How Diners Choose Restaurants

TouchBistro®

Yelp gave it four stars, but Nancy said "the chicken was so dry," but Bob *raves* about the customer service...

There was a time, not so long ago, when a restaurant opened and, viola! A line up of curious customers, with no knowledge of the service or menu, would be willing to try something new. They might not even know the type of food you served. They might ask a friend who'd been if they enjoyed their experience.

While classic marketing tactics like promos, events, and word of mouth aren't going anywhere, we're now living in the information age, with countless ways to learn about new restaurants online.

Review sites like Yelp and Google yield thousands of voices weighing in, celebrating – or berating – their experience. Social media chatter celebrates culinary aesthetics or publicly blasts poor management. Menus are readily available on websites for the world to see. And now, with digital marketing, restaurants exist online before they exist in real-life. So the question is **how does this impact the dining choices of restaurant goers?**

Survey Goals

At TouchBistro, we're committed to helping restaurants around the world be successful. Our products, services, and resources are all based around enabling, educating, and growing restaurateurs and the businesses they run.

We know that getting customers through the door is half the battle, **so we set out to understand how today's restaurant goers choose the restaurants they dine at, including their dining habits, decision makers, and deal breakers.**

Working with an independent research firm, we surveyed 521 participants across the US of varying ages, geographies, and life stages to find out what's getting people in the door... and what's pushing them out.

Respondent Profile

Participant Criteria: Must dine out at least once a week to have participated in the study.

AGE
18-34: 156
35-54: 182
55+: 182

GENDER
Female: 260
Male: 261

LOCATION
Northeast: 82
Midwest: 122
South: 194
West: 122

ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME
$50K: 135
$50K - $100k: 231
100K+: 135

MARITAL STATUS
Single: 107
Living with Significant Other / Married: 358
Separated / Divorced / Widowed: 56

CHILDREN
Female: 260
Male: 261

Key Findings

Restaurant goers are eating out multiple times per week and are regularly looking for new places to eat.

■ Almost half of participants eat out between 2-4 times per week (**48%**)

■ Restaurant goers occasionally look for somewhere new to dine (**64%**), while only a slim percentage stay with the same restaurants (**18%**).

Food is first: Restaurant-goers choose restaurants first and foremost on type of food and will return if the food is good.

■ The majority (**63%**) of restaurant goers say that the type of food would have the biggest impact on their restaurant choice, ahead of the other four ranked factors, including location, recommendations from friends, online reviews, and popularity on social media.

■ The YUM Factor: Almost three-quarters (**70%**) agreed that they would re-visit a restaurant that had bad customer service if their food was good.

Restaurant-goers take recommendations from friends very seriously.

■ **9/10** restaurant-goers had visited a restaurant they'd never been to purely based on a friend's recommendation. **Almost three-quarters** said they would avoid a restaurant if their friend gave them negative feedback.

Most restaurant-goers regularly look at online reviews to help make new restaurant decisions.

■ The majority of participants (**68%**) said that they had tried a new restaurant based on positive online reviews.

■ Almost half (**45%**) regularly check online reviews before deciding on a new restaurant.

■ Millennial restaurant-goers are more likely to look at reviews when deciding on a new restaurant than others (**67%**).

... live music is a compelling attraction for nearly half of surveyed diners.

The majority of restaurant goers look online in some capacity before going to a new restaurant.

■ Over half look at the online menu (**59%**) and website (**51%**) before stepping in the door.

■ Almost **24%** look up a new restaurant on social media before committing.

Recommendations from friends have the most influence when deciding on a new restaurant, ranked above both online reviews and social media.

■ **87%** agreed they would take a recommendation from a friend more seriously than online rating.

■ **91%** tried a new restaurant based entirely on a recommendation from a friend, as opposed to 68% who tried based entirely on positive online reviews, and 41% who tried based entirely on positive feedback on social media.

Locally sourced food and live music options attract restaurant goers.

■ When it comes to food options that attract restaurant goers, locally sourced food would have an impact on the restaurant choices of almost half of surveyed restaurant-goers (**49%**).

■ For entertainment, live music is a compelling attraction for nearly half of surveyed diners (**44%**).

Discounts and promotions continue to fill seats.

■ Classic marketing mainstays still fill seats, with **80%** of restaurant goers visiting a new restaurant based entirely on receiving a discount or promotion.

Restaurant-goers are deterred by restaurants who've had a recent health warning or if they've received feedback from a friend that the food is bad.

■ Health inspection warnings (**70%**) and hearing the food is bad from a friend (**69%**) were the most frequently stated deterrents.

■ Waiting for a table longer than 30 minutes (**55%**) and bad online reviews (**51%**) followed as top reasons a restaurant-goer would not consider a restaurant.

Millennials have substantially different habits than Gen Xers and Baby Boomers.

■ More Millennials (**66%**) eat out than Gen Xers (**50%**) and Baby Boomers (**54%**)

■ Millennials are much more likely to look at online reviews (**67%**) and social media (**34%**) than their Gen X and Baby Boomer counterparts.

■ Baby Boomers are significantly less driven by specific food options, like gluten-free, locally sourced, and vegetarian.

Urban restaurant-goers have substantially different habits than small town and rural diners.

■ Urban diners frequent restaurants more often, are more likely to try somewhere new every time they go out, and perform online activities before settling on a new restaurant.

■ Small town and rural dwellers are less likely to use review sites, are less influenced by online reviews, and are less attracted to restaurant entertainment options.

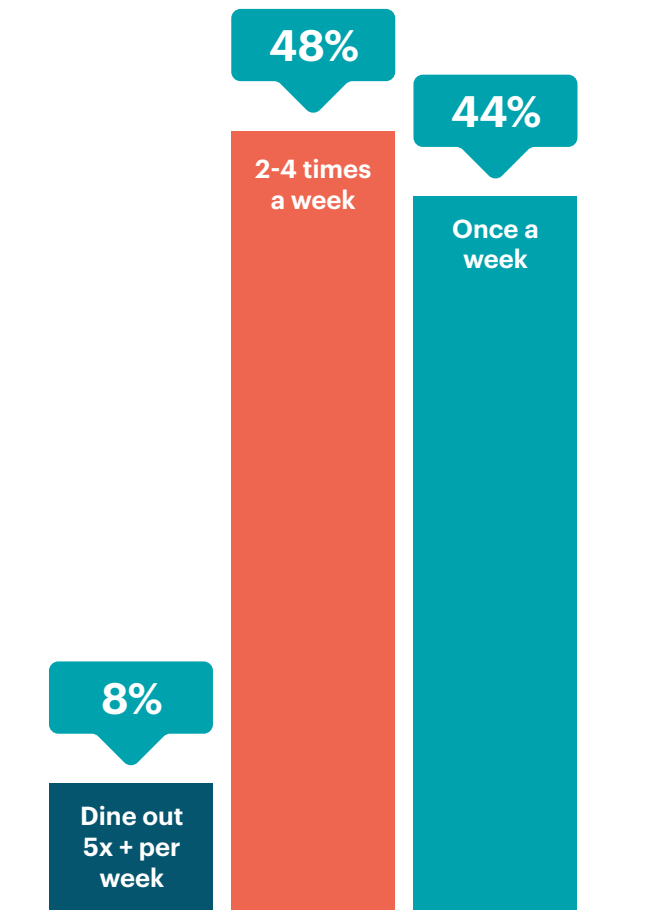**Ballers – or those in high income brackets – have finicky tastes.**

■ Ballers are more finicky about where they eat – they more frequently check online menus and reviews than other income brackets before committing to a new restaurant.

Dining Habits

56%
dine out more than once a week

48%
2-4 times a week

44%
Once a week

8%
Dine out 5x + per week

Restaurant-goers are **skipping the stove-top.**

Only frequent diners (those who indicated that they dine out at least once a week) were eligible to participate in this research study. But what we found was that many frequent diners eat out a whole lot more than once a week!

While restaurant goers have their ol'faithful go-tos, they're also on the hunt for something new.

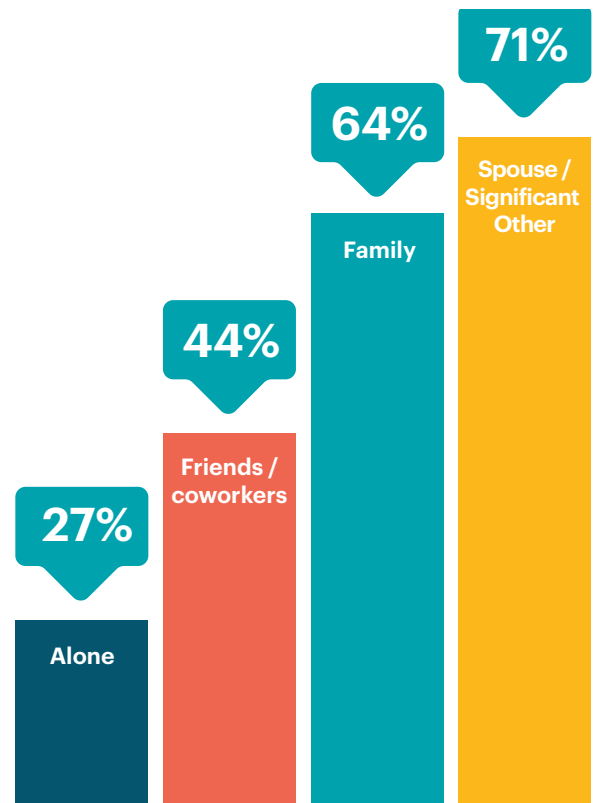**How frequently do you choose a restaurant you've never been to?**

18%

18%

64%
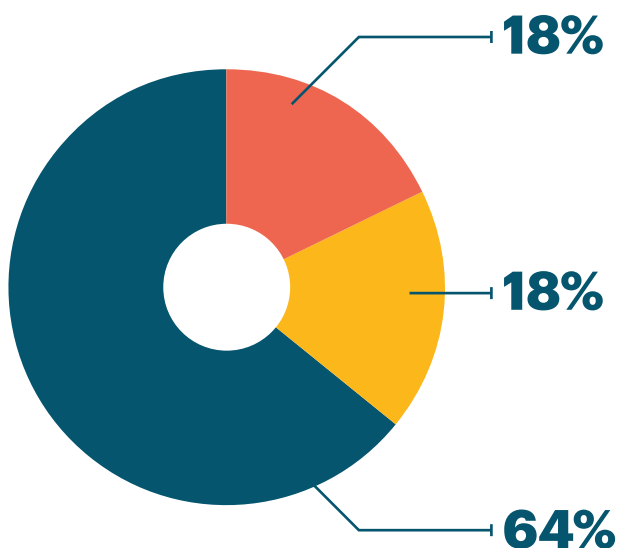
Table for 1? Not that often.

Who do they typically dine out with?

71%

64%

44%

27%

Alone

Friends / coworkers

Family

Spouse / Significant Other

Only a quarter **(27%)** of restaurant diners said they at least sometimes dine alone. While nearly three-quarters **(71%)** of diners can be found dining out with their significant other.

Frequent restaurant-goers are influencers in their social circles.

Frequent diners believe they have a high influence when they recommend a restaurant to a friend.
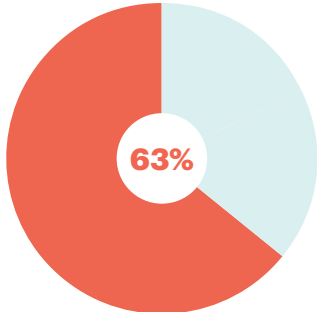
63% say their **friends or colleagues** rely on their opinion or follow their recommendation most times when they're out to eat.
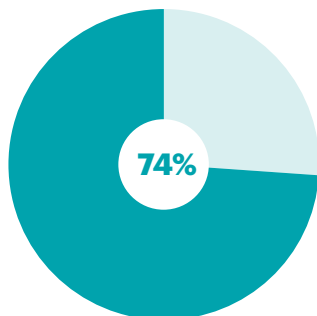
74% of surveyed restaurant goers say their **family / significant other** relies on their opinion when deciding on a restaurant.

These boots are made for walk-ins....

Walk-ins are favored over reservations.

60% rarely or never make a reservation

26% occasionally make a reservation

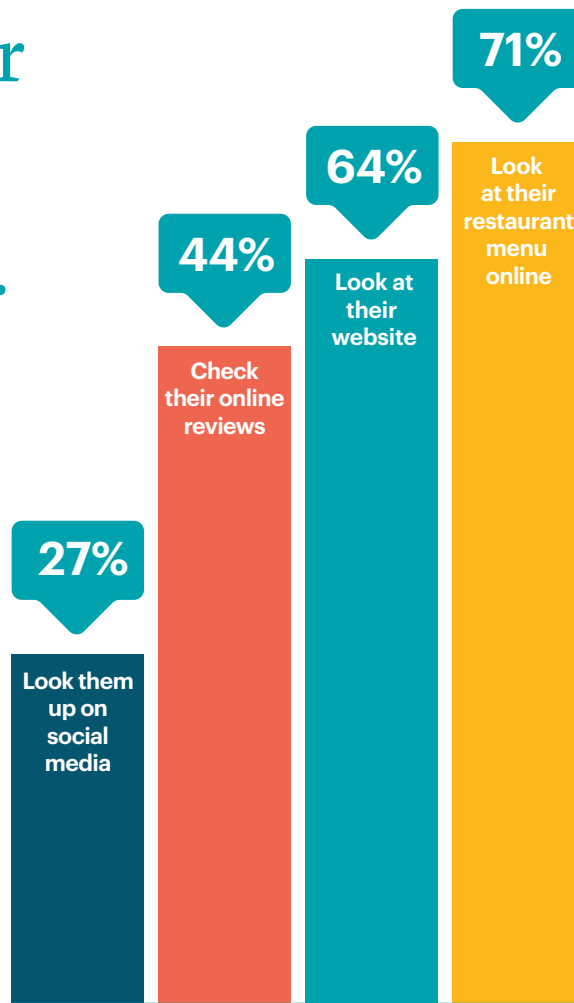**14%** always or most times make a reservation

Google It

What Do Restaurant-Goers Do Before Dining?

Today's diner is digital. And curious.

Frequent diners are doing quite a bit of research online before settling on a restaurant.

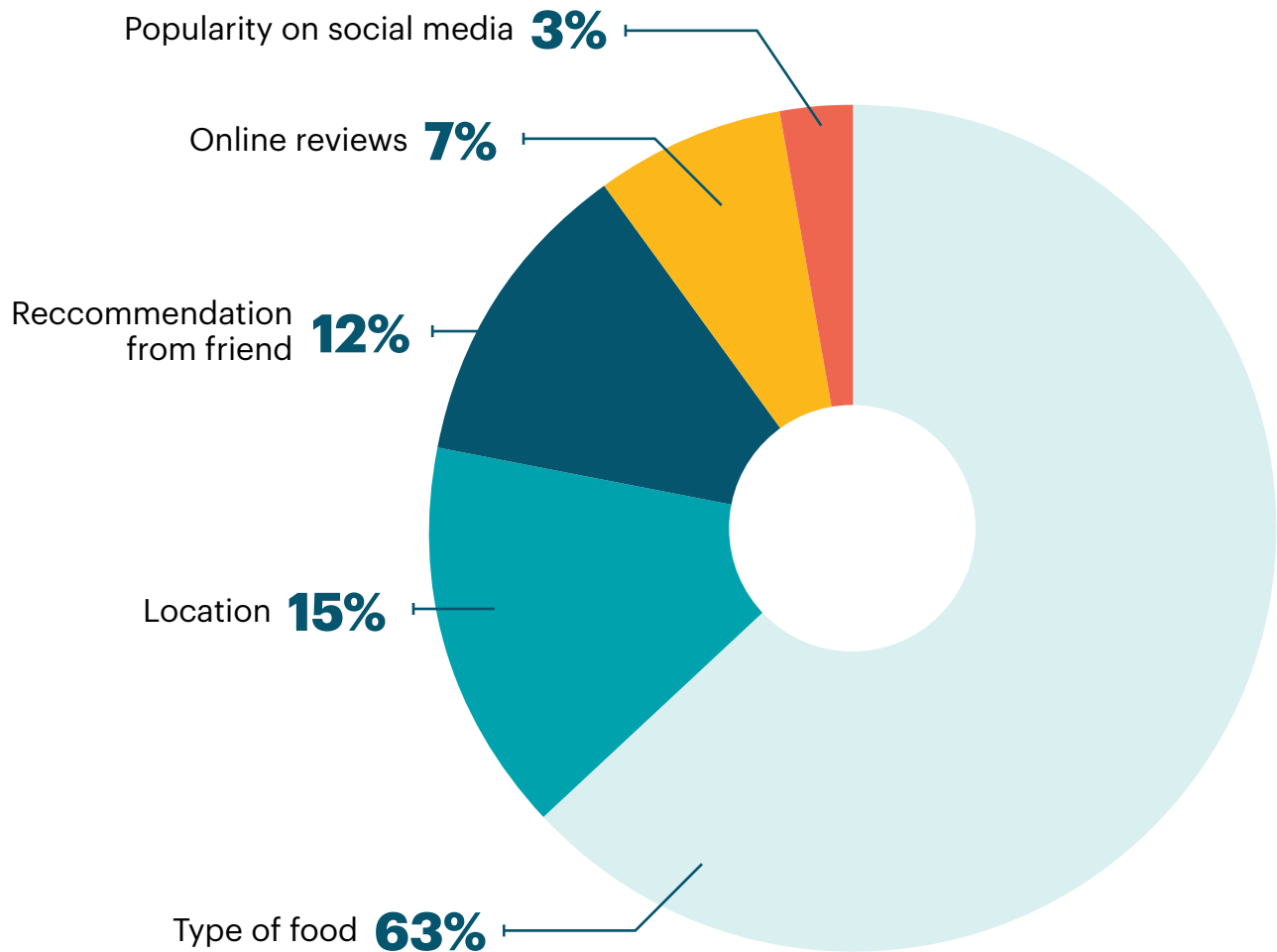**How often do you do the following before deciding on a new restaurant?**

27%
Look them up on social media

44%
Check their online reviews

64%
Look at their website

71%
Look at their restaurant menu online

What Matters Most?

Cravings always win.

63% of restaurant goers said that the "type of food" that restaurants offered has the biggest influence on their dining decisions above all other factors.

How would you rank the following factors in terms of the impact they have on your dining decisions?

Popularity on social media **3%**

Online reviews **7%**

Reccommendation from friend **12%**

Location **15%**

Type of food **63%**

The YUM Factor:

## Good food to the rescue

70%

would re-visit a restaurant that had bad customer service if their food was good.

Social media: "Is this thing on?"

Social media was ranked last for factors that impact restaurant-goers dining decisions including: recommendations, online reviews, type of food, and location. Only 3% ranked social media as the most impactful in their decision making process.

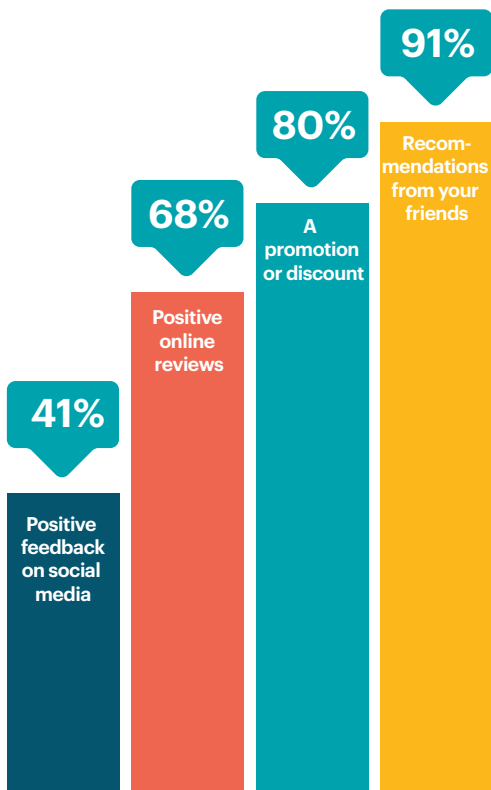**How would you rank popularity on social media in terms of the impact it has on your dining decisions?**

69%
Dead last

18%
Fourth

3%
First

4%
Second

5%
Third
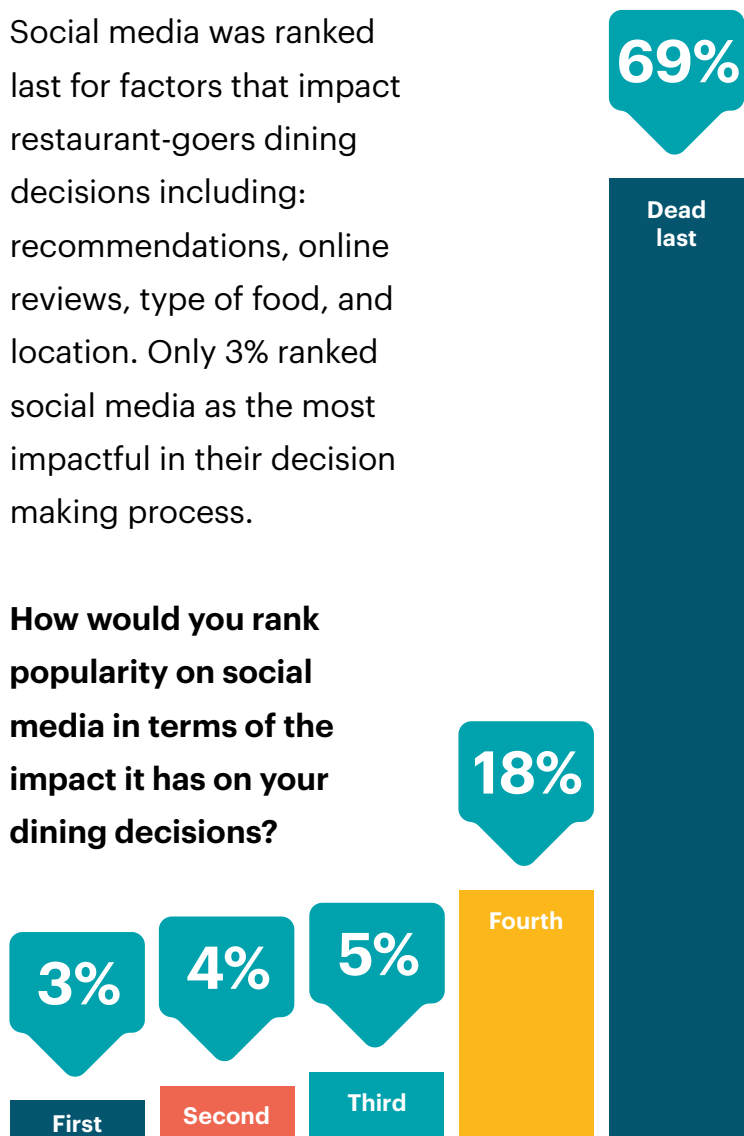
Deal Makers

When asked

"Have you ever made a decision to try a new restaurant based entirely on any of the following?"

restaurant-goers said:

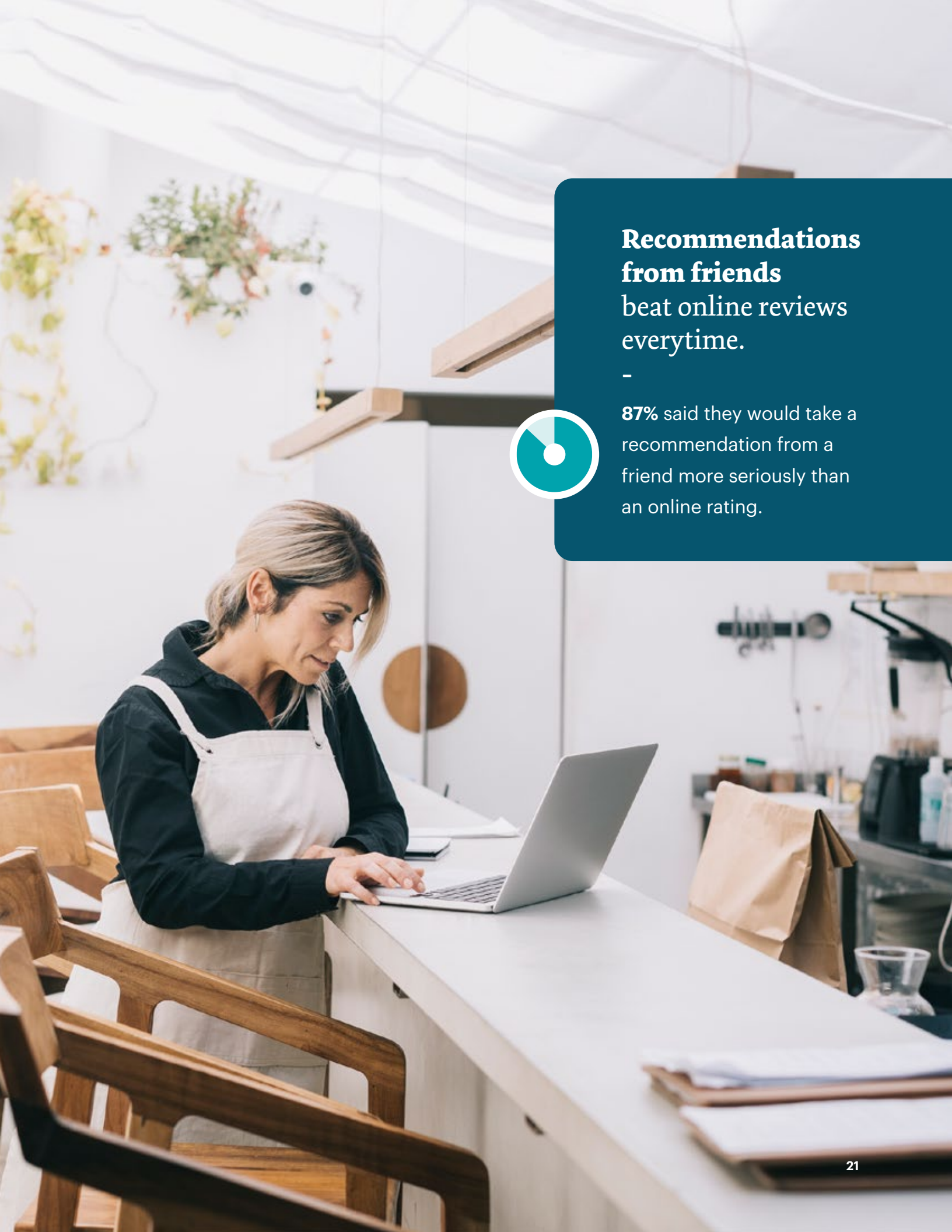|			91% Recommendations from your friends
		80% A promotion or discount	
	68% Positive online reviews		
41% Positive feedback on social media			

Biggest Influencers:
Reviews vs. Recommendations vs. Social Media

Would try a new restaurant based entirely on:

91%   A recommendation from a friend

68%   Positive online reviews

41%   Positive social media feedback

Has decided to not go to a restaurant in the past because:

74%   Negative feedback from a friend

57%   Read bad online reviews

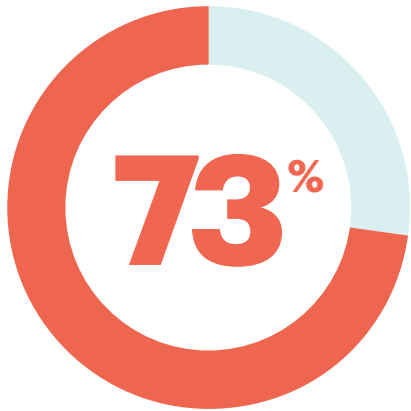**32%**   Negative feedback on social media

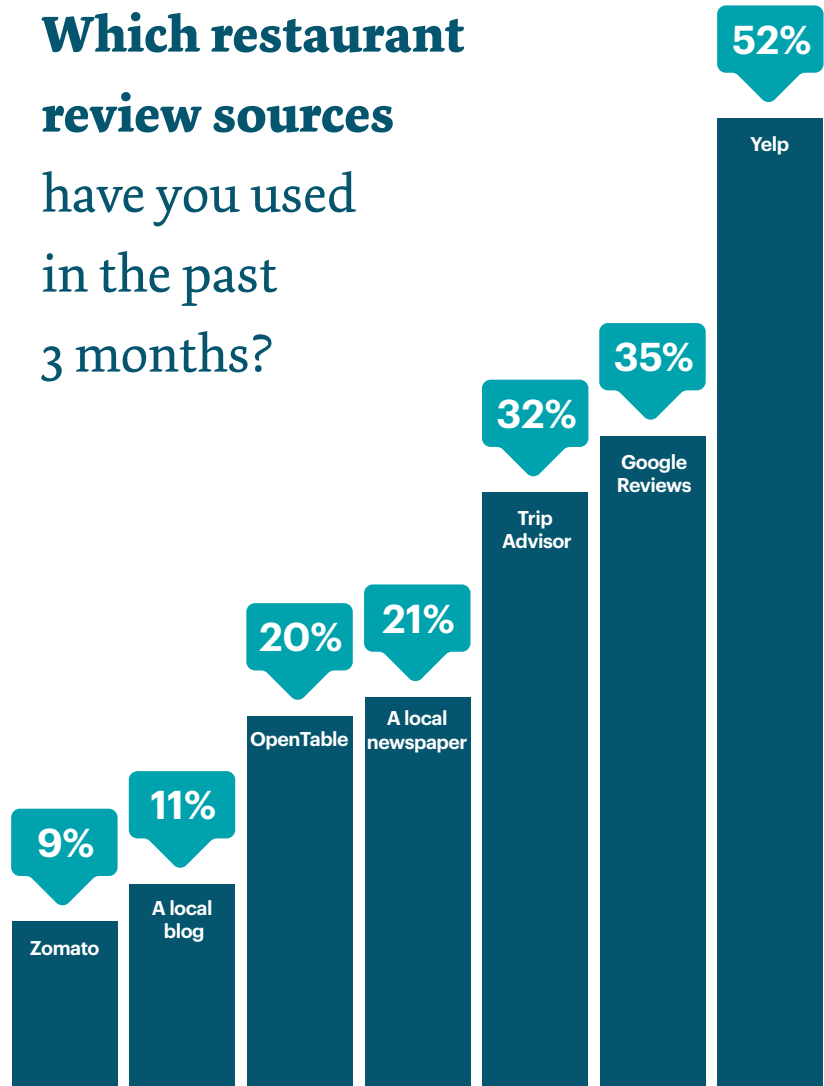**Recommendations from friends** beat online reviews everytime.

–

87% said they would take a recommendation from a friend more seriously than an online rating.

Please pass the Yelp.

73%

of diners have used at least one online review source in the past 3 months.

Which restaurant review sources have you used in the past 3 months?

9%	**11%**	**20%**	**21%**	**32%**	**35%**	**52%**
Zomato	A local blog	OpenTable	A local newspaper	Trip Advisor	Google Reviews	Yelp

The Coupon Lives On...

80% of restaurant goers have tried a new restaurant based entirely on receiving a discount or promotion.
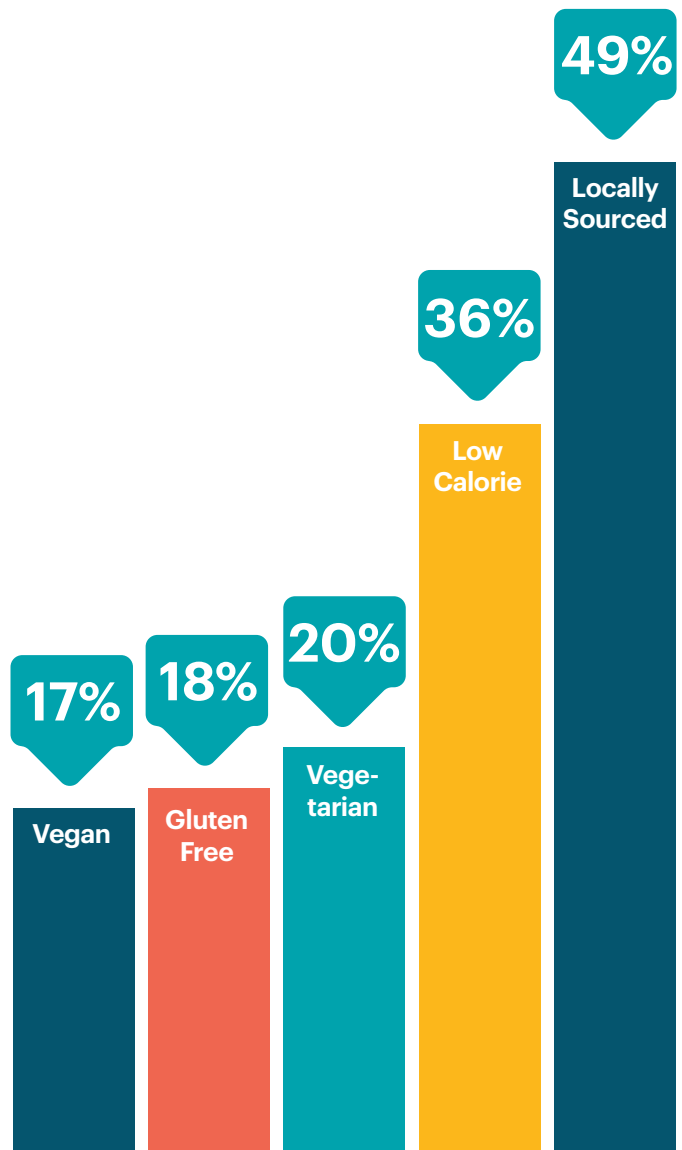
How Much Do Food Options Matter?

Half of diners said they would be more likely to choose a restaurant that had locally-sourced food options.

If a restaurant provided the below food options, how would it affect your likelihood to choose that restaurant?

17% Vegan

18% Gluten Free

20% Vegetarian

36% Low Calorie

49% Locally Sourced

That old song and dance…
gets diners in the door.

If a restaurant provided the entertainment options below, how would it affect your likelihood to choose that restaurant?

44% Live music

39% WiFi

36% TVs

25% Games or billiards
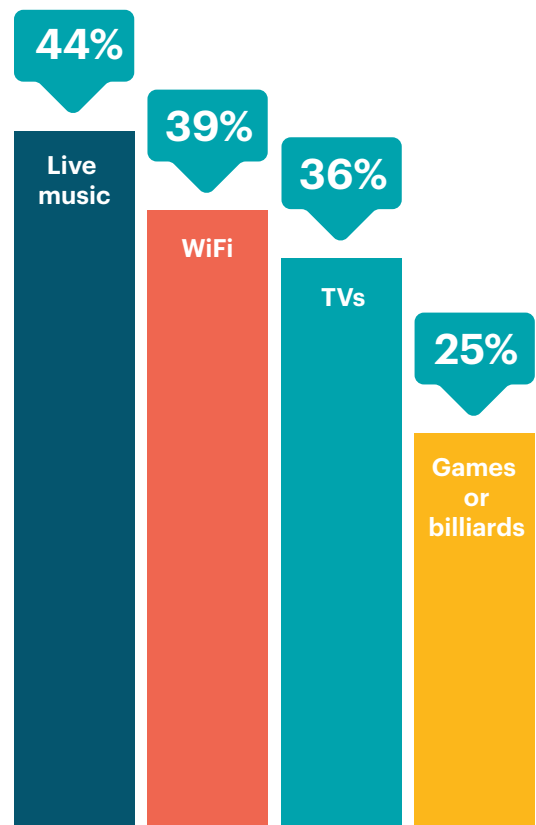
Deal Breakers

Hold the rats, roaches, and rust.

Health warnings were the top reason diners would forego visiting a restaurant, with **40%** citing it as their top deterrent.

**Which of the following, if anything, would be most likely to deter you from going to a restaurant?**

2%
No bill splitting

11%
Auto gratuity

20%
Distance greater than 30 minutes away

21%
Bad online reviews

32%
A table wait time over 30 minutes

35%
Heard from a friend that the food was bad

52%
A recent health inspection warning

Nearly three-quarters (74%) said they would decide not to go to a restaurant if a friend gave them negative feedback about it.

Have you ever made the decision NOT to go to a restaurant based entirely on negative feedback from friends?

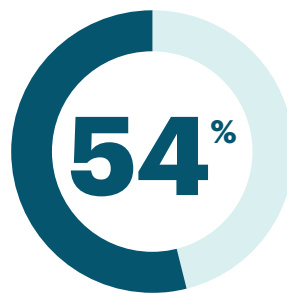**26%** No

74% Yes

Millennials vs. Baby Boomers
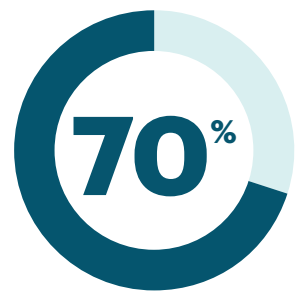
"What's good tonight?"

66%
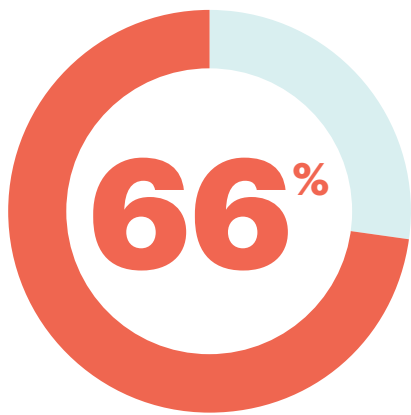
of Millennials are eating out more than once a week. That's **16%** more than Gen Xers and **12%** more than Baby Boomers.

Millennials are less driven by their cravings.

Millennials are far less likely to say that the type of food has the biggest impact on their dining decision.

54%

Ages 18-34

70%

Ages 55+

... but Millennials are more driven by online reviews and popularity on social media.

How would you rank the following factors in terms of the impact they have on your dining decisions?
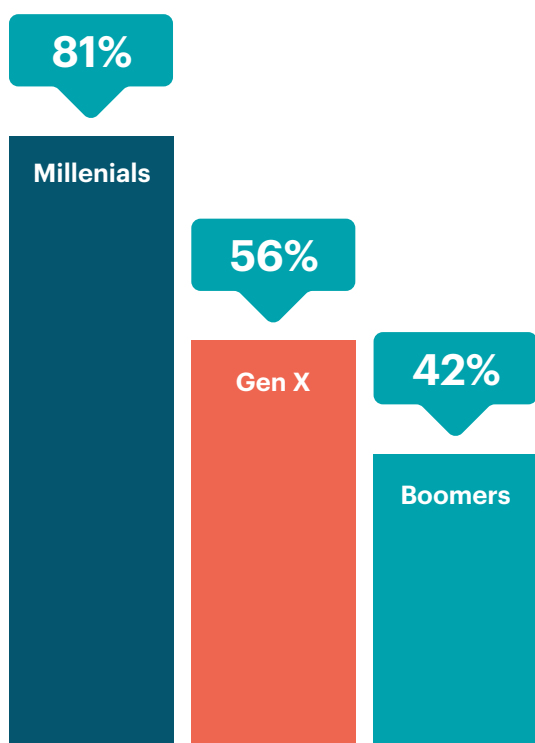
| Online Reviews	Social Media
31%	**15**%
Ages 18-34	Ages 18-34
8%	**0**%
Ages 55+	Ages 55+

Maybe they're just hungry,
but far more Millennials seek out restaurant menus online.

How often do you look at a restaurants online menu before deciding on a NEW restaurant?

81%

Millenials

56%

Gen X

42%

Boomers

Millennials are much more likely to look at online reviews than others before deciding on a new restaurant.

Check online reviews before deciding on a new restaurant.

67%

Millenials

44%

Gen X

26%

Boomers
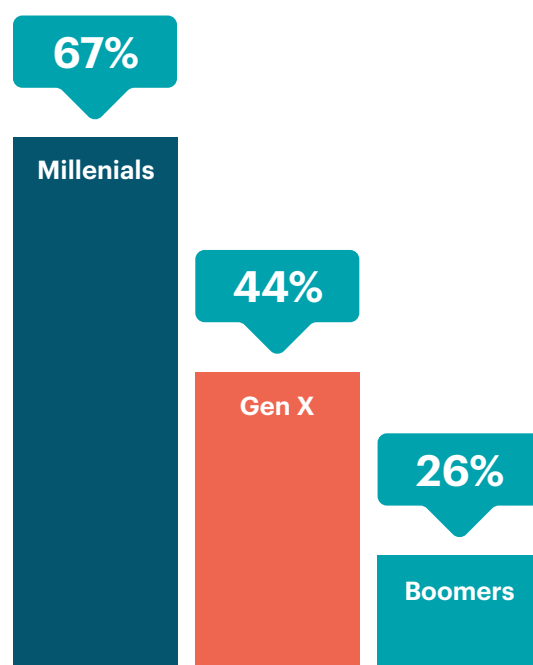
Where's the "unlike" button?

While negative feedback on social media isn't a big deterrent overall, Millennials were more deterred by negative social media reviews than other demographics.

32% of restaurant goers have chosen not to go to a restaurant because of negative feedback on social media.

This is especially true for Millennials **(45%)** and significantly less true for those 55+ **(17%)**.
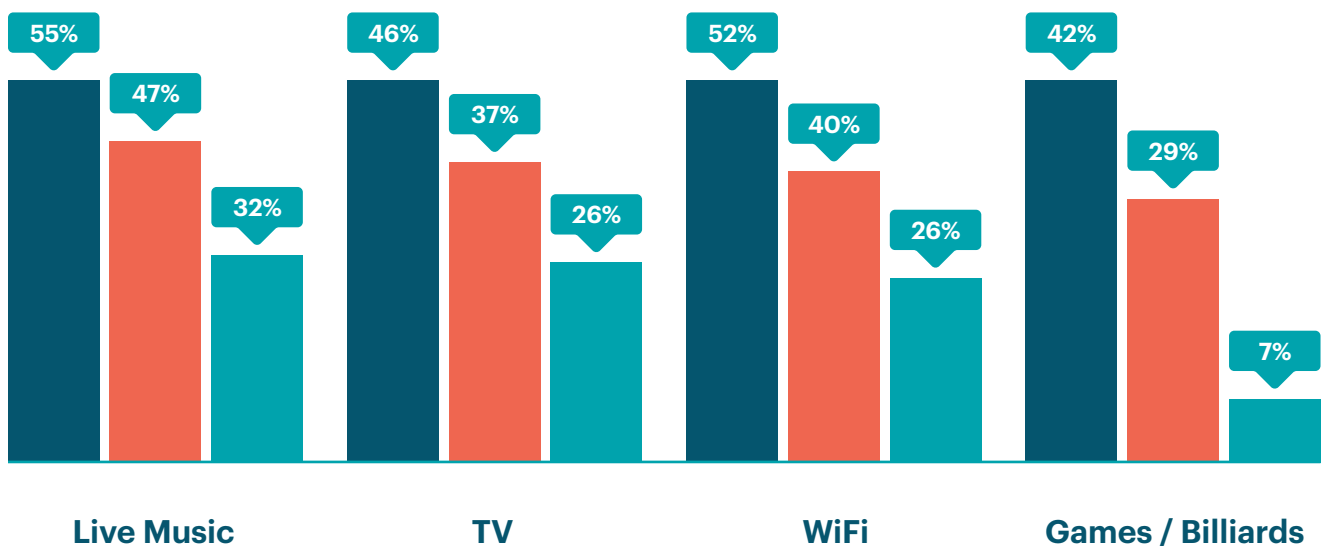
Picky palates? **Not Baby Boomers.**

Baby Boomers are far less likely to be influenced by specialty menu offerings when choosing a restaurant.

	18-34	35-54	55+
Gluten Free	24%	21%	11%
Locally Sourced	52%	53%	42%
Vegetarian	26%	21%	14%
Low Calorie	44%	35%	31%
Vegan	18%	20%	15%

Turn it down vs. Turned up?

Restaurant entertainment is less important for Baby Boomers and more important for everybody else.

If a restaurant provided the entertainment options below, how would it affect your likelihood to choose that restaurant?

■ **Millennials**
■ **Gen Xers**
■ **Baby Boomers**

	Millennials	Gen Xers	Baby Boomers
Live Music	55%	47%	32%
TV	46%	37%	26%
WiFi	52%	40%	26%
Games / Billiards	42%	29%	7%

Urban vs. Rural

Empty fridge syndrome.

How often do you usually dine out? Urban diners frequent restaurants most often.

69%

Urban

55%
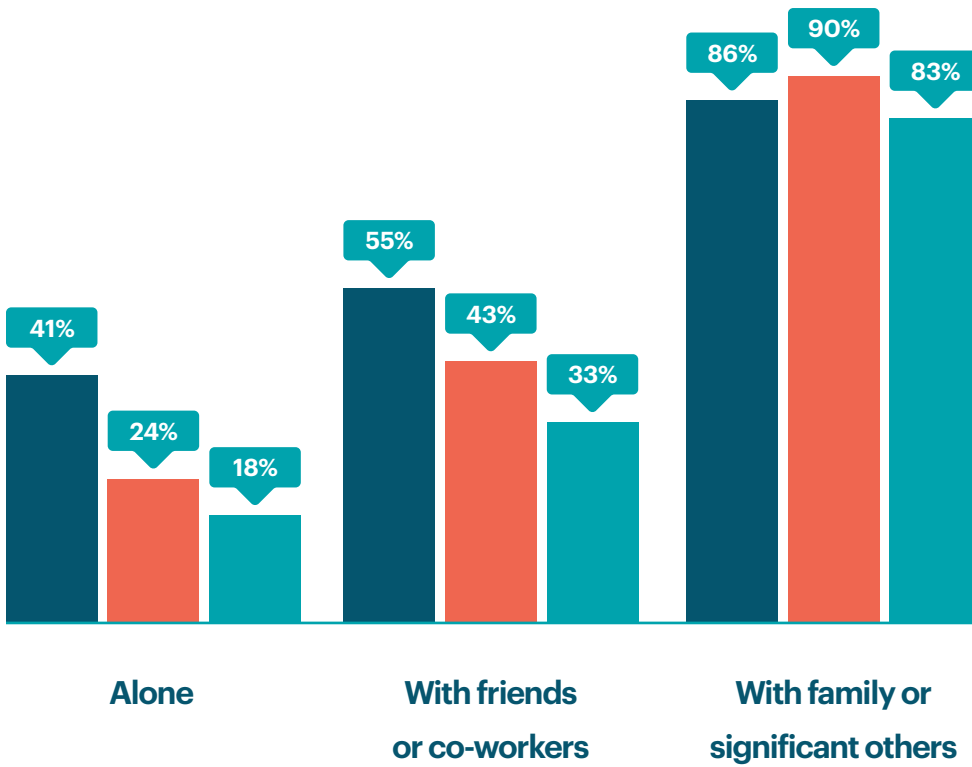
Suburban
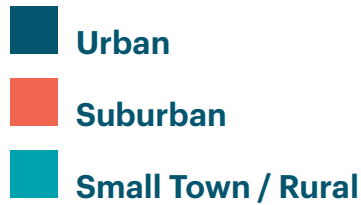
43%

Small town / Rural

More than once a week
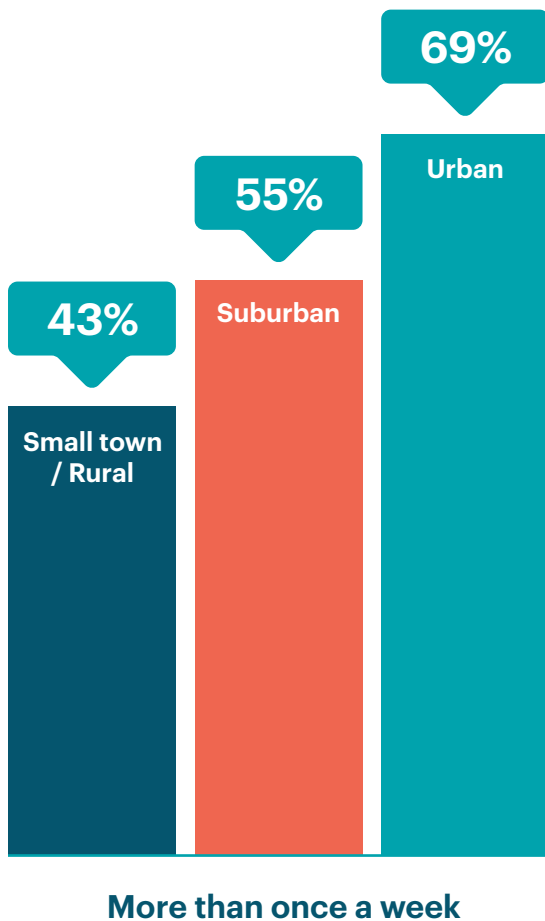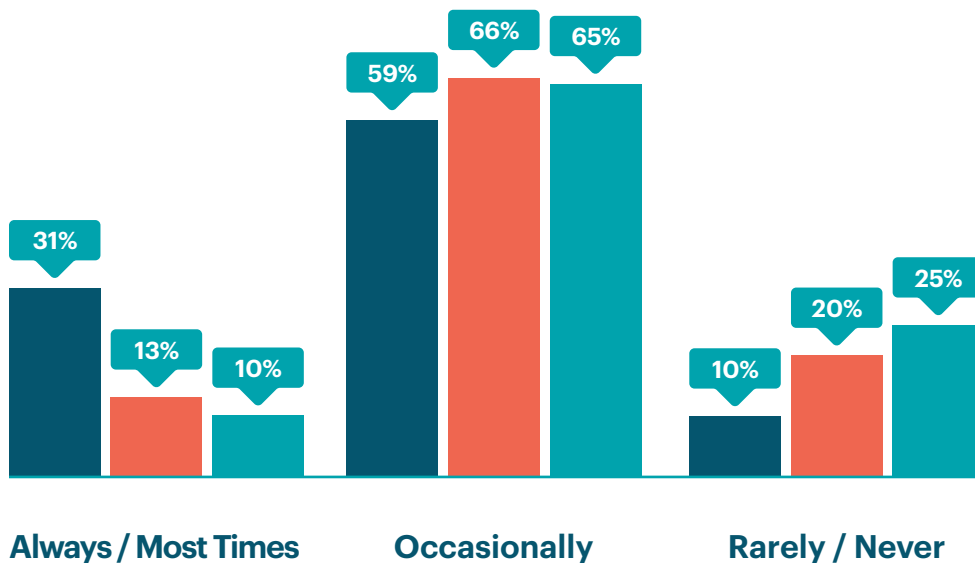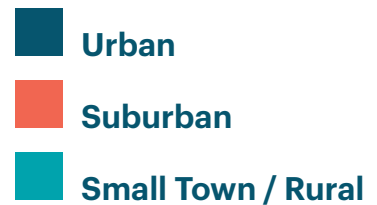
"You can't sit with us."

Urban diners are more likely to dine alone or with friends and colleagues, while rural diners often dine with their families or significant other.

Who do you typically dine out with?

■ **Urban**

■ **Suburban**

■ **Small Town / Rural**

	Alone	With friends or co-workers	With family or significant others
Urban	41%	55%	86%
Suburban	24%	43%	90%
Small Town / Rural	18%	33%	83%

Urban diners are more likely to try somewhere new.

How often do you choose a restaurant you've never been to?

Urban

Suburban

Small Town / Rural

Always / Most Times
- Urban: 31%
- Suburban: 13%
- Small Town / Rural: 10%

Occasionally
- Urban: 59%
- Suburban: 66%
- Small Town / Rural: 65%

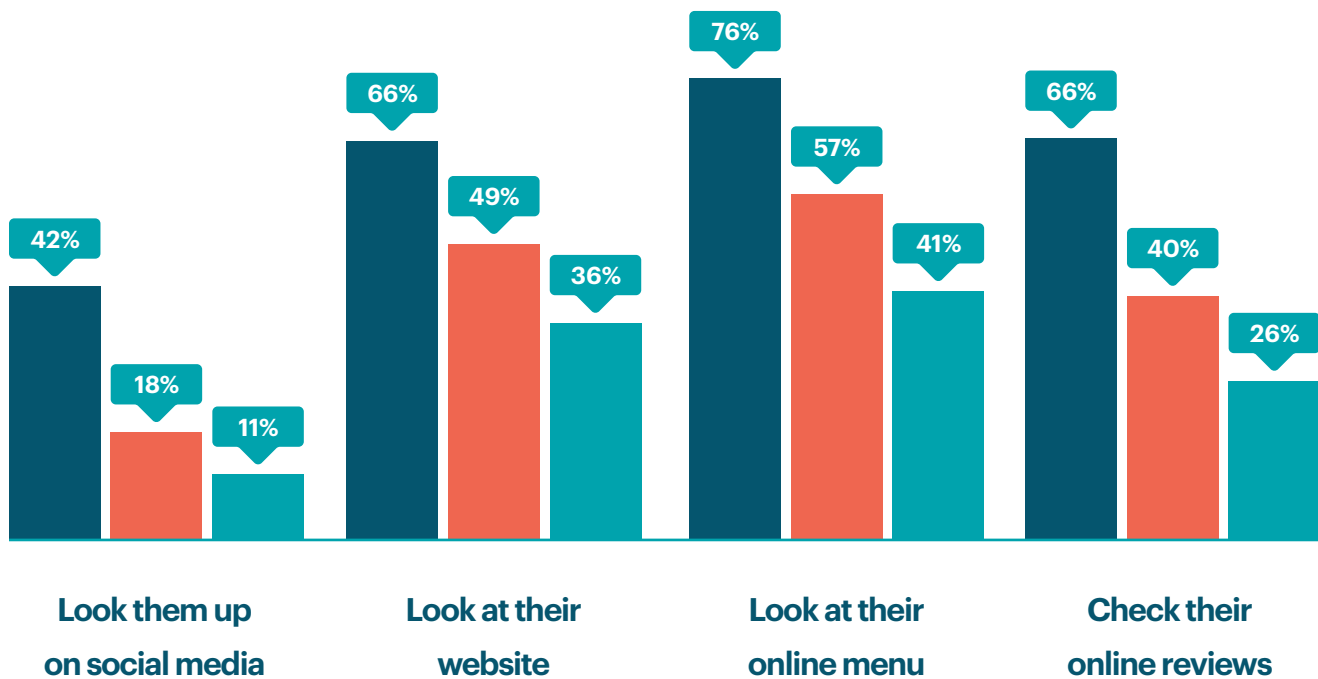## Rarely / Never
- Urban: 10%
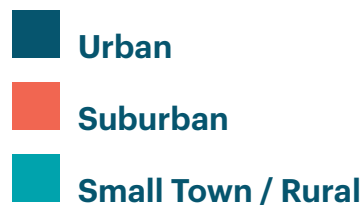- Suburban: 20%
- Small Town / Rural: 25%

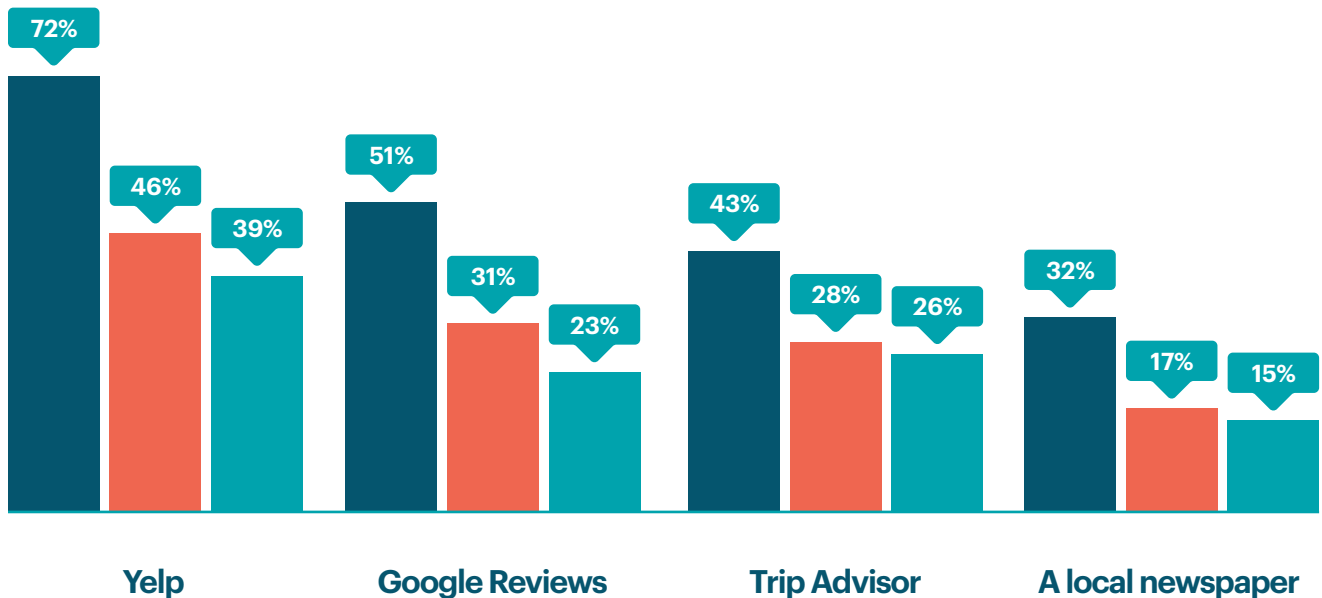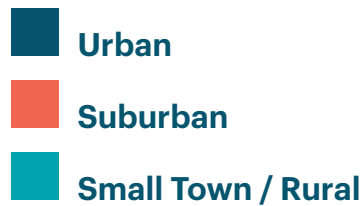# The real reason young people are glued to their phones on transit.

Urban restaurant-goers perform **significantly more online activities** before deciding on a new restaurant.

How often do you do the following before deciding on a new restaurant?

- ■ **Urban**
- ■ **Suburban**
- ■ **Small Town / Rural**

Look them up on social media
- 42%
- 18%
- 11%

Look at their website
- 66%
- 49%
- 36%

Look at their online menu
- 76%
- 57%
- 41%

Check their online reviews
- 66%
- 40%
- 26%

When urban restaurant-goers check out reviews online, this is where they go.

Which restaurant review sources have you used in the past 3 months?

- **Urban**
- **Suburban**
- **Small Town / Rural**

	Yelp	Google Reviews	Trip Advisor	A local newspaper
Urban	72%	51%	43%	32%
Suburban	46%	31%	28%	17%
Small Town / Rural	39%	23%	26%	15%

OpenTable
34%
18%
4%

A local blog
22%
5%
10%

Zomato
19%
5%
3%

Have not used any reviews in the past 3 months
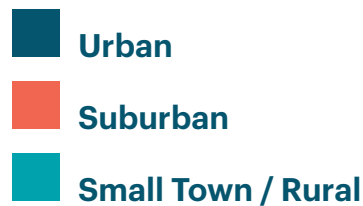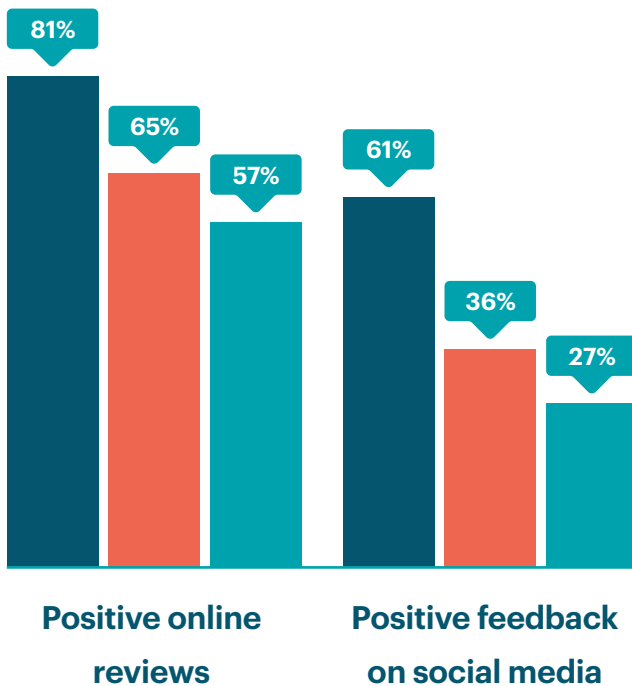11%
27%
39%
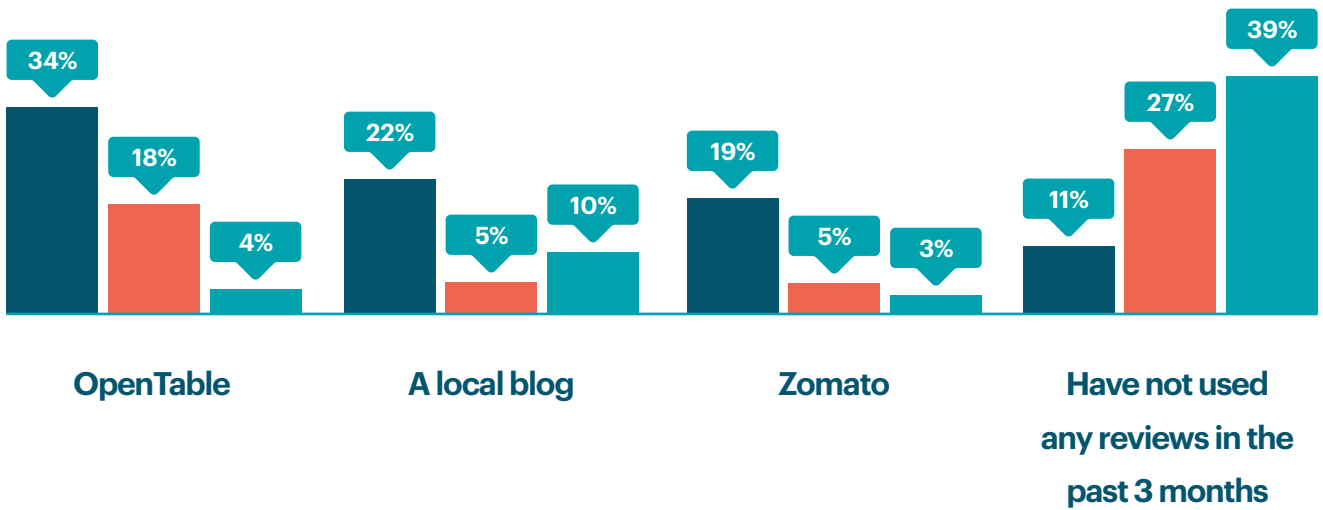
A digital thumbs up goes a long way for urbanites.

Online reviews and social media are more likely to drive the decisions of urban restaurant goers.

- **Urban**
- **Suburban**
- **Small Town / Rural**

Have you ever made a decision **to go** to a new restaurant based entirely on the following:

	Positive online reviews	Positive feedback on social media
Urban	81%	61%
Suburban	65%	36%
Small Town / Rural	57%	27%

Have you ever made a decision **to not go** to a restaurant based entirely on the following:

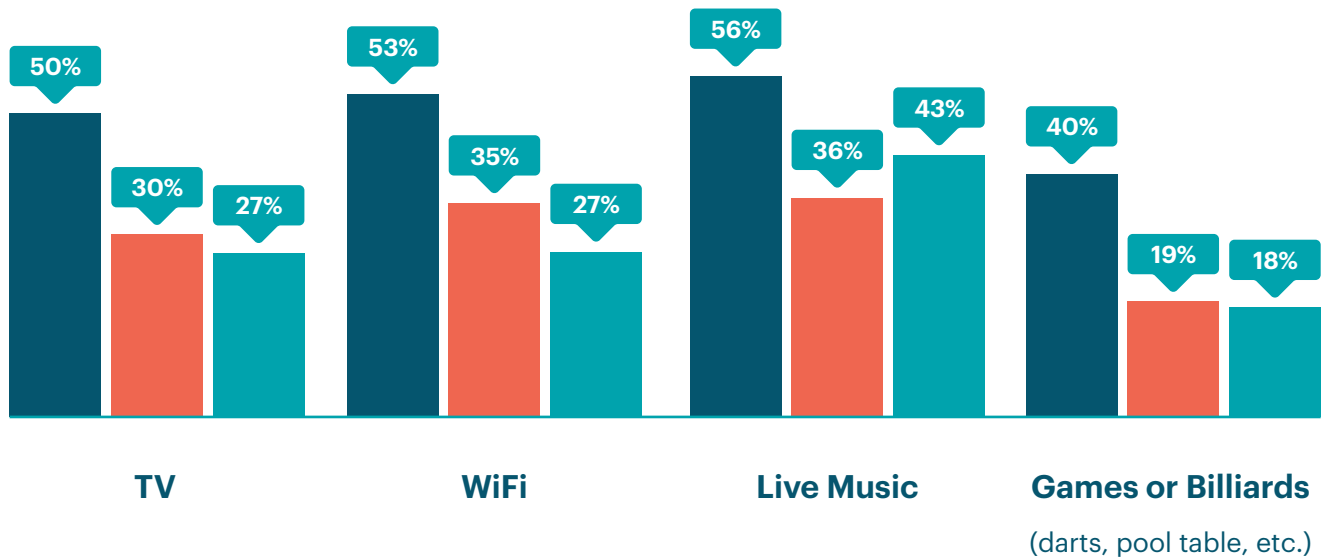|	Negative online reviews	Negative feedback on social media
Urban	62%	48%
Suburban	60%	25%
Small Town / Rural	47%	24%
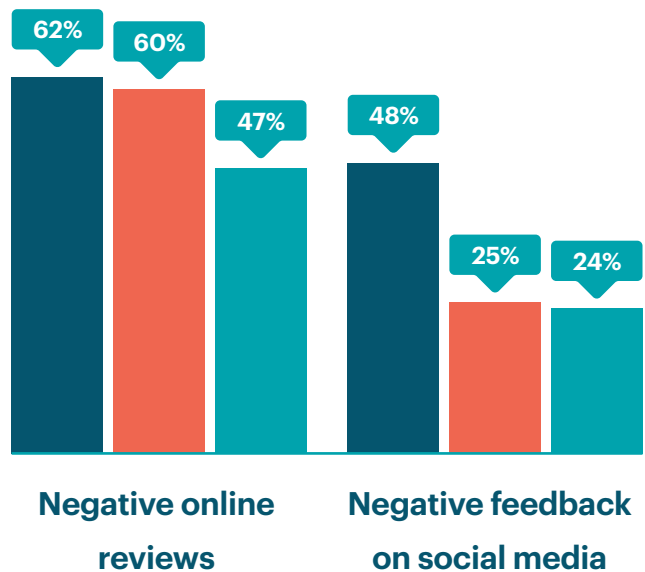
Healthy, local food options are more important to urban dwellers.

If a restaurant provided the following food options, would it affect your likelihood to choose that restaurant?

Legend:
- **Urban**
- **Suburban**
- **Small Town / Rural**

Gluten-Free
- Urban: 33%
- Suburban: 12%
- Small Town / Rural: 12%

Locally Sourced
- Urban: 64%
- Suburban: 42%
- Small Town / Rural: 43%

Vegetarian
- Urban: 32%
- Suburban: 13%
- Small Town / Rural: 17%

Low Calorie
- Urban: 48%
- Suburban: 30%
- Small Town / Rural: 33%

Vegan
- Urban: 31%
- Suburban: 9%
- Small Town / Rural: 14%
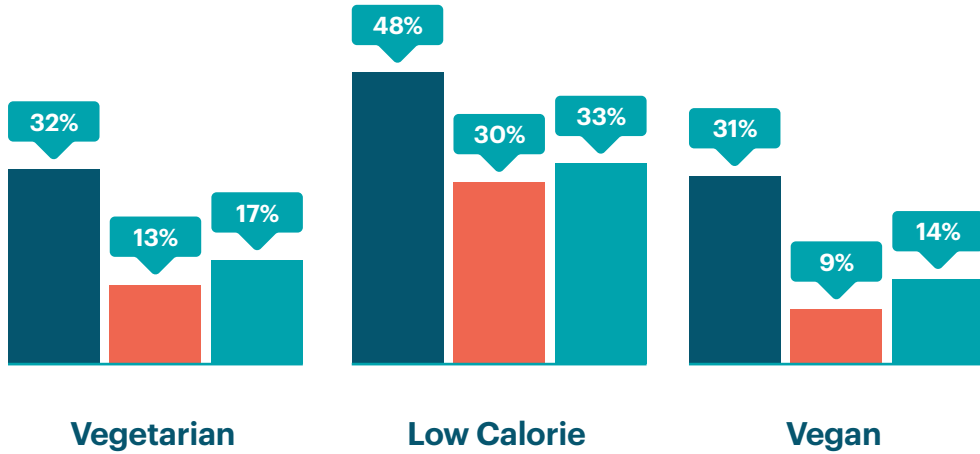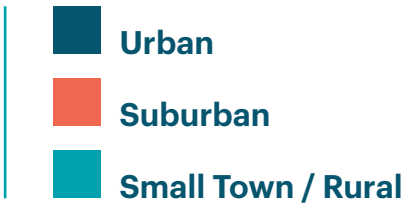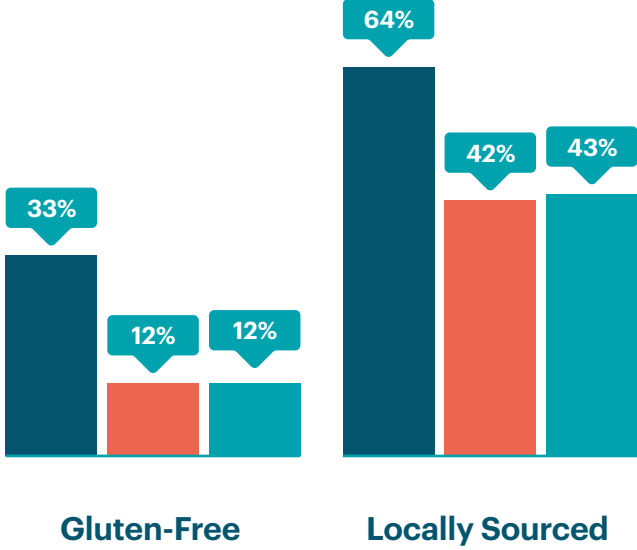
Urbanites love their food with a side of entertainment.

If a restaurant provided the entertainment options below, would it affect your likelihood to choose that restaurant?

- **Urban**
- **Suburban**
- **Small Town / Rural**

TV
- 50%
- 30%
- 27%

WiFi
- 53%
- 35%
- 27%

Live Music
- 56%
- 36%
- 43%

Games or Billiards
(darts, pool table, etc.)
- 40%
- 19%
- 18%
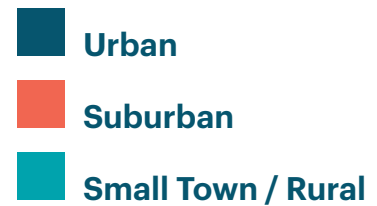
Baller Budget vs. Dining on a Dime
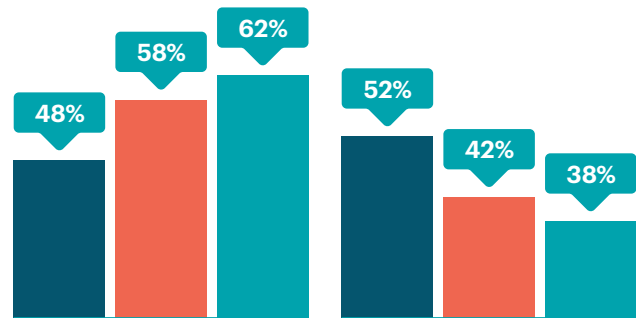
Ballers are more likely to seek out new dining experiences.

How often do you choose a restaurant you've never been to?
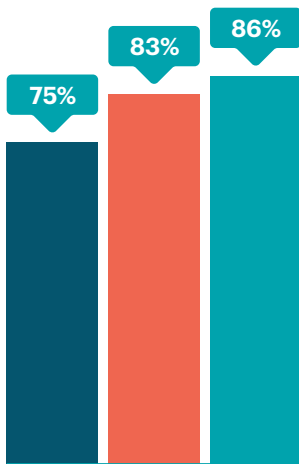
Ballers want to know what they're getting themselves into.

**Diners with a household income of 100k+ are more likely to look at the menu online before deciding on a restaurant.**

75%   83%   86%

Always / Most Times

48%   58%   62%

I look at the menu online first

52%   42%   38%

I don't look at the menu online first

Diners on a dime are less likely to avoid a restaurant just because it has negative reviews.

Have you ever made a decision to not go to a restaurant based entirely on negative reviews?

48%

60%

62%

■ <50K

■ $50K-$100K

■ $100K+
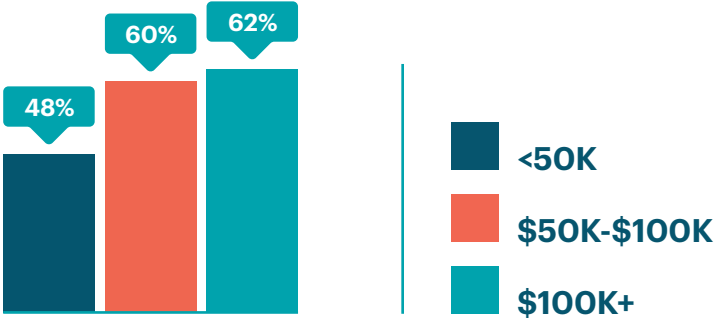
Opportunities for Restaurants

■ "Honey, I feel like Thai":

Put food first! If you take away one thing from this research report it's that the type of food you offer is the main draw towards your restaurant. Diners value food first and good food can be your saving grace when it comes to saving a bad service scenario or combatting poor online reviews. No matter what age, location, or dining circumstance your customer is coming for, the results are in and "type of food" is the biggest influencer on choosing restaurants.

■ You can't please everyone all the time... so get to know your diners and know them well:

Use analytics to your advantage. Sales data and customer profiles provide you with key intel into who is frequenting your restaurant. If your customer

base is primarily Millennials, you'll know they're more inclined to value what's being said about you on social media. They're also more likely to attend your karaoke night – so perhaps you should put out an ad on social media! Skip the gluten-free options if you're attracting a largely Boomer customer base.

■ In terms of reviews, recommendations from friends are the most important:

We all know that negative word-of-mouth can cause substantial harm. But equally as detrimental is silence. If you're not being talked about, do you even exist? Restaurants should find a way to make a positive impression through a combination of food, service, and marketing strategies to get people to return and tell their friends. A positive recommendation goes a long way.

■ Showcase your goods online:

The numbers speak for themselves. While some online activity – like constantly scouring through online reviews – might have less impact on dining choices in comparison to others, most restaurant-goers perform some kind of activity before venturing to your spot for the first time. Having an updated menu and an easy to use website is a must-have.

■ Take advantage of good PR:

They had a good time and you know it. Don't let that supremely satisfied customer slip through your fingers. Sweeten the deal with a coupon, a discount or another incentive, so not only will they have a higher chance of returning, but they'll tell all their friends.

■ Urban restaurants should provide a variety of healthy food options:

Urban restaurants have their jobs cut out for them. More competition, more choices, more pressure to perform well in all avenues than their small town counterparts. But at the same time, they have a larger customer base and more opportunity to get people in the door. We know urban diners are attracted to food options, so it's best for urban restaurants to cater to a variety of dietary restrictions, while keeping sustainability top of mind.

By the numbers, rural restaurants don't have to worry as much about catering to vegans, however across the board locally sourced was a stand out formany diners so they should keep that top of mind.

■ Social media matters… but not in comparison to other factors:

With social media's relative lack of importance revealed in the survey, it's function can become more of a reminder that you exist and less of a lure to get people in the door. If you're targeting new customers on social media, you might want to change your strategy to retention and focus more on building your website and presence on online review sites.

Research Methodology

This study was conducted by Maru Matchbox research firm on behalf of TouchBistro. Results are from 521 Americans aged 18+, who indicated that they dine out at least once a week.

The survey was conducted June 2017.

TouchBistro is an iPad and integrated payments solution built for restaurant people, by restaurant people. Our system helps thousands of restaurateurs around the world increase sales, delight guests, and save both time and money. Find out how our solutions can help make it easier to run your restaurant. Book a demo today!

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