



## Hungry (but Not for Human Contact), Americans Head for the Drive-Through

A national fixture is enjoying a fresh surge as post-pandemic customers crave speed and solitude. And restaurants are responding with a raft of innovations.



By Kim Severson

Kim Severson, based in Atlanta, writes about the nation's food culture. She reported this story from Minnesota and Georgia.

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Faith Enokian loves a drive-through. The senior at the University of South Alabama loves them so much she pulls into one at least eight times a week.

Sometimes it's just to pick up food. Other times she asks an often-baffled Starbucks barista to make "whatever your favorite drink is" and posts the interaction on TikTok.

"Maybe I'm lazy," she said, "but it's something about the car."

Getting a meal through a car window began to define the nation's food culture the moment the founders of In-N-Out Burger set up a two-way speaker in 1948. But the drive-through has never been as integral to how America eats as it is now.

The pandemic sent people into the comforting isolation of their cars to get tested for Covid, celebrate birthdays and even vote. And now, it seems, they don't want to get out. At least to eat.

Drive-through traffic rose 30 percent from 2019 to 2022, according to a report from the food service research firm Technomic. Meanwhile, the number of people eating inside fast-food restaurants in the first half of 2023 fell by 47 percent from the same period in 2019. Drive-throughs now account for two-thirds of all fast-food purchases, according to a September report by Revenue Management Solutions.



Faith Enokian, a student at the University of South Alabama in Mobile, hits the drive-through eight times a week. Natalie Zepp for The New York Times

As momentum builds, the \$113 billion fast-food industry is leaning in. Popeyes executives are cutting the size of dining rooms in half. Taco Bell is experimenting with eliminating them altogether in favor of more car lanes. Chick-fil-A plans to open a two-story, four-lane drive-through in Atlanta next year that can handle 75 cars at a time and delivers food from the kitchen on a conveyor belt.

Restaurants are tailoring mobile menus to individual customers, based on their past purchases. Some are experimenting with artificial intelligence that can take orders in either Spanish or English, depending on the first words out of a guest's mouth.

Why the new wave of drive-through love? Because the experience has become faster and smoother, industry executives say. The pandemic turbocharged upgrades that were already underway, including better mobile ordering, streamlined kitchens and smarter traffic management.

Others point to cultural shifts like the growing popularity of coffee shop drive-throughs among Generation Z and young millennials, and even pet ownership, which skyrocketed during the pandemic.

"People don't like to leave their pets at home," said Diana Kelter, associate director of consumer trends for Mintel, a global market-intelligence agency. "And you can't bring your dog into Starbucks."

But the most striking explanation may be a societal sea change: People emerged from the pandemic with less tolerance for interacting with strangers.

"These are all sorts of ways people are prioritizing safety. The drive-through mentality keeps people both physically and psychologically safe," said Shelley Balanko, a social scientist and senior vice president with the Hartman Group, a research company that studies American eating patterns.





Starbucks is designing drive-throughs with smaller footprints. Natalie Zepp for The New York Times

“Fellow shoppers are disgruntled. Staff are equally unhappy and difficult to be around,” she said. “There are times when it’s just not worth it.”

Ronald Gross, a retiree with three grandchildren who lives in Brooklyn Park, just north of Minneapolis, sat in his car in a Taco Bell parking lot on a recent sunny afternoon eating a chicken chipotle melt.

Across the street was a Starbucks drive-through. Behind him was a bank with two lanes for customers in cars. Next to that was an oil-change station with a banner promising that customers would never have to leave their cars. And towering above them, trimmed in purple neon, was the futuristic, two-story Taco Bell where Mr. Gross bought his lunch.

The company opened it last year and called it Defy, an innovation that aims to redefine the drive-through for the digital age. It has no dining room. The kitchen is on the second floor. Below, three of its four drive-through lanes are reserved for delivery drivers and people who order through an app. Bags of food zip from the kitchen to the customer on a round tray a little smaller than manhole cover that travels up and down a system of plastic tubes.

The technology didn’t strike Mr. Gross as a big deal. Having a moment to himself in the car did.

Before the pandemic, he would go inside restaurants like McDonald’s to eat. Now he sticks to the drive-through. “I got out of the habit,” he said. “I think I’m like a lot of people who just don’t necessarily like being social that much anymore.”

Even at Chick-fil-A and Dutch Bros, two chains where tablet-wielding employees walk the drive-through lines cheerfully taking orders while cars inch forward, the interaction is too much some for people.





Taco Bell's Defy facility in a suburb of Minneapolis is a recent example of "drive-through" optimization. Nate Ryan for The New York Times



Three of the four lanes are reserved for drivers from food-delivery apps. Nate Ryan for The New York Times

"I do the drive-through so I can be antisocial. Now you forcing me to interact?" Caleb Edwards, a rapper, lamented in a TikTok video about Chick-fil-A. "Naw, bro. Let me just drive through."

Caitlin Campbell worked the Starbucks drive-through as a college student in Tucson, Ariz. Customers often tried to draw her into their lives, asking her to do things like draw a heart on a drink cup to cheer up a heartbroken passenger.

"You are an avatar for their special experience," she said.

These days, she works from her home in Portland, Ore., handling mergers and acquisitions for a software company, but still goes to Starbucks drive-throughs.

"I lean on that feeling of not wanting too much interaction," she said. "Working from home for three years really zapped my social skills."

If nothing else, the fast-food industry has always known how to meet the mainstream exactly where it is, said Adam Chandler, a journalist who published "Drive-Thru Dreams: A Journey Through the Heart of America's Fast-Food Kingdom" in 2019.

Although by the 1950s Jack in the Box had customers talking into a clown's head to order, the '70s saw the true dawn of mass drive-through culture. Wendy's had just opened its first, and McDonald's and Burger King soon followed. Americans embraced the idea as a convenient, family-friendly novelty.

In the '80s, as middle-class wages took a beating and more families had two parents working, the drive-through offered a fast, inexpensive solution to dinner. The '90s brought a race to the bottom, as fast-food companies tried to offer the cheapest meal possible and some communities began to push back on drive-throughs as a way to combat obesity.





McDonald's, which created its first drive-through in the 1970s, opened a location last year in Fort Worth with no dining room at all. Richard B. Levine

By the 2010s, the backlash had hardened. Several cities banned drive-through lanes for reasons of pedestrian safety, public health and reducing car emissions. Accidents in the lanes became so frequent some law firms began specializing in them.

But the drive-through has managed to remake itself and rise again. Although Minneapolis banned new drive-throughs in 2019, the law has drawn legal challenges and complaints from people with disabilities. Companies like Starbucks and Biscuitville are getting more creative, building smaller restaurants that create fewer traffic snarls and fit better into neighborhoods.

In October, McDonald's said in its quarterly earnings report that 40 percent of its sales came from customers ordering digitally. It opened its first drive-through restaurant without a dining room late last year in Fort Worth.

Danny Klein, the editorial director of QSR magazine and author of its annual Drive-Thru Report, calls this "the era of drive-through optimization."

The quality — and the price — of drive-through food are both rising as wait times get shorter. "The drive-through is no longer a trade-off that is just fast and cheap," Mr. Klein said. "Now it's really about the technology. It's about being accurate and being a good experience."

A generation that loves to customize orders on an app, expects speed and wants an experience to post on TikTok is all in. Social media is filled with videos exploring all manner of drive-through culture, from random outbursts of violence to pranks like a car rigged to go through the line without a driver.

Eric Decker, the YouTube star who goes by the name Airrack, recently visited drive-throughs for 100 different restaurant brands. His quest took him and some buddies three days. The resulting 23-minute video has nearly 10 million views.

The Gen Z customer turned the drive-through experience on its head, said Scott Mezvinsky, Taco Bell's North American president. "It's a lesson in how to make a functional thing cool."



Since the lockdowns of the early pandemic, drive-throughs have only become more popular. Lindsay Dedario/Reuters

Even fast-casual restaurants that once shunned drive-through culture and targeted urban customers willing to pay more for fresher, less-processed ingredients have jumped on the train.

Shake Shack, which started as a hot-dog stand in a Manhattan park in 2001 and now has more than 500 restaurants around the world, opened its first drive-through in December 2021 in Maple Grove, Minn. Now it has 22. Sweetgreen, a company built on custom-made salads whose ethos includes being less carbon-intensive, opened a Sweetlane last year in Schaumburg, Ill.

"Drive-through culture has really been one thing, and we are happy to help make it something else," said Nicholas Jammet, who co-founded the chain.

Plenty of independent restaurant owners opened drive-through lanes to get through the pandemic. And some have had them all along.

"Drive-through culture is just part of the landscape here," said the author and Los Angeles Times columnist Gustavo Arellano. "You learn how to drive and eat at the same time. The trick is how do you put the salsa on top, but you figure out."

He has a particular fondness for the chile relleno burrito at Lucy's Drive In, but it's about more than the food, he said. A drive-through offers a delicious way to take a little time for yourself.

"For less than two minutes, that person in the window has to focus on you and only you," he said. "Then you get your burrito and go on with your day."

That experience is not likely to lose its appeal.

"Despite the war against the combustible engine, we are all stuck in cars and we are all pressed for time," he said, "so all roads for Americans eventually lead to the drive-through."

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