

Formulating a Winning Restaurant Concept

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Questions to Ask

Figuring out what kind of restaurant to open will be one of the most important decisions you'll make. Once you make this decision, everything else will flow from it -- from the dining room design to what sort of menu to develop to how many people to hire.

There are a lot of things to decide on when formulating your restaurant concept. The most important questions to ask are, "What kind of restaurant would I love to eat in everyday? The concept you choose should be something you love, since you'll be giving your time, money and sweat to this enterprise.

The next question you ought to ask is, "What kind of restaurant does my area need?" Every town has restaurants, and the best way to beat the competition is to offer something a little bit different from the rest.

Instead of opening an Italian restaurant like the one down the street, think about something that your area needs. What type of restaurant do you wish were in your town? Open that restaurant.

Real Life Concept Examples

Take Will Goldfarb, for example. He's a pastry chef who wanted to open a bar that felt like people were eating in his kitchen at home. He recently opened Room 4 Dessert in Manhattan, where he assembles desserts right in front of his customers while his mixologist serves up cocktails.

Inspiration for concepts comes from within and also from trends you read about and see while traveling. There's a new market segment called Meal Assembly, for example. People who don't really want to cook, but who want to put a nice meal on the table for their family go to a commercial kitchen where all the guesswork and labor is taken out of the process. How about developing a restaurant concept that would build on this trend?

Concept Considerations

If you have your heart set on opening a lunch place where locals can order your mom's meatloaf sandwiches, then obtaining a liquor license probably doesn't make sense. Neither do white tablecloths. You probably will offer a limited menu of sandwiches, maybe some soups and a salad or two. You won't need a huge kitchen with an army of chefs. You'll need a line cook or two and a prep cook. You'll probably want to offer those delicious sandwiches for take out. Depending on your area, you may need to offer delivery. If you're catering to the downtown office crowd, you probably want to be closed at night and on the weekends.

The more formal the concept, the more complex the menu and the more people you'll need to hire. If you plan to start your restaurant on a shoestring, keep the concept simple and small to save money. Now that you're working on your concept, you'll need to formalize a business structure and start securing financing.

Atmosphere

You should decide at the outset what kind of place you want to run. Will it have a scenic location with a great view and outside dining? Will it be a dark, romantic place for couples to dine? Will it be a casual eatery serving nearby office workers?

Knowing what kind of place you want to open at the start will save you time and money. You won't waste time looking for the wrong type of location and you won't waste money on design plans and buying the wrong type of chairs and lighting, etc.

Concept Checklist

A restaurant concept results from a combination of the following features:

1. Serve Liquor
2. Full Menu vs. Limited Menu
3. Take out
4. Delivery
5. Catering
6. Atmosphere

Concept Checklist as a Menu for Starting a Restaurant

The concept checklist contains important components of the restaurant business model. Each item on the check list will directly impact your revenue. Deciding not to serve liquor, for example, may be the right choice if you're opening a casual breakfast and lunch place, but know that it will limit your revenue and that you'll have to have that many more turns. Similarly, if you're opening a fancy upscale dinner restaurant, you may decide that delivery is not an option because your elegantly plated food will not travel well.

Use the concept checklist to decide how each items fits into your concept and business model.