

## How Professional Foodies Are Using Tech to Transform the Restaurant Business



2 days ago by Dana Zemack

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*Dana Zemack is a public relations pro at tech PR firm LaunchSquad and works with wonderful and innovative tech startups and emerging companies. To find Dana, tweet at @danamarcelle or check out the LaunchSquad blog.*

We've come a long way since our favorite 6'2" culinary icon first broadcast her kitchen prowess to aspiring cooks all over the country in 1963. Since then, we've been blessed with 24-hour food TV, celebrity chefs who swear at everyone and brag about being naked, food that comes to us instead of the other way around, real-time access to our favorite restaurants, and generally a superabundance of reasons for us to obsess over what we're going to eat for dinner. But what happens behind the scenes?

The world of food is certainly not a simple one. Restaurateurs, cafe owners, food personalities and others who make it their business to be foodies have a mammoth operational task to manage each and every day.

Julia Child kept it all together by way of a typewriter, her own masterful organizational skills and a very supportive husband who doubled as a dedicated business manager. To be sure, all of these are excellent and worthy means to manage a business, but these days there are many other helpful tools to consider. So how do people in the food industry use technology to better organize their businesses?

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### Play Well Together: Communicating with Your Staff

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Every chef knows that managing a busy kitchen goes way beyond cooking. The kitchen staff needs to be up to date on menus, ingredients have to be in stock, the specials need to be relayed to the waitstaff and myriad other tasks need to be completed from early in the morning to late at night. Michael Scelfo, executive chef at [Russell House Tavern](#) in Harvard Square, Cambridge, MA, uses [Dropbox](#) as a key tool for communication with his employees. Every day, his staff keeps a log in a simple Word document. They summarize the day's events, record new dishes, report on staff performance, document what the specials were and how they sold and incorporate a range of other pertinent information.

And then everything goes into Dropbox. Clickable desktop pop ups at home or in the office alert Scelfo when any of the documents have been updated. Scelfo scans new information in real time and, if needed, responds immediately. Recently, a staff member couldn't locate a certain cut of meat, assumed they had run out and logged plans to put in a large order to replenish supplies. Michael caught the log update, quickly communicated the location of the missing steak and managed to avoid a pretty expensive misunderstanding.

On the topic of keeping tabs on restaurant supplies, Scelfo also said that the iPad has transformed the way he keeps inventory. He keeps everything organized using the [Numbers app](#) for iPad; the lightweight tablet makes for an incredibly useful inventory tool that beats walking all around the restaurant with a laptop (impractical) or a clipboard (inefficient).

Scelfo explains that his goal is make it into the kitchen more and not be stuck handling operational details. These tools eliminate redundant steps, freeing him to do what he loves the most.

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## **Delight Your Guests: Making Your Menus Interactive**

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The steakhouse [Chicago Cut](#) found an interesting solution for making their menu of more than 750 bottles of wine accessible to their customers. The company worked with Chicago-based [Shared Marketing](#) to develop their own iPad wine menu platform. After spending about eight months developing the app, the restaurant opened this past September ready with 40 iPads to serve as an interactive wine list. Diners can choose to view wines based on characteristics such as vintage, region, type and price range. For example, in the world map view, tapping on a region or country will show you wines that come from that area of the world.

At first I cringed at the potential consequences of combining too much red wine with thousands upon thousands of dollars of Apple products. Custom-made hard leather cases seem to keep the restaurant's vast iPad inventory safe from harm, and Chicago Cut managing partner Matt Moore assured me that there have been no accidents so far. Also of note, none have disappeared. With 180 seats, the demand for the iPad menus is high and the restaurant plans on investing in around 15 more in the near future.

The team at Chicago Cut also has several new features coming up. In the future, customers will be able to interact with a 360 degree image of each wine bottle that they can 'spin' to check out the back label. A platform for tasting notes as well as POS integration are already in the works.

All Foods

Info

# Avocados

Available locally all year round

Currently in season in these pla...



Awareness of organic, sustainable and local food has permeated American food culture, making seasonal and sustainable ingredients an integral element of the food philosophy of many restaurants. Scelfo aims to source as many ingredients as possible within 20 miles of his restaurant. One of the first apps he ever used to support his mission was Locavore, a local food sourcing iPhone app. Locavore can be searched based on specific produce or location and also shows nearby markets and seasonal recipes. Tap on "avocados" in the fruits and vegetables list and you'll be taken to a U.S. map showing that they are currently locally available in Florida, Hawaii and California. Swipe upward on the screen and you'll also learn how many months are left in the season.

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## Take Credit: Managing Your Payments

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Payments service [Square](#), which is now signing up close to 50,000 new users per month, first approached San Francisco-based coffee shop [Sightglass](#) just under two years ago when they were in the midst of signing the lease for their storefront space. Sightglass became the first beta tester of the Square product, using an early prototype (which plugged into an iPod) that enabled them to easily accept credit card payments. Before Square had approached them, the company wasn't planning on accepting credit at all.

Since then, Square has [expanded the service](#) considerably and has come out with an app for both the iPhone and iPad. According to Sightglass co-owner Jerad Morrison, the shop uses Square's POS system for both cash and credit, and it handles not only all store transactions, but they also use the iPhone app for taking payments while out delivering wholesale orders. The system can serve tiny vendors that take one transaction per week all the way up to those that manage many hundreds per day.

The process is simple. For credit, vendors simply swipe the card, prompt customers to sign the screen with their finger and then process the payment. If a customer pays cash, information is entered like any cash register, calculating change as needed. In both cases, customers can choose to receive receipts by text or e-mail.

For each card swipe, users pay 2.75% of the transaction plus 15 cents, and that covers all fees including those charged by the credit card institutions. The hardware and software are free, and cash transactions don't have any cost.

Square spokesperson Kay Luo explains that many people think of credit cards as being more expensive. However, when so many of us pay with credit, there is also a cost associated with cash-only business, as many find that they simply lose sales. Kay also says that when smaller businesses take cards, particularly mobile operations such as farmers market stands and food trucks, they see more sales. In the near-term, Square has plans to build out analytics dashboard features for users to gather additional intelligence around what sells well and other data points. Currently, the app offers the capability to export cash and credit records right into Quickbooks.

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## Keep Your Menus Under Control: Managing Your Recipes

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 **Paprika**

Finally, an app that lets you manage your recipes.

 Available on the App Store

Get it for: iPhone / iPad

User Manuals: iPad / iPhone  
Help and feature requests

 

The advertisement features a large iPad in the center displaying the Paprika app interface. The iPad screen shows a 'Categories' list on the left with options like 'All Recipes', 'Most Recent', 'Favorites', 'Uncategorized', 'Breakfast', 'Burgers', 'Cake', 'Cereals', 'Chocolate', 'Desserts', 'Fish', 'Lamb', 'Meats', 'Noodles', and 'Pasta'. The main area of the iPad shows three recipe cards: 'Chocolate Cream Pie', 'Crepes', and 'Eggs Benedict'. Each card includes a photo, a star rating, and preparation/cooking times. To the right of the iPad, an iPhone is shown displaying the 'All Recipes' screen with a list of recipe thumbnails.

With breakfast, brunch, dinner, appetizers, desserts, the occasional amuse bouche and various other eats to think about, how can chefs keep it all together? Scelfo used to keep his recipes in a three-ring binder. He's since become a fan of [Paprika](#), a recipe management app that is available on both iPhone and iPad. The app offers a simple format to enter and search your own recipes, browse the web and clip recipes you like, create and share grocery lists and plan meals. For about \$20 per year, you can sync the two platforms, which is definitely a key component if you're planning on using both at the same time.

This app is particularly useful for the home cooks among us. I tried it out and entered a recipe for Champagne persimmon popsicles that I recently made. The interface is simple and clear and I was able to put it all easily into an e-mail for a quick share. (Using [Locavore](#) I learned that, thankfully, persimmons are around for another month or so.)

New recipe ideas and food concepts abound, and amidst a bounty of food blogs, recipe apps and other food resources, chefs and home cooks alike have plenty of ways to both find and record new inspirations. The ways in which professional foodies consume food-related content is changing, too. According to Faith Durand, managing editor at Apartment Therapy's [The Kitchn](#) blog, many cookbook publishers hoping to get the blog to post a book review are starting to offer review copies using the iPad's [iBooks](#) instead of sending hard copies through the mail. It saves quite a bit of postage for the publishers and quite a bit of shelf space for the bloggers. It seems like everyone wins.

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## What It's Really About

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We've been hearing about chefs and restaurants using social media to engage with their customers for a while now. But more recently, we're starting to see technology play a bigger and bigger role on the operations side of the equation. Food industry professionals have an immense opportunity to tap new technologies to boost efficiency and streamline operations. Tablets, in particular, will continue to be a major catalyst in the food industry's move toward making web and mobile services into everyday management tools.

All that said, the real allure of the wonderful world of food has nothing to do with technology at all. Renowned Boston chef and restaurant owner [Michael Schlow](#) offers an apt explanation: "Food is about tastes, smells, emotions and imagination, and the food business is about real people, one-on-one experiences and face time."

As many innovative and helpful apps as there are, if food pros suddenly find themselves compulsively tapping every food-related thought into their iPads while their gourmet pot pies are burning to a crisp in the oven, it isn't going to help anyone.