

Grab n' go isn't going anywhere anytime soon

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The grab n' go outlet is the latest hotel food-and-beverage evolution. Don't make the mistake of thinking that it's just a trend.

By [Gary Isenberg](#)

As a youngster, I recall summer after summer sitting in my parents' station wagon as we ventured on family vacations along the East Coast.

When it was time to eat, we stopped at a Howard Johnson's. From the mid-1930s through the late 1970s, Howard Johnson's evolved from a single-unit restaurant in Milford, Connecticut, to more than 1,000 restaurants and 500 motor lodges.



At that time, people preferred a more utilitarian food experience. We didn't—for the most part—seek different or unusual tastes; we wanted sameness. And for many years, full-service hotels offered a similar format in their restaurants—three meals a day and plentiful choices for guests.

Today, our society craves, even demands, a completely different dining experience and that's been reflected in how hotels configure their food-and-beverage outlets. This also may explain why [only one HoJo restaurant](#) still stands today.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the full-service Hiltons, Marriotts and Sheratons expanded into the suburbs ringing primary markets. Hotel restaurants soon became the dining epicenters in secondary and tertiary markets.

But the heyday of the full-service hotel restaurant crumbled when chain restaurants infiltrated those same secondary and tertiary markets. With more culinary choices, people steered away from hotel restaurants.

Since then, hotel brands have configured F&B offerings to match guest preferences, and that has led to hotels presenting guests with richer and more varied culinary experiences. At the cusp of this trend is the [“grab n' go” phenomenon](#) as well as an emphasis on local cuisine and culture.

This change in hotel F&B rightly mirrors how people dine today. The majority of people lead very busy lives, leaving little time to prepare a meal during the week. They don't possess enough time to cook nightly. So what do they do? They stop at the grocery stores, such as Wegman's or Whole Foods, after work and shop the prepared food aisle. When people have an occasion to cook, they can order from an on-demand food service like Plated, which brings the fresh ingredients and the recipe to the door. Yet while people insist on convenience and quickness in food service, they also demand the food be freshly prepared and healthy.

People nowadays also desire more choice in how they consume food. They want the option to choose whether to make a quick meal, dine at an upscale dining experience or prepare an elaborate meal at home at a leisurely pace.

Now, consider how all these trends have influenced hotel F&B and you can begin to understand why grab n' go has evolved into a current necessity. Guests covet the freedom to decide how and where they'll eat their food—just as they do at home.

Hotels have built their grab n' go and other F&B outlets on the premise of fewer, but fresher food choices. Guests

would rather choose from three to five food choices made with good, locally sourced ingredients than be bombarded with an endless menu. The Hilton Garden Inn's recent redo of its food service reflects this.

All Hilton Garden Inn's upper-midscale franchises will soon install a 24/7 grab n' go-style counter where guests can buy healthy snacks and plates made with fresh, locally sourced ingredients, as well as craft beers. Three benefits ensue from this arrangement: It provides guests with their preferred food choices; it occupies fewer square feet than a traditional restaurant, leaving more room for revenue-producing spaces; and operators don't need to hire extra staff to man the counter, since guests can check out their purchases at the front desk.

In the past, brands mandated uniform standards for all franchised hotel properties, which sometimes led to ridiculous menu items with no relation to the locale. Hotel brands have responded with the "soft" concept that gives owners and operators the autonomy to create properties steeped in local culture and cuisine. Travelers now book hotels where they can immerse themselves in the surrounding neighborhood.

Grab n' go is not only meeting the current trends and needs of consumer, it is also providing economic benefit to hotel ownership groups. The concept operates on much less labor than a traditional hotel restaurant, and less capital is required for inventories, furnitures, fixtures and equipment, and operating supplies. Hence, this concept provides owners with improved profit margins as compared to the stodgy hotel restaurant of yesteryear.

Existing hotels also obtain the benefit of reducing the F&B "real estate" because grab n' go does not require as much space as a full-service, three-meal-a-day restaurant—thus also freeing up space for other revenue-generating opportunities. New hotel development projects are seeing reduction in required public space areas due to the use of grab n' go F&B concepts, resulting in less overall building square footage and reduced construction cost.

Although grab n' go concepts might work in any hotel, upscale and upper-upscale properties should incorporate grab n' go with sophisticated dining options. At higher price points, guests expect a more varied and upmarket culinary experience.

While food concepts have evolved over the years, guests still want a good meal when they arrive at the hotel. Grab n' go might be the latest, but probably not the last, version of hotel F&B. Fortunately, hotels have the freedom now to offer guests a unique, locally driven, and fresh dining experience.

Gary Isenberg is President of LW Hospitality Advisors Asset & Property Management Services. With more than 30 years of diversified hospitality experience in Hotel Management, Finance, and Asset Management, Gary's expertise includes third party asset management, serving as an owner's representative, due diligence for real estate investors, and development services to negotiate management or franchise agreements. His asset management specialties include, among other services, capital budgeting and PIP costing as well as internal control and accounting.

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