Original Research

Masterestaurant Analysis of Restaurant Openings 2026: *how to open a restaurant step by step* when CapEx no longer forgives

 By **Diego F. Parra** · Updated 2026-09-09 · Expansion & Franchising

QUICK VERDICT

Headline finding: input costs in the United States rose 35% in food and 35% in labor since 2019, according to the National Restaurant Association (2024), while menu prices at large chains climbed 42% between 2020 and 2025 (One Haus), nearly double the 22% general inflation rate. Translated into an opening: the financial model you used for your first location in 2019 no longer describes the business you are about to open in 2026, and holding food cost under the 32% ceiling requires deciding menu and territory BEFORE signing the lease, not after.

How to open a restaurant step by step, in 2026, is a sequence of capital decisions: territorial prefeasibility, model unit economics, CapEx with contingency, a replicable operations manual and automation from day one. Whoever inverts that sequence — location first, numbers later — pays for the inversion across the following forty months.

This analysis started with an uncomfortable question from a partner in a four-location group in Bogotá: why his fifth opening, with the same format and the same team as the fourth, took twenty-six months to return the investment when the previous one had taken eighteen. The concept did not change. The ground under the concept did. The National Restaurant Association (2024) documents a cumulative 35% rise in food costs and 35% in labor costs since 2019, and 7shifts (2024) records the base hourly wage in United States restaurants rising 4% to 14.20 USD per hour. Neither figure shows up in the business plan most operators carry into an investor pitch.

What follows is not primary Masterestaurant research nor a proprietary sample: it is a SYNTHESIS of verifiable public data — National Restaurant Association, Technomic, Restaurant Business, One Haus, World Bank, Harvard Business School, FRANdata — organized and read by Diego F. Parra through the framework he applies in consulting. The contribution lies in the reading, in the order of decisions and in the segment breakdown; the numbers belong to whoever published them, and each one is cited.

A methodological warning before entering. The expansion figures that circulate most — Chipotle opening 315 to 345 locations in 2025 with more than 80% in Chipotlane drive-thru format, per Chain Store Age; Shake Shack targeting 45-50 company openings on a base of 630 heading toward 1,500, per Restaurant Business — describe operations with institutional capital access and dedicated real estate development teams. They work as directional reference, never as benchmark for a three-location group. That comparison error is why so many opening plans are miscalibrated from birth.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

Side-by-side comparison

	OPENING WITHOUT PRIOR ANALYSIS (BEFORE)	OPENING WITH PREFEASIBILITY AND DATA (AFTER)
Cost pressure assumed in the financial model	✕ Projected on the pre-2019 cost structure, ignoring the 35% food and 35% labor rise documented by the National Restaurant Association (2024)	✓ Modeled on the real 35%/35% rise (National Restaurant Association, 2024) and on the 14.20 USD hourly base wage, up 4% (7shifts, 2024), with target food cost under the 32% ceiling
Pricing power of the chosen format	✕ Assumes price can rise at will, without checking against the 42% cumulative menu increase in large chains 2020-2025 (One Haus) versus 22% general inflation	✓ Sets the check range against the 42% menu rise documented by One Haus and accepts that elasticity is already spent; margin comes from menu engineering, not from raising the card

	OPENING WITHOUT PRIOR ANALYSIS (BEFORE)	OPENING WITH PREFEASIBILITY AND DATA (AFTER)
Territorial prefeasibility and location intelligence	✕ The site is chosen on perceived foot traffic and available rent; zero contrast against the dominant format in the segment	✓ Checked against segment evidence: more than 80% of Chipotle's 315-345 openings in 2025 carry the Chipotlane drive-thru (Chain Store Age, Q4 2024), a signal that vehicle access outweighs the storefront
Reputation as a CapEx asset	✕ Reviews get attention once there is already a crisis; rating is treated as marketing, not as a model line item	✓ Reputation management budgeted from month zero: each additional star in the rating is worth between 5% and 9% of revenue, per Michael Luca's study at Harvard Business School
Point-of-sale automation and applied AI	✕ Opens with a traditional counter and postpones kiosk and automation investment to a vague 'once we stabilize'	✓ Kiosks sized inside the initial CapEx: kiosk checks run 8-15% higher than counter, with Yum around 10% (QSR Magazine, 2024), and McDonald's reports close to 30% higher average check
Revenue retention through loyalty and email	✕ Customer base never captured; email starts months after opening, once the initial curiosity has burned off	✓ Capture from day one: 55% of restaurants report loyalty member checks growing faster than their menu prices (Paytronix, 2024) and personalization lifts open rates 26% (Stripo, 2025)
Realism about the ecosystem it opens into	✕ The project is compared against institutional-capital chains; the investor pitch uses multiples that do not apply to an independent operator	✓ The project is placed in its own league: MSMEs contribute 78% of employment where reliable data exists, range 50%-90% (World Bank, 2024), and FRANdata catalogs over 4,000 brands and 200,000 franchisees (2026)

Finding 1 — What is the real first step to opening a restaurant in 2026?

The first step is calculating your break-even with TODAY's costs, not with those of the year you first dreamed up the concept.

The National Restaurant Association (2024) documents a cumulative 35% rise in food costs and 35% in labor costs since 2019 in the United States, and 7shifts (2024) records base hourly wages climbing 4% to 14.20 USD per hour, so a plan built on a 2019 cost structure is born with a one-third gap before the first plate leaves the pass. And there is an uncomfortable counterweight: One Haus reports that menu prices at large U.S. chains rose 42% between 2020 and 2025, nearly double the 22% general inflation, which means the market did absorb cost pass-through. The question is not whether you can raise prices; it is whether your concept justifies the price you need to charge. Your format caps your margin before you hire the first line cook, and that is why it comes before the menu.

Finding 2 — Concept, location and format: the decision that caps your margin

Chipotle projected between 315 and 345 openings for 2025 with more than 80% in the Chipotlane drive-thru format, according to Chain Store Age, because a pickup channel lifts transactions without adding tables or servers. Shake Shack, on a base of 630 locations and a target of 1,500, aimed for 45 to 50 company-operated openings in 2025 according to Restaurant Business. Those two figures describe operations with institutional capital and dedicated real-estate teams; use them as direction, never as a benchmark for a three-unit group. What does transfer is the criterion: first the channel you intend to own, then the square footage, and only then the menu. Reversed —menu first, site later— you end up paying rent on space your service model never bills. Budget your opening in three separate blocks and never blend them: build-out and equipment, working capital for the early months, and contingency.

Finding 3 — The opening budget: CapEx, contingency and the months nobody provisions

In the case that prompted this analysis —a Bogotá group with four locations— the fifth opening took twenty-six months to return the investment against eighteen for the fourth, with the same format and the same team. The concept did not change: the cost floor beneath the concept did, that 35% rise in food and 35% in labor the National Restaurant Association (2024) measures since 2019. Contingency stops being a decorative line item the moment your opening prime cost lands three or four points above the model. Diego F. Parra insists at Masterestaurant that contingency is calculated on total CapEx, not on whatever balance happens to be left. In the Masterestaurant method food cost is capped at 32% per dish and that number is a LIMIT, not a goal to reach for. Payroll, rent and utilities are not loaded onto the plate: they live in the break-even, and confusing the two is the costing mistake that shows up most often in plans that reach review.

Finding 4 — Menu engineering and food cost: 32% is a ceiling, not a target

Menu engineering works on top of that floor, moving cash without touching the price list: NeatMenu (2026) reports average check gains of 15% or more from menu psychology techniques alone. The digital channel pushes the same way — Sunday (2025) measures a 20% to 30% check increase when menu, ordering and payment are integrated. Sort contribution margin per dish first; then decide which dish earns the upper right corner of the menu. Install on day one whatever changes the check or the labor cost; everything else can wait until the second quarter. Self-service kiosks are the best-measured case: QSR Magazine (2024) places kiosk checks 8% to 15% above the counter —Yum reports around 10%—, McDonald's has documented roughly 30% higher average checks, and Future Ordering records +35% in one integration case. That wide range, 8% to 35%, is not noise: it depends on whether the kiosk replaces a line or merely duplicates it.

Finding 5 — Technology at opening: what to install on day one and what can wait

Turn it around for a moment. If you install kiosks without cutting a counter position or redesigning the pickup flow, you will have bought hardware to pay the same payroll with a shorter queue. Technology pays when it changes the operation, not when it is added on top of it. Your public rating is the cheapest revenue lever an opening has, and it is decided in the first ninety days. Michael Luca, of Harvard Business School, measured in his Yelp study that each additional star translates into a revenue increase of 5% to 9%, an effect no grand-opening discount matches for durability. Around that base sit channels that do scale: Marketing LTB (2025) reports 30% more reservations in the week after a creator posts, and Stripo (2025) measures 26% higher open rates with personalized email. I got this wrong for years by recommending paid media during opening month; the correct order is stable operation first, reviews second, paid media last.

Finding 6 — Reputation and the first ninety days: the cheapest revenue variable

Buying traffic toward a service that still stumbles is buying two-star reviews. Opening a second location is a structural decision, not a prize for having survived the first. FRANdata (2026) catalogs more than 4,000 brands and over 200,000 franchisees, and Technomic counted 30 chains that opened 100 or more locations in 2024, led by Starbucks, Jersey Mike's and Wingstop; extreme growth does exist —7 Brew grew 267% in sales and 350% in units according to Restaurant Business— but it rests on manuals, not on instinct. In Colombia, Frisby led with revenues above 1.21 trillion COP and 12% growth, according to Valora Analitik (2025). The tension is real: your own capital preserves margin and consumes cash; franchising preserves cash and gives up margin. You resolve it by looking at which of the two is scarce on your balance sheet. If your prime cost is not documented location by location, you have nothing to franchise yet.

Finding 7 — The indicators that must be live from week one

An opening dashboard needs six numbers and no more, measured weekly from the first service: food cost per dish, prime cost over sales, contribution margin per unit, monthly break-even, average check and CapEx executed against budget. Prime cost is the one that decides whether the location survives, because it adds inputs and labor into a single percentage, and those two lines are exactly the ones that rose 35% each since 2019 according to the National Restaurant Association (2024). Average check is the one that moves fast with cheap decisions: 15% from menu psychology (NeatMenu, 2026) and 20% to 30% from a full digital offering (Sunday, 2025). And there is a scale figure worth keeping in mind: the World Bank (2024) estimates that MSMEs contribute close to 78% of employment where reliable data exists. Your opening is not an anecdote; it is economic infrastructure. OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS, so the scorecard reads without ambiguity.

Finding 8 — Operational definitions and the differences that move the outcome

Food cost: dish input cost divided by its selling price, in percent; the Masterestaurant ceiling is 32% and it is not a target, it is a limit. Prime cost: food cost plus total labor cost over sales, in percent; it is the indicator that decides whether a location survives. Contribution margin: selling price minus variable dish cost, in currency per dish, and it is what pays rent and payroll. Break-even: sales required to cover fixed plus variable costs, in currency per month. Expansion CapEx: capital investment to open, in currency, contingency included. Average check: sales divided by number of transactions. The structural difference between before and after is not the size of the check but the ORDER. An operator who settles territory, format and menu with data before signing the lease has a break-even point he can defend; whoever signs first spends the next three years solving backward.

Finding 9 — Operational definitions and the differences that move the outcome — in practice

Chipotle does not put drive-thru in more than 80% of its 315-345 openings for 2025 (Chain Store Age, Q4 2024) out of preference, but because its location intelligence tells it where the volume sits. That muscle is buildable by a three-location group with far cheaper tools. There is a real tension worth resolving head-on: automating early raises initial CapEx, and raising CapEx stretches payback. It looks like an argument for postponing kiosks. It is not. Kiosk checks run 8-15% above counter per QSR Magazine (2024), with Yum around 10%, and McDonald's reports close to 30% higher average check from its rollout. If the check differential holds across first-year volume, the kiosk pays for itself inside the payback window; if projected volume cannot carry it, the problem is not the kiosk, it is the volume, and prefeasibility should have caught that. On physical menus versus QR menus, the Masterestaurant position is explicit and allows no shortcut: BOTH, each with its role.

Finding 10 — Operational definitions and the differences that move the outcome — key points

The physical menu controls the experience — service pacing, menu narrative, suggestive selling, the hospitality of placing something in the guest's hands — and QR is the complement for delivery, accessibility, price updates and analytics. Killing the physical menu to save on printing sacrifices the suggestive-selling lever, which is exactly where the 15%-plus check lift documented by NeatMenu (2026) through menu psychology lives, without raising a single price. LIMITATIONS OF THIS SYNTHESIS, stated plainly. First: most available quantitative sources are United States based — National Restaurant Association, 7shifts, QSR Magazine, One Haus — and their labor cost structure does not transfer line by line to Latin America, where labor as a share of sales tends to run lower and input volatility higher; the Colombian figure from Valora Analitik (2025) on Frisby, with revenue above 1.21 trillion COP and 12% growth, is included precisely to anchor the regional reading. Second: the source window runs from 2024 to 2026, and 2024 figures may have moved. Third: chain expansion data describes institutional-capital operations and is not a benchmark for a one-to-ten location operator.

POINT BY POINT

Criterion-by-criterion analysis: before vs after the opening study

STARTING POINT OF THE DECISION

A · OPENING WITHOUT PRIOR ANALYSIS (BEFORE)

An available site gets found first and the business is then designed to fit inside it

B · MASTERESTAURANT Format and unit economics get defined, and territory is validated against that model

Verdict: The 'after' scenario wins. Rent is the most rigid fixed cost in the structure, and signing it first turns every subsequent decision into a concession.

BASIS FOR THE FOOD COST CALCULATION

A · OPENING WITHOUT PRIOR ANALYSIS (BEFORE)

Recipe cards inherited from the previous unit or from the last printed menu

B · MASTERESTAURANT Cards recalculated with current-quarter input prices and a 32% ceiling

Verdict: The 'after' wins outright. With a cumulative 35% food increase (National Restaurant Association, 2024), a two-year-old card describes a dish that no longer sells at that margin.

TIMING OF THE AUTOMATION INVESTMENT

A · OPENING WITHOUT PRIOR ANALYSIS (BEFORE)

Kiosks and digital ordering postponed to a phase two that rarely arrives

B · MASTERESTAURANT Automation sized inside the initial CapEx, with payback modeled

Verdict: The 'after' wins where volume sustains it. The 8-15% kiosk check differential (QSR Magazine, 2024) is material; if volume cannot carry it, the flaw sits in the projection.

TREATMENT OF DIGITAL REPUTATION

A · OPENING WITHOUT PRIOR ANALYSIS (BEFORE)

Reviews get a reaction once the first visible crisis appears

B · MASTERESTAURANT Management budgeted from month zero as a line in the financial model

Verdict: The 'after' wins. Michael Luca's work at Harvard Business School quantifies 5% to 9% of revenue per additional star: that is a P&L line, not a marketing task.

COMPARABLES USED IN THE INVESTOR PITCH

A · OPENING WITHOUT PRIOR ANALYSIS (BEFORE)

Multiples from chains with institutional capital and dedicated development teams

B · MASTERESTAURANT Comparables from the operator's own segment, with the MSME range as realistic frame

Verdict: The 'after' wins. Measuring against Shake Shack, targeting 45-50 company openings on 630 locations (Restaurant Business), miscalibrates any three-unit plan.

EXISTENCE OF THE REPLICABLE OPERATIONS MANUAL

A · OPENING WITHOUT PRIOR ANALYSIS (BEFORE)

The process gets documented at month eight, when three versions already coexist

B · MASTERESTAURANT Manual written before opening, with thresholds, protocols and a scorecard

Verdict: The 'after' wins. FRANdata catalogs over 4,000 brands and 200,000 franchisees (2026) because replicability gets documented before it is sold, never afterward.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

What the 'before' scenario shows: opening without prefeasibility

BEFORE THE ANALYSIS

- ✕ The financial plan inherits the cost structure of a pre-2019 opening, when food and labor sat 35% lower (National Restaurant Association, 2024).
- ✕ The lease is signed before the menu: rent fixes the break-even point and then a menu is forced to sustain it.
- ✕ CapEx carries no contingency; any permitting or construction delay gets paid out of first-quarter working capital.
- ✕ Automation is deferred: without kiosks or digital ordering, the operator forgoes the 8-15% check lift documented by QSR Magazine (2024).
- ✕ Reputation is managed reactively, ignoring that each star is worth 5%-9% of revenue per Harvard Business School.
- ✕ The investor pitch leans on comparables from chains with institutional capital access, not on the project's real unit economics.

What the 'after' scenario shows: opening with data and a replicable manual MASTERESTAURANT

- ✓ The model is built on published, dated figures, with target food cost under the 32% ceiling and prime cost watched week by week.
- ✓ Territorial prefeasibility precedes the lease: format, access and competition get evaluated before committing CapEx.
- ✓ The replicable operations manual exists BEFORE opening, rather than being drafted at month eight with three versions of the same process already live.
- ✓ Kiosks and digital ordering enter the initial CapEx, with the documented check improvement range (8-15%, QSR Magazine 2024) built into the model.
- ✓ Database capture starts on day one: loyalty and personalized email have measured effect (Paytronix 2024; Stripo 2025).
- ✓ Intelligent dashboards track contribution margin per dish from week one, not at the close of the first fiscal year.

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Revenue retention through loyalty and email	✕ Customer base never captured; email starts months after opening, once the initial curiosity has burned off	✓ Capture from day one: 55% of restaurants report loyalty member checks growing faster than their menu prices (Paytronix, 2024) and personalization lifts open rates 26% (Stripo, 2025)
Realism about the ecosystem it opens into	✕ The project is compared against institutional-capital chains; the investor pitch uses multiples that do not apply to an independent operator	✓ The project is placed in its own league: MSMEs contribute 78% of employment where reliable data exists, range 50%-90% (World Bank, 2024), and FRANdata catalogs over 4,000 brands and 200,000 franchisees (2026)

THE NUMBERS THAT MATTER

The scorecard: seven public figures that define a 2026 opening

35%

rise in food costs and in labor costs at U.S. restaurants since 2019

42%

menu price increase at large U.S. chains between 2020 and 2025, versus 22% general inflation

14.2 USD

base hourly wage at U.S. restaurants in 2024, after a 4% rise

9 %

upper bound of revenue lift per additional star in review rating (range 5%-9%)

15 %

upper bound of additional check at self-service kiosk versus counter (range 8%-15%; Yum near 10%)

78 %

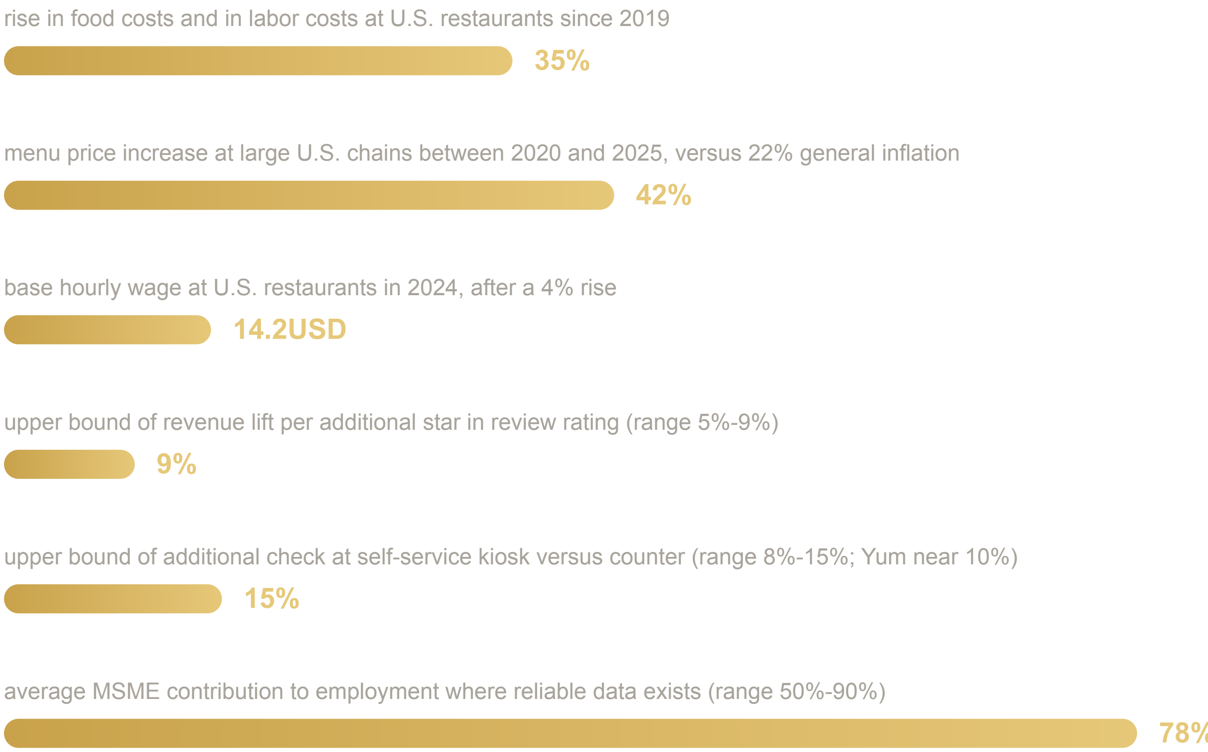
average MSME contribution to employment where reliable data exists (range 50%-90%)

55 %

of restaurants report loyalty member checks growing faster than their menu prices

VISUALIZATION

The numbers, visualized



Sources: National Restaurant Association 2024 · One Haus 2025 · 7shifts 2024 · Harvard Business School (Michael Luca) · QSR Magazine 2024

Chart by masterestaurant.com

REAL CASE

> *“I came to Diego with the model for my fifth opening already closed and the lease nearly signed. He sent me back to step zero: recalculate target food cost with the real input increase, not the one from the previous location. The signature dish I counted as profitable sat at 38% food cost because the supplier had raised prices twice in fourteen months and nobody updated the recipe card. We redesigned the menu before signing, brought that dish down to 29% and adjusted the new unit's break-even. We opened four weeks later than planned and reached break-even in month seven instead of the eleven the old model projected.”*
>
> **— Operating partner of a five-location restaurant group in Bogotá, Masterestaurant consulting client**

HOW TO APPLY IT IN YOUR RESTAURANT

How to situate yourself: three scenarios and the order of decisions

1 **Step 1 · Territorial prefeasibility before lease (location intelligence within a small operator's reach)**

Before looking at a single site, define the format and check it against segment evidence. Chipotle allocated more than 80% of its 315-345 openings for 2025 to the Chipotlane drive-thru format, per Chain Store Age (Q4 2024): that figure tells you vehicle access is displacing the pedestrian storefront in fast casual. Your cheap version of location intelligence is three crossed layers: traffic density in the dayparts you plan to sell, direct competition inventory within eight minutes, and coherence between the check your menu can sustain and the polygon's purchasing power. Small scenario (one location): validate on foot, across both critical dayparts, over seven distinct days. Mid scenario (3-10 locations): use your own units as baseline. Group scenario: territory risk gets modeled by polygon, not by address.

2 **Step 2 · Close unit economics with recalculated food cost, never inherited**

Recalculate the recipe card for EVERY dish with this quarter's input prices. With the cumulative 35% food increase reported by the National Restaurant Association (2024), a two-year-old card describes a dish that no longer exists. The ceiling is 32% food cost and it is a maximum, not a target: any dish above it gets reformulated, repriced or dropped. Payroll, rent and utilities do NOT load onto the dish — they belong to break-even — and confusing that is the costing error operators repeat most. Then rank the menu by contribution margin in currency, not in percent, because what pays rent is money per dish sold. With the 14.20 USD hourly base wage documented by 7shifts (2024) pressing prime cost, contribution margin is the only real cushion.

3 **Step 3 · Size CapEx with automation inside, not as phase two**

Put kiosks, digital ordering and dashboards inside the initial CapEx and model their return with cited figures rather than optimism. QSR Magazine (2024) documents checks 8-15% higher at kiosk than at counter, with Yum around 10%, and McDonald's reports close to 30% higher average check; Sunday (2025) places the check improvement from full digital menu, ordering and payment at 20% to 30%. Reserve contingency on CapEx: permitting and construction delays are the norm, not the exception, and whoever skips the reserve pays it out of first-quarter working capital. House rule: ALWAYS keep the physical menu alongside the QR menu, because the printed card controls service pacing and suggestive selling while QR handles delivery, accessibility and analytics.

4 **Step 4 · Write the replicable operations manual before the door opens**

A replicable operations manual written BEFORE opening is the difference between a second unit and a repeat of chance. FRANdata catalogs more than 4,000 brands and over 200,000 franchisees (2026): that infrastructure exists because someone documented the process before selling it. Document recipe cards per dish, service sequence, opening and closing protocol, waste thresholds and the scorecard you will review every Monday. Add reputation management from month zero, because each additional star in the rating is worth between 5% and 9% of revenue per Michael Luca's study at Harvard Business School. And capture your database from the first service: Paytronix (2024) reports 55% of restaurants seeing loyalty member checks grow faster than menu prices, and Stripo (2025) measures 26% higher open rates with personalized email.

FAQ

Frequently asked questions about how to open a restaurant step by step

What is the real first step to open a restaurant in 2026?

Territorial prefeasibility, always before the lease. Defining format and validating the polygon with traffic and competition data keeps rent from fixing an impossible break-even. Chipotle allocated more than 80% of its 315-345 openings in 2025 to drive-thru, per Chain Store Age (Q4 2024): format decides location, not the other way around.

What food cost should I target when designing a new restaurant's menu?

Below 32%, the Masterestaurant ceiling and a maximum rather than a target. With the cumulative 35% food increase documented by the National Restaurant Association (2024), any recipe card older than this quarter is out of date. Payroll and rent do not load onto the dish: they belong to break-even.

Should self-service kiosks go into the initial CapEx or wait?

Include them from the start if projected volume sustains them. QSR Magazine (2024) documents checks 8-15% higher at kiosk than at counter, with Yum near 10%, and McDonald's reports around 30% higher average check. If volume cannot carry that investment, the flaw sits in the volume projection, not in the kiosk.

Can I replace the physical menu with a QR menu to save on the opening?

No. Masterestaurant recommends BOTH, each with its role: the physical menu controls service pacing, menu narrative and suggestive selling; QR handles delivery, accessibility, price updates and analytics. NeatMenu (2026) measures up to 15% higher checks through menu psychology, and that lever lives on the printed card.

DATA & SOURCES

Sector data 2026 (official sources)

Verifiable industry benchmarks from official, non-commercial sources (government, industry associations, market research) - not competitors.

Metric	Benchmark 2026	Source
Costo de construcción de un restaurante nuevo por pie cuadrado	**250 a 500 USD por pie cuadrado**	Van Brunt & Co — Restaurant Build Cost 2025
Costo de compra de local para restaurante por pie cuadrado	**cerca de 178 USD por pie cuadrado**	FreshBooks — Cost to Build a Restaurant 2025
Costo de renta de local para restaurante por pie cuadrado	**cerca de 159 USD por pie cuadrado**	FreshBooks — Cost to Build a Restaurant 2025
Restaurantes propios que abrió Chipotle en 2024	**304 locales (257 con Chipotlane)**	Chipotle — Resultados anuales 2024 (feb. 2025)
Aperturas previstas por Chipotle en 2025	**315 a 345 locales (más del 80% con drive-thru Chipotlane)**	Chain Store Age / Chipotle — Q4 2024
Chipotle abrió su restaurante número 4.000	**4.000 unidades (dic. 2025, Manhattan, Kansas)**	Chipotle — Nota de prensa dic. 2025

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