

EATER-TAINMENT

Keep 'Em Hungry for More

By Brandon Willey

To keep guests coming back for more, savvy operators are reimagining their food and beverage options. This approach not only enriches the guest experience but also boosts revenue for the business. A solid and evolving food and beverage program can significantly enhance guests' overall experience, providing the fuel to enjoy all the center's activities, making the visit more enjoyable, and increasing dwell time. I recently sat down with Dave Wallace from Turfway Entertainment to discuss the vital role of a strong food and beverage program in bowling and entertainment centers.

The Evolution of Food and Beverage

Historically, food and beverage options were often limited to essential snacks and fast food. Simple offerings like popcorn or pretzels, hot dogs, pre-packaged pizza, soda, and beer were the norm, catering to the need for quick, convenient, and low-cost items. However, as consumer expectations have evolved, successful centers have adjusted accordingly.

Wallace reflects on the change, sharing, "As long as 15 years ago, groups such as Dave & Busters, Main Event, and Jillian's led the way in revolutionizing the 'Eat, Drink,

Play' experience, also known as eatertainment. The shift over the years has gained momentum and is now very common within the industry, resulting in significant revenues, profitability, and relevance due to the diversification of products."

Today, many centers are shifting towards more diverse and quality-driven menus. This evolution reflects a broader trend in the entertainment and hospitality industries, where guests increasingly seek unique, high-quality dining experiences.

Wallace says, "This change in consumer habits is pushing entertainment centers towards deploying a more significant footprint within the building for the food and beverage program. Modern centers are now incorporating comprehensive dining options that range from casual, quality eateries to full-service, sit-down restaurants, offering a variety of foods that appeal to all age groups."

The Case for Strong Food and Beverage Offerings

Investing in a robust food and beverage program has clear revenue implications. High-quality and diverse menu options can boost sales and increase per capita spending. Guests are more likely to stay longer and spend more when they can access appealing food and beverage choices. Wallace emphasizes that sales can increase significantly by designing the right menu, layout, and location and developing a robust branding and marketing plan for the restaurant and bar.

"The best social-based entertainment centers thrive on a 33% food, 33% beverage, 33% attractions model leveraging one against the other to drive top-line sales and large profits."

— Dave Wallace

Revenue Opportunities are Limitless

Additionally, food and beverage offerings present unique marketing opportunities. Special food events, seasonal menus, and themed dining experiences can attract new guests and keep regular visitors excited about returning. Wallace continues, "People know you have entertainment. Therefore, showcasing your food and beverage program enhances additional visit opportunities. Seasonal tabletop menus allow for a constant adaptation of the menu based on market trends, adjusting every quarter by removing the slower-selling items and adding the anticipated popular seasonal hits. These incremental quarterly





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changes allow for seasonal price increases of 25%, and by the end of the year, you have adjusted your menu to include the most popular items and a full price increase across the board."

Wallace says that one-off food and drink promotional experiences like beer pairings or wine and painting nights are increasing annual visits. Most Turfway clients have ten visits annually, Wallace shares. However, he suggests "all the pieces need to be in place," and creative food and beverage options need to be central to your entertainment offerings.

Trends in Elevated Food and Beverage Options

One of the most notable trends in entertainment centers is the introduction of gourmet and specialty food items. Entertainment centers now offer gourmet pizzas, artisanal sandwiches, and craft beverages, appealing to kids and adults looking for more than typical fast food. However, Wallace warns, "People eat with their eyes, so consistency of the product, the presentation, and the correct location for the restaurant within the facility are all critical to the highest success possible."

Another trend gaining traction is the integration of local products. By partnering with local vendors and showcasing regional specialties, centers can offer unique dining experiences that differentiate them from competitors. For example, offering locally sourced ice creams, freshly baked pastries, or craft beers can significantly enhance the appeal of a food and beverage program.

Wallace explains, "Some elevated food items include gourmet mac and cheese, bison burgers, artisanal flatbreads, sushi rolls, ramen, a wide variety of tacos, smoked foods, and more. Unique items are well received by guests as long as they are kept in the right place on a menu. For instance, having ramen with no other Asian foods would create guest apprehension and uncertainty, and this could cause lower sales than if the ramen was found in an Asian-inspired restaurant. Having at least three unique items per category offers higher comfort in purchasing these items."

Designing Family-Friendly Menus

Creating a family-friendly menu is crucial. Understanding the diverse dietary needs and preferences of families is the first step.



A successful menu balances variety with familiarity, offering choices catering to children and adults. Wallace emphasizes, "Ensuring you have a food content allergy chart is essential to ensure guests' needs are

met, and offering items such as gluten-free, free-roam, or plant-based items are becoming more commonplace."

Wallace adds, "Since entertainment is about fun, food offerings in many facilities should mirror this. Common foods such as burgers, tenders, wings, and pizzas are all very popular because they are ubiquitous in the home as fast-casual restaurant takeout. These items should represent a large menu section if you focus on unique chef-inspired cuisine."

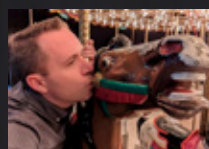
However, it's also essential to introduce healthier options that appeal to parents who are mindful of their children's nutrition, and the trend has been that centers are increasingly incorporating nutritious options into their menus. Strategies for offering healthier choices without compromising taste include using fresh, high-quality ingredients and cooking methods that preserve nutritional value.

Wallace suggests, "Common food purveyors offer many unique prepared sauces to add flair to nutritious foods. Having a chef as part of your team allows for a creative yet healthy opportunity to visually and tastefully enhance foods such as roasted Brussels sprouts, marsala chicken, and unique salads like spinach, watermelon, and feta."

Wallace sums this up by saying, "If you fail to move, someone else in your market will figure it out and possibly take you out of the game before you realize it's happened. An all-encompassing entertainment and food and beverage experience is the new norm in our world."

Fortunately, as Wallace mentions, "There are 100 times more restaurants than entertainment centers, which allows for a wealth of knowledge online and through your vendors. Beware of allowing a manager to dictate your path forward. If they are wrong, you could lose a lot, and they walk away unharmed financially. Do your homework. It's much easier than you think!"

Serious operators can significantly enhance guest satisfaction and drive business success by evolving menus to include elevated options, designing family-friendly offerings, emphasizing healthy choices, and understanding the business benefits. Investing in food and beverage is not just about feeding guests; it's about creating memorable experiences that keep families returning for more. It's time to dig in! ●



Brandon Willey, ICAE, is co-founder of the LBX Collective and Premier LBX Group, co-host of The LBX Daily Show, and founder and CEO of Hownd. Brandon has an intense passion for the attractions industry and extensive knowledge of location-based entertainment. Brandon is the former chair of IAAPA's FEC Committee and now sits on the North American Manufacturers and Suppliers Committee. You can connect with him at [LinkedIn.com/in/bwilley](https://www.linkedin.com/in/bwilley).