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Reframing dining

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REFRAMING DINING



Cheng Hsin Yao of Picnic explains how he has future-proofed his latest restaurant with technology and design.

In 2012, Cheng Hsin Yao left the banking industry to set up his first F&B venture, Omakase Burger, based entirely on a recipe he had spent two years perfecting. At a time when restaurateurs were gunning for taller, fancier burgers, Hsin Yao made waves for a no-frills product that was all about the grilling technique. It is hardly surprising that he has once again marched to the beat of his own drum, leaping over common industry pitfalls with his latest venture, Picnic.

Picnic is billed as a 10,000 sq. ft. restaurant, but in a single day it can be used as a coffeehouse, food court, business lunch venue, urban dinner spot, sleek bar, and even, says Hsin Yao, a remote office for freelancers. The space houses nine different culinary concepts, seven of which are served out of “food trucks” — standalone food stalls modelled after the icons of street food culture.

Perhaps the best way to understand Picnic’s revolutionary concept is to compare it to the now ubiquitous co-working office. Similar to how co-working spaces have allowed companies to ditch bloated overheads, work in friendlier and more flexible environments, and enjoy complementary facilities, Picnic has broken the rigidity of traditional restaurants to offer both a new dining experience for customers, and a new business model for restaurateurs. Stepping into

Picnic even feels like entering a hip co-working concept: artificial turf underfoot; hanging foliage overhead. Gone are the familiar banquet-style tables — in its place is a selection of picnic tables, bar stools, arcade games. Could this be the future of F&B?

Hsin Yao, how did you develop the concept for Picnic? Food is like fashion: a few years ago, tapas was all the rage, but now you don’t really hear about it. I was concerned about the volatility of having a single concept store with Omakase and wanted to diversify our portfolio, but it would be high risk to fit out several places in different locations. In Singapore, larger food groups do well because they have economies of scale. To reach that level, you have to reach a certain critical mass, so we decided to skip ahead by building our own environment to support different concepts.

I also started to have this frustration as a restaurateur. When you have a single concept, it’s easy to lock yourself into this glass prison. You have a certain look that gives your concept its personality, but this personality is fixed. Some restaurants do well for dinner but they’re not somewhere you’ll go for lunch; some are good for families but drive away couples. I wanted to design a restaurant that could do everything when I wanted it to.



How have you done that? We designed Picnic to recreate an outdoor park experience indoors. Singapore's weather is tricky, so it's nice to enjoy air-con and be out of the sun. We wanted to cater to different needs at different times – business meetings, dates, family outings.

We have three seating areas, each designed to cater to different groups. The centre is The Picnic Garden. It's the biggest space: good for families and communal dining. Then we have the Flower Garden, which is more intimate. Most of the tables there seat two. We keep the music low in there so it's suited for those who want privacy and quiet. The Beer Garden is a little more urban so it's popular with youngsters who like to hang out with friends over drinks.

Our ambience also changes throughout the day. Our lighting system is brightest during lunch to keep up people's energy, but it's dimmed in the evening for a relaxed feel.

Singaporeans are spoiled for choice, and we're also a very diversified culture. We eat all kinds of food every day: Thai today, Japanese tomorrow, Italian the day after, local food for dinner.



This creates a unique environment where many concepts can survive, but not many will flourish.

Picnic is a response to that. To attract large groups and keep people returning, we had to balance old and new, conservative and avant garde. That's primarily why we chose to do everything ourselves – a lot of food halls do a great job of finding tenants, but we wanted to control curation and be able to change concepts so we can stay up-to-date with trends.

The actual dining experience is also quite unorthodox. Can you tell us about that? Sure. Each customer is given a buzzer when they enter, which is used to order at every stall. Most stalls here are self-service via a touch screen counter; the order is then saved on your buzzer. What's unique is a lot of places use pre-payment self-service where you pay before eating, but we offer the world's first self-service post-payment system.

We did that because we wanted to create a seamless dining experience – we didn't want customers to constantly be taking out their wallets to pay while ordering. We also designed this restaurant for large groups, and we didn't want someone collecting multiple buzzers because it's difficult to tell which stall the buzzer belongs to. That's why we looked for a buzzer with a LCD display. A single buzzer can let you know which stall is buzzing.

Technology is most useful in helping you do things you don't want to do – often menial, repetitive tasks – and it has certainly helped us from a customer service perspective. For example, no one really wants to be a cashier, and our automated checkout system, which also accepts cash, can replace that role quickly and usually without error.

Theoretically, we can operate without any staff. The hardware is there for diners to have an entirely self-service experience. We were enthusiastic about this initially, but we found that the experience took away the romance of dining.

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The primary role of service staff within a restaurant has always been to make a customer feel attended to and satisfied. With the high amount of automation, staff have been freed up to focus on higher-value services, such as fielding special requests and giving additional information or guidance to customers who need it.

How have you used technology to help with manpower shortage? Manpower is a big issue here. We want to retain people as much as possible, and people stay if they're happy. We don't really pay above market because we're quite a small group, and our benefits can't compare to hotels.

So, we compete on a better working environment: we take care of our people by using technology to do the work. One thing that is underestimated by non-industry people is that the food business is quite emotionally draining. Technology makes life easier for our staff by giving them more time to rest their minds. It keeps them happier.

A lot of our kitchen production is automated, which allows our staff to produce a very high volume in a short amount of time. Instead of five people, we only need one, and instead of six hours, we do it in one. Yes, we have a lot of excess capacity, but it also means that we can do more business, and staff have more time to rest. Nobody is very stressed, which is the best kind of environment. ♦