

ON THE HOUSE

JANUARY 2026
ISSUE: 03

A RESTAURANT GUIDE TO
GETTING DINERS IN THE DOOR



Relish

SWIPE, SEARCH, & SAVOR

How to get discovered in 2026,
presented by Back of House

From TikTok rabbit holes to consulting ChatGPT, the path to dining is becoming more algorithmic by the day. We sat down with Hilary Young, Head of Marketing Strategy at Back of House, to talk about how discovery is evolving and what operators can do to take back control of their digital presence. Covering everything across search and social, she walks us through how to think about visibility and storytelling today.



Hilary Young,
Head of Marketing Strategy at Back of House



At Back of House, restaurant operators have a trusted partner to tackle their most pressing operational and tech-related challenges. With access to vetted 3rd party technology providers and the help of veteran restaurant advisors, operators can more easily find and select the right technology solutions for their unique business needs. Visit www.backofhouse.io for more information.

Q. What makes a restaurant discoverable today?

A. You can't depend on having great food and hoping people find you — you need a digital presence. Make sure you're on social media like Instagram and TikTok. Start by just reposting what food lovers and micro-influencers are sharing about your restaurant. (Read more about working with food content creators on page 15.) Even someone with 2,500 followers can move the needle. Don't sleep on local PR either. I discover new restaurants all the time through Eater's city editions or food columns in local papers. That kind of earned media builds credibility. Some of the best visibility comes from inside the industry — chefs doing collabs, restaurants supporting each other, and cross-promoting on socials. It feels like a community and you create goodwill.

“You can't just depend on word of mouth anymore. Someone who's visiting from out of town is not going to hear about you unless you show up when they Google what's nearby.”

44%

of Americans plan to use AI more to discover restaurants and book reservations in 2026.

OpenTable Sep 2025 Survey

Q. Is AI changing how diners find restaurants?

A. People are definitely turning to ChatGPT or Google's AI Overview for recommendations, and if your digital presence isn't optimized for Google, it's not going to show up on ChatGPT either. These platforms crawl the entire internet, so if your website, listings, or profiles are outdated or incomplete, you're essentially invisible. If you don't have the time or headspace to manage your SEO yourself, there are tools that can help.

+ Tech Tool

Owner.com offers white-labeled restaurant websites and ordering tools with improved SEO that help businesses become more discoverable, plus marketing tools to reach out to your customer base.

A tricky shift is the new behavior called “zero-click search.” People Google something, get the answer they need in the AI snippet at the top, and then never click on a link. Operators may think no one is visiting their site, but people are just making decisions differently.

Q. How do you show up where diners are looking?

A. You have to think about search intent: not what they are searching, but why. Someone attending a downtown show will likely use Google Maps for proximity, while someone planning ahead tends to start on Resy or Eater.

These habits shift by generation: older diners may stick to simple Google searches, Millennials might prefer Google Maps or Resy, and Gen Z is likely turning to TikTok. To reach a wide swath of potential diners, you have to show up where they are already looking.

“Be everywhere — or at least be strategic about where you show up so your audience can find you.”

+ Tech Tool

Localyser is a tool that monitors online reviews, guest feedback, surveys, and social media DMs across 75 sources including food delivery aggregators.

Q. What's your advice for restaurants trying to stand out online in a sea of sameness?

A. One of the biggest things I see is restaurants trying to copy what others are doing just because it looks successful, but that kind of mimicry rarely works if it doesn't feel authentic to you.

“Figure out who you are as a restaurant and what feels good for you and your team. What works for one restaurant may not work for you.”

Your digital presence should match the experience guests get when they walk through the door. →



Hilary's Top 10 Tips

01 Use AI, But Don't Lose the Human Touch

Automate where it counts, like answering phones or taking inventory, but make sure staff still connects with guests at the table. Efficiency and hospitality can co-exist.

02 Word of Mouth Isn't Enough Anymore

A strong digital presence is essential. If you're not online, many potential guests will never find you, no matter how good the food is.

03 Go Beyond One Platform

Being listed on Google or one delivery app isn't enough. Create a social media presence and collaborate with food lovers and influencers big and small, to expand your reach.

04 Leverage Local PR and Community

Cross-promote with neighborhood businesses, get featured in local media, and build both physical and digital goodwill that keeps guests coming back.

05 Stay True to Your Brand

Don't chase trends. Identify what makes your restaurant unique and build a strategy that fits your identity and team culture.

06 Be Everywhere Your Audience Is

Think about who your customer is and where they're searching. If you cater to an older crowd, be rock-solid on Google. If your guests are younger, prioritize TikTok and Instagram. Either way, show up with consistency.

07 Optimize Everything

If your content isn't optimized for Google, it's definitely not optimized for AI tools like ChatGPT. Use searchable language, clear photos, and accurate metadata.

08 Use Tools to Simplify the Chaos

Boosting discovery doesn't have to be overwhelming. Whether it's managing feedback, streamlining reputation management, or saving time, the right tech can help you stay focused on what you do best.

09 Don't Skip Delivery

We live in a convenience culture. Forgoing delivery is leaving money on the table. Explore owned channels or optimized third-party solutions.

10 You Don't Have to Know It All

You're not expected to be a tech expert. That's what Back of House is for. We help operators streamline decisions, uncover savings, and make your existing tools work harder.

You don't want someone to see one thing online and then come in and feel, "this isn't what I expected." A lot of operators feel intimidated by digital marketing. The best piece of marketing advice I can give is: be your authentic self. That consistency is what builds real connection and keeps people coming back.

+ Tech Tool

SocialPilot is an all-in-one social media tool that lets you schedule, automate, and analyze content across platforms to boost productivity and results.

Q. What would you say to operators who aren't sure where to begin?

A. Restaurant operators aren't SEO experts or website developers, and they shouldn't have to be! That's where someone like Back of House comes in. You don't need to have all the answers. Back of House helps guide operators in the right direction by connecting them with the experts in restaurant tech. Our consultants have real-world restaurant experience, and many have owned and operated their own concepts. We also have vetted tech vendors that can do the heavy lifting. Operators are not in this alone, and you don't have to become a tech expert to run a successful restaurant. You just need the right people in your corner. ♦

Have a question about your restaurant tech?

Our team has worked hands-on in the restaurant industry and is well-versed at selecting, evaluating, and implementing software for restaurants. Together, we've supported more than 200 operators as they navigate new technology options for their business.

Consultations are free for GFS customers!

Scan to learn more!



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