The menu included “diamond dogfish & chips,” described as a homage to “Diamond Dogs,” one of the chef’s favorite Bowie albums, as well as a croque monsieur, with the description: “An oft-documented Bowie favorite, particularly the off-the-menu one made for him at a NYC restaurant where he was a regular.”

At the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African-American History and Culture in Washington, the menu at the Sweet Home Café is as carefully researched as the objects in display cases.

The food items are designed to be “part of the learning experience in what defines the African-American culture,” says museum director Lonnie G. Bunch III. Developed with the help of chef and television personality Carla Hall of “The Chew” and James Beard award-winning food historian and cookbook writer Jessica B. Harris, the menu includes gulf shrimp and stone-ground grits, with smoked tomato butter, caramelized leeks and crispy tasso.

Museum optional

Museum restaurants used to be located somewhere inside the building, which meant that guests had to pay an admission fee to eat there. These days, many museum restaurants have their own, separate doors from the outside, and most museum expansion projects are designed with these connected-but-separate spaces in mind.

At Dolcezza, the cafe in the lobby of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, 8% to 12% of customers stop in on their way to work, before the museum opens for the day, says a spokeswoman for the eatery, which opened this year.

In some cases, the restaurant outshines the museum—at least in certain guests’ minds. A 2017 TripAdvisor review of the Russ & Daughters cafe at New York’s Jewish Museum said: “This is a destination in and of itself, and you can also visit the Jewish Museum which is an additional destination at the same site.”

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