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COST OF DINING

Rising restaurant prices put diners' habits under new scrutiny

JENNIFER ALLEN
Food Drink Life via AP

Menu prices continued to rise in February across both full-service and limited-service restaurants. Over the past year, prices have climbed 4.6% at full-service locations and 3.2% at limited-service spots. Operators cite higher costs for food, labor and daily operations as key drivers behind these increases.

Diners adjust how they order in response, and many choose fewer items per visit or skip add-ons such as appetizers or desserts to manage the total bill. About 54% of American diners say they have changed how they eat out to spend less, with 60% opting for lower-priced restaurants, 53% turning to discounts, 51% cutting back on items and 42% skipping drinks.

ORDERING HABITS UNDER SCRUTINY

In the food-away-from-home category, menu prices grew 0.3% at both full-service and limited-service restaurants in February, raising the stakes around how orders are placed and managed. That pressure shows in diners' approach to the menu: 82% of Americans say restaurant prices have risen over the past year, and only 28% believe those prices are fair for the quality they receive.

The first few minutes at the table often determine whether a meal moves forward smoothly or turns into a longer back-and-forth. When guests wait to review the menu until a server arrives, it delays decisions and holds up orders. Asking for suggestions and then choosing a different dish can also extend the interaction.

Requests become more complicated when orders involve substitutions, cancellations and detailed ingredient questions without a clear dietary concern involved. Those choices do not create the same problem in every case, but they can complicate kitchen preparation, lead to wasted food and prolong the ordering process more than many guests realize.

TABLE BEHAVIOR AFFECTS DINING ROOMS

Restaurant etiquette also plays out in the way diners share space with the

people around them. In rooms where tables are close together, loud diners, speakerphone use and videos played without headphones can easily change the atmosphere for everyone nearby. The same is true when long phone calls continue through the meal, turning a shared setting into a more private one than the room allows.

Space and comfort also come into play in tighter layouts, where bags or personal items placed on chairs or walkways can spill into nearby seating and limit movement. Strong scents from perfume or cologne can linger and affect others at close range, while uncovered coughs or sneezes can raise concerns among nearby diners.

GUEST BEHAVIOR TOWARD STAFF

The way diners speak to staff can influence the tone of a meal as much as the food itself. Loud calls for attention, snapping gestures or interruptions while a server helps another table can turn routine interactions into tense ones before the request is even addressed.

Diners sometimes direct frustration over delays at servers, even when the issue comes from the kitchen, which can strain communication during service. Even after a table is finished, courtesy still matters, as harsh language and excessive mess leave more work for staff and contribute to a dining environment that feels more hostile than welcoming.

EXPECTATIONS AROUND CHILDREN IN RESTAURANTS

Questions around children in restaurants often center less on blame than on whether a dining room is set up to handle different kinds of guests. In smaller spaces, children moving through aisles can create safety concerns for staff carrying hot food or drinks, and restaurants may ask parents to keep younger guests seated for that reason.

Some operators have gone further by describing their establishments in advance as better suited for adults or by setting aside seating periods for older guests. Those policies point to a broader shift in dining culture, where restaurants are becoming more explicit about the kind of experience they want to provide and the expectations that come with it.

TIMING PRESSURES DURING SERVICE

Guests who continue to occupy a table well after the meal ends can hold up the next reservation, while late arrivals create uncertainty about whether a table should still be held or reassigned. Similar issues arise when a party arrives larger than booked, as staff may have to rework seating plans with little room to spare.

Requests to move after being seated can add another layer of disruption, especially in a full dining room. Extended stays over a single drink can also limit availability, particularly during peak hours when tables turn more quickly.

CHECKOUT HABITS AFFECT TABLE FLOW

Settling the bill has become a source of friction as group payment habits grow more complicated. A check split several ways can take time to sort out, particularly when each guest wants to pay differently or when disagreements arise over shared items.

Requests to revise charges or reissue checks add more steps after the meal ends, and those extra back-and-forth exchanges draw staff away from other tasks. When diners wait until the bill arrives to decide who owes what or to look for payment, the checkout process can take longer than the meal itself.

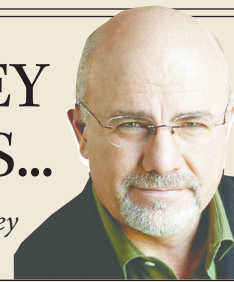
DINING CULTURE ADJUSTS TO HIGHER COSTS

As dining out becomes more expensive, guest behavior plays a larger role in how restaurants manage each service. Restaurants continue to operate with tighter staffing and higher expenses, which place greater importance on pacing, coordination and clear communication between guests and staff. Industry observers expect these standards to remain as both sides adjust to rising costs and a more structured dining environment.

Jennifer Allen is a retired professional chef and long-time writer. Her work appears in dozens of publications, including MSN, Yahoo, The Washington Post and The Seattle Times. These days, she's busy in the kitchen developing recipes and traveling the world, and you can find all her best creations at [CookWhatYouLove](#).

MONEY TALKS...

By Dave Ramsey



Time to sell a car?

Dear Dave,

I have two cars. One is paid for, and I owe \$23,000 on the other. These are my only vehicles. I'd like to sell the one I still owe money on, but no one wants to pay enough to cover the balance.

I make \$85,000 a year, and I also have enough money in savings, with plenty left over, to cover the difference on one of the offers. Still, I was wondering if there's a rule of thumb to determine whether or not to sell a car in this kind of situation?

— Jimmy

Dear Jimmy,

If you really love the car, and by really focusing and saving like crazy you can pay off everything else in your life, except your home in 18 to 24 months, I'm okay with you keeping the car. But if you can't? Sorry, it's time to sell.

But I want you to hear this next part loud and clear. It also may be time to sell if the total value of all your vehicles — I'm talking cars, trucks, boats, jet skis, and their relatives — is equal to half, or more than half, of your annual income. Why? Because these are all things that depreciate quickly.

You don't want half of your income wrapped up in things that are going down in value.

You can probably pay this thing off in less than two years if you really focus on making it happen, and you haven't got a bunch of other debt.

But if you don't like the car, or you don't want to work that hard to keep it, then sell the thing and write a check for the difference.

I mean, when it's all said and done, it's just a car. And anyway, you said you'd have plenty of cash left over in savings if you went this direction, right?

But remember, if this is your decision, start rebuilding your savings to its previous level right after by putting what would have gone for car payments back into your savings account.

You never know when life might throw something unexpected at you!

— Dave

Dave Ramsey is a nine-time national bestselling author, personal finance expert and host of "The Ramsey Show." He has appeared on Good Morning America, CBS This Morning, Today, Fox News, CNN, Fox Business and many more. Since 1992, Dave has helped people take control of their money, build wealth and enhance their lives. He also serves as CEO for Ramsey Solutions.



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