

ASK THE EXPERTS

10 tips for successful al fresco dining

By Steven Pike , 20-Jun-2016

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Steven Pike, managing director of guest experience management company HospitalityGEM, gives his top 10 tips to hospitality operators looking to make a success of their al fresco dining.

While the weather may have other ideas, summer is rapidly approaching and operators are preparing for their busiest time of year. When the sun is shining, there are few things more attractive to a customer than enjoying some good food and drink outside, which offers increased footfall and sales opportunities, but can also present operational difficulties.

While it may be tempting to just open up the additional tables and hope for the best, it's vital to consider the experience of those outside and ensure it is just as good as it is for those inside. Our research shows that 79 per cent of people would increase their dwell time if table service was available al fresco, while 48 per cent said that said that slow or poor service most puts them off from eating outside.

So for those keen to improve their al fresco dining experience, here are our top tips:

1. First impressions count

Your outside space is often the area that guests see first when they first arrive at an establishment, so make sure yours is top notch. The space should be a priority during morning set up and make sure the team doesn't forget about it during the day; no one is going to be enticed into coming in by empty tables piled high with dirty dishes and empty glasses.

2. Consider the audience of those using the outside area

Our research shows that 42 per cent of families with children will use an outdoor space. Al fresco dining is popular with families as children are able to move around more freely and make more noise than is

normally accepted inside. Eating out with children can be a stressful time for parents, so make sure staff are understanding and friendly, engaging with the children and demonstrating that they're in a family friendly space. If you have a garden, it may be worth stocking games like giant Jenga to keep children entertained while parents relax.

3. Maintain your service standards

Make sure you have adequate numbers of team on shift and processes in place to ensure your outside guests are not forgotten about at busy times and service continues as smoothly and efficiently as normal. It should immediately be clear to your guests whether it's table service, or whether they need order inside – and if they do need to order inside, staff still need to be on top of check backs in case of problems. If most guests are eating al fresco, be careful not to ignore or overlook anyone sat inside. As English weather can often be unpredictable, it might be worth introducing a 'sunshine shift' where team members are on call if the weather is good to help with extra garden capacity.

4. Keep the service consistent with your brand

Our research demonstrates that people who eat outside have very similar expectations to those who sit inside; 62 per cent would order two courses per person, directly correlating with those who choose to eat inside, while 54 per cent of respondents who not be happy with a different menu to inside. The outside area is not an afterthought but a key part of your brand - be sure to treat it as such.

5. Make sure your furniture is on point

Perhaps surprisingly, picnic choices are not a favourite choice when eating outside, with 72 per cent preferring dining tables over 21 per cent of people choosing picnic benches. And remember, outside furniture gets messy more quickly than that indoors - unexpected mess from birds is sure to put guests off their meal. Make sure your staff are checking the cleanliness of tables and chairs in between seating guests, as well as removing plates quickly to avoid attracting flies and wasps. You can also protect furniture through simple measures like providing plenty of ashtrays and making sure there are napkins available outside for mopping up little spills as they happen.

6. Give guests space to relax and enjoy their meal

Arrange furniture with care, allowing more space than usual between the tables; al fresco diners are often accompanied by pets, or pushchairs and buggies, which take up space around tables. If you want your space to be considered pet-friendly, demonstrate this by adding water bowls and keeping them topped up throughout the day.

7. Make the most of the space you have available

If it's large, consider breaking it up into different areas, perhaps one for drinking, one for eating, one for people with children near a play area, or one for smokers. If it's small, think about what you want to focus on and how the area looks – a seasonal mural and potted plants can really brighten up an area.

8. Smokers

Unfortunately smokers are a key bugbear for those eating outside, and while it's a controversial subject, it's definitely one you need to consider. Perhaps the easiest solution here is to divide up your space and make one section a designated smoking section.

9. Events

Outside areas can be used for more than just eating from the menu. Why not hold a barbecue, an open mic session or run a local beer festival?

10. Look into the long term

Remember that outside areas are not just for the summer season. Our survey found that 48 per cent would eat outside once the temperature reaches 16-18 degrees, while 13 per cent would head outside at just 13-15 degrees. Blankets, heaters and fire pits can make an outdoor area profitable throughout the year.