

# ON-SCREEN HEROES

They haven't taken over the restaurant world yet, but computers are shaping the industry's future. Here's our guide to the latest software and gadgets designed to make your life easier and more profitable

Words  
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From iZettle and ConnectSMART to location-based marketing, technology is transforming the restaurant business. Be it the way you cook, sell wine or distribute vouchers, there is new hardware and online services available that can help you do it more efficiently. But how do you navigate your way through the thicket of technical jargon and acronyms, like NFC, SAAS and QSR, without having your own WTF! moment?

That is where *Restaurant* comes in. Whether novice or geek, this technology overview is an opportunity to learn what's out there, what's new and how it might help you. Our focus, as ever, is on the bottom line.

## EPOS

### WHAT'S THE DEAL?

The PoS system is the huge pulsating brain at the centre of the modern restaurant: taking and relaying orders to the kitchen, monitoring tables and feeding staff upselling prompts, while reporting business intelligence data (key performance indicators, voucher redemptions, voids, corrections etc) to online hubs.

Area managers can receive regular email reports, or remotely drill down into the figures, while they are hundreds of miles away. Central offices can, likewise, update menus and prices across multiple sites. Further add-on stock/staff management modules then allow the PoS to be used by staff to clock-in, generate rosters, log labour costs and more.

With such complex functionality, the only danger is that you can forget that the PoS is still, primarily, your till. It, and the hand-held PDAs that your staff use, need to be robust and visually simple, and you need to make sure when you choose a provider that you are clear about service agreements and upgrades.

### WHAT'S THE LATEST?

There is a big PoS shift under way to mobility. The idea is to free up staff, so they are not having to permanently man or make unnecessary trips to a fixed terminal. Acorn Hospitality Systems' Squirrel software is now available for iPad, iPhone and iPod Touch. "With hand-held [PDA] units you have to use a different graphic interface to the 15in terminal," explains Acorn's David Jones. "That means you could have two interfaces your staff need to learn. Apple has an app that downsizes your software so it fits perfectly. You can do the full transaction [on an iPhone]: order-taking, bill settlement, and managers can see all their table statuses."

Squirrel's business intelligence software is similarly flexible. It can, for instance, export 'batches' of information (eg to an accountant, or

payroll firm), and area managers don't need to lug a laptop around to access it. Via SmartGlance, reports formatted for small screens can be emailed to their phones. Site managers can add local detail to such reports too (weather conditions, staffing levels etc) to explain trading anomalies.

At Micros the company has developed its own highly-sophisticated 'payment gateway', which enables the PoS system to share information with PDQ (card payment machines) like never before. Whereas, traditionally, staff would have to print an itemised bill from the PoS, Micros's PDQs (as used at Wahaca and Wagamama) can print that bill tableside, before reconciling payment automatically in the PoS system.

"It guarantees staff aren't going to key in the wrong amount or tender it as Visa as opposed to MasterCard," says Micros' sales director Matthew Parker.

Back at the fixed terminal, Zonal's new i700 features a video display that, depending on the order, suggests different menu items and deals to the customer. Its screen can also scan vouchers that have been sent to customers' phones. "We have a suite of applications to handle the loyalty side, sending out emails, tracking who's consuming what and what they might like to buy," says Zonal's Richie McBride.

## STOCK, MENU AND RESTAURANT MANAGEMENT

### WHAT'S THE DEAL?

Stock management will always require human oversight. Whatever the system, managers need to count and input stock, check deliveries, do impromptu stock-takes of items that tend to go walkabout (mainly booze). They also need to intercede when their intuition - or an irregular event like a royal wedding or the Olympics - suggests that a computer-generated order



Swish kit: Sophisticated technology from Micros helps eliminate errors by staff

needs fine-tuning.

Increasingly, however, by processing data from the PoS and simplifying the relaying of information (on stock availability, suppliers' delivery schedules, prices, orders, invoices etc) between restaurants and suppliers, the stock management systems offered by companies like Fretwell-Downing Hospitality and Fourth Hospitality do a lot of that work for you. "You're able to use till data to forecast the next period's trading, and on that prediction, make suggested orders based on your current stock. And we can put in purchase-ordering templates and pull in stock lists from suppliers," says Fretwell-Downing's Andrew Pond.

"You're looking for something that joins together ordering, receipting, stock management, recipes and nutritional analysis, linking seamlessly with the PoS," advises Fourth Hospitality's James England.

iTradeNetwork's Multiple Operator Portal - a subscription, web-based service - further enables chain operators to automate purchasing. As a spokesperson explains, it can "take [stock management] data directly into our system to produce suggested orders that can be sent electronically to suppliers and tracked online".

In this way, head offices can standardise ordering and its costs across multiple sites, and/or minimise the time managers spend on the phone placing orders. As Guy Croot, head of distribution at the Gondola Group, puts it: "It's a win-win."

If such automation sounds like voodoo to chef-owners who are producing daily market-driven menus, remember that once you begin to input data, such management systems will produce



Plates a go go: kitchen automation speeds up food delivery times

useful information about what stock is moving or not, 'menu mix' (ie sales/profitability of individual dishes), or the prices you should charge as ingredient prices fluctuate.

### WHAT'S THE LATEST?

Fourth Hospitality is taking its systems mobile and its stock software is now smartphone-compatible, so managers can update stock lists on the move. In addition, it is also helping negate the need for the old-fashioned brand manual with a slick alternative to the standardisation cards often used by multi-site operators. At present, most restaurants tend to have big thick brand manuals sat in a dark corner of the kitchen of every venue, which tell site staff how to prepare dishes, what they should contain and include photos of how they should be presented. However, StarChef Light - an extension of its original StarChef software - has been configured to run on tablets and smartphones and can relay recipes and photos to multiple sites. This means the head chef, GM and site staff can all access brand menu information such as dish contents, how it should look, how it should be served, and its nutritional values all via a smartphone, iPad or back-office PC. An additional benefit is that it can be updated instantly so if a menu item is tweaked and a new

dish introduced, a new paper insert for the brand manual doesn't have to be issued to every restaurant in the group.

## KITCHEN AUTOMATION

### WHAT'S THE DEAL?

Popular at high-volume sites such as Wahaca, Jamie's Italian and Drake & Morgan's restaurants and bars, kitchen automation - delivered in the UK by companies such as Call Systems Technology and Logwood - regiments the cooking process in order to speed up food-delivery times, minimise wastage and enable quicker table-turning.

The PoS feeds a table's order through to the kitchen, as normal, but then breaks it down into a dynamic flow of information displayed on screens at the kitchen's individual stations, prompting brigade members to start cooking each component/dish at the right time to bring each table's order together at the pass promptly. The head chef has an overview of all orders and their progress, via his/her 'expediter screen', and the system can be pre-programmed to vary its delivery times (according to staff levels, time, day etc). It also exports daily performance reports via email.

### WHAT'S THE LATEST?

Call Systems Technology will be showcasing its multi-lingual ConnectSmart TeamAssist at this month's Hotelympia show. TeamAssist incorporates text, images and video and carries everything from health and safety training to

## HOW DINERS WILL BOOK, ORDER AND PAY THEIR BILL IN THE FUTURE:

### 1 VIA TOUCHSCREENS AND SELF-SERVICE:

Companies such as Conceptic and X2 are pushing fixed at-table screens that, with their graphic ability to 'sell' items, could both speed up service and increase sales. If that sounds too sci-fi, X2 also offers a traditional-looking, book-format SmartMenu that wirelessly transmits orders to a venue's PoS.

Likewise, Comtrex is about to start distributing Useable Health's SmartMenu terminal. On its screen, perhaps as they queue, customers can browse the menu, filtering it by nutritional and dietary requirements, pull up their previous orders, send their order and pick up a receipt.

Self-service, says Micros's Matthew Parker, is very on-trend, particularly in restaurants with express or takeaway sections. The idea is that customers order and pay at a computer - on a secure web page/app, like any online transaction - collect and go. "I'm working with some new launch brands who'll be coming out in a big way, who want to push self-ordering," says Parker.

### 2 USING DIGITAL CASH:

In the US, Google Wallet, an Android app that allows you to pay by waving your phone at a contactless pay-point, is big news. It should launch in Europe this year. In the meantime, Barclaycard and Orange have launched Quick Tap, a phone app you can pre-load with £100. Like Barclays' contactless cards, you can then use it to make payments of under £15 at places like Subway and EAT. Given the convergence issues - you have to be with the right bank, mobile network and have an NFC (see *Geek Speak*, p54) phone - some observers predict that payment apps, like Pizza Express's, which allows you to settle up without a waiter using a unique code and PayPal, may prove more popular.

### 3 WITH THEIR WATCHES:

The saying that 'time is money' has finally become a reality with the launch of Watch2pay, the UK's first pre-paid contactless wristwatch that uses 'Tap & Go' technology.

Watch manufacturer LAKS has teamed up with MasterCard PayPass to create a timepiece that consumers can tap against a contactless reader to make a payment without the need to enter a PIN. The watch comes with a reloadable MasterCard prepaid card, which is not linked to a bank account or any line of credit to help users avoid getting into debt and is already in use in Turkey, Poland and a number of markets in Asia.



### 4 THROUGH ONLINE/MOBILE BOOKING AND ORDERING:

The ability of customers to order online or through a mobile device is only set to increase. Customers can already book a table online on their phone via smartphone apps from companies such as Livebookings and Micros, for example, has developed an app for Wagamama to enable remote ordering/payment for takeaway collection. The company is now about to launch a similar app for independent restaurants. Call Systems Technology, meanwhile, distributes QSR's Hostess table-management software, which - mediating between the ConnectSmart Kitchen system and a WebAhead app - enables customers to go online and remotely insert themselves into the queue at a restaurant and see their wait-time. See it in action at Cau in Guildford, Surrey. The upshot of all this technology means customers soon will be able to sit in the pub, browse a menu, choose dishes and the time they want to eat, then walk around the corner and do so.

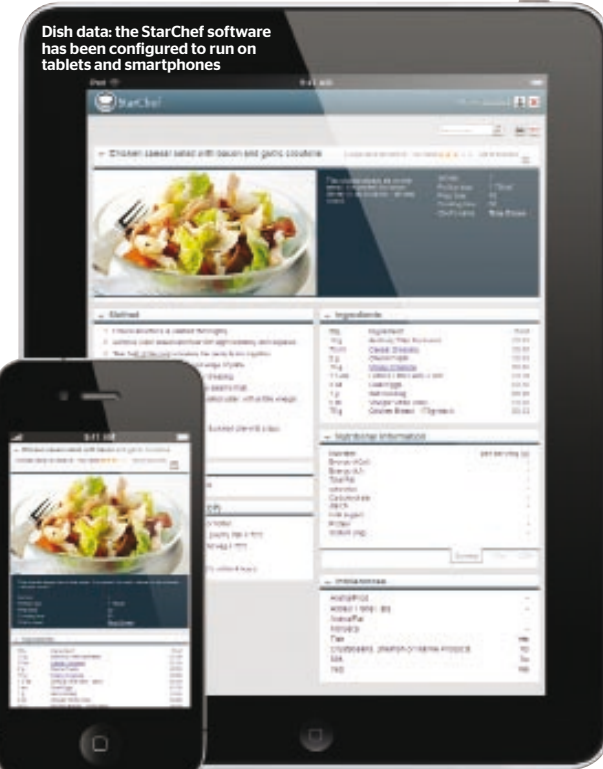
Swedish firm iZettle even created an app and card-reader that, says Livebookings' strategic advisor Magnus Hultberg, "turns every iPhone into a mobile PDQ, bypassing the horrific processes normally required to start taking credit cards". Launched in Sweden, the device should be rolled out in Europe this year.

### 5 ON THEIR IPADS:

Whether you're running your PoS on them, or installing one in a self-service kiosk, iPads are going to be everywhere. At Living Ventures's Manchester restaurant Australasia, the wine list is carried on an iPad. The terminals are leased from a US firm, Incentient, which designed the software and hosts the content on its server. In essence, Australasia's customers connect, via Wi-Fi, to a ring-fenced website. The iPads have proven reliable - there have been no attempted thefts - and, given that this wine list can be changed endlessly without the usual reprint costs, it compares favourably financially. "In pure marketing terms it creates a great talking point," says Living Ventures' commercial director Jeremy Roberts.

### 6 USING THEIR LOCATION:

Click on Livebookings' reservation site, bookatable.com, also available as a smartphone app, and - working, presumably, from your IP address - it will suggest available restaurants in your region. The GPS technology in smartphones means that, if you wish, such booking sites can locate people to an exact street and, soon, will be able to serve suggested restaurants and deals in real-time. On a slow evening, a restaurant will be able to initiate a location-based marketing push (see *Geek Speak*, p54) mid-service.



clean-down schedules, alongside a dish/recipe database. Allied to ConnectSmart's scheduling software, it means kitchen staff should always know what they are doing next, and how to do it.

## RESERVATIONS, TABLE MANAGEMENT, CRM

### WHAT'S THE DEAL?

PoS systems incorporate reasonably good table management software (eg table status reports: has a table been cleared, are guests on dessert?).

Reservations and bookings, however - specifically, online booking - and the complex business of customer relationship management (CRM) require specialist software tools from companies such as OpenTable, Livebookings or LiveRES.


In online booking, the options range from OpenTable's Electronic Reservation Book - a fixed always-online terminal that, together with table management/CRM tools, can take bookings live 24/7 - to a variety of online services, where you either log in and pull-down your bookings, or see them update 'live' in your integrated booking system as the online feed refreshes. These are paid for by subscription, per-booking or per-number-of-covers per-booking, with the providers also promoting your restaurant on affiliated websites (for example, OpenTable, toptable.com) or by distributing your discount deals to voucher hubs like Groupon.

CRM is about restaurants proactively filling tables by attracting existing customers back. By harvesting email addresses and personal details - such as diners' birthdays or favourite dishes - you can build a valuable database that can be used to target email promotions.

### WHAT'S THE LATEST?

LiveRES customers can now accept bookings via Facebook, or use a new tool to create quick banner ads for their websites. Both are typical of how online marketing is evolving. "We're looking to give restaurants easy-to-use innovations," says chairman Jeremy Roberts.

At Livebookings, its bookings widget is now smartphone-compatible, reflecting that 20% of its customers' web traffic arrives from mobile devices. The next release of its online or 'cloud-based' restaurant management/CRM software will also run on tablet PCs.

To the dismay of many, discount coupons are here to stay. But how to track their effectiveness? Traditionally, this involved long-winded counting or expensive barcode technology, but mobile coupons and gift voucher Eagle Eye distributes vouchers and gift cards by SMS. These contain a unique pin that must be entered into the PDQ or POS system at payment, which generates a redemption report (eg. when, where, how it was spent). You can even send customers text-prompts if they haven't used a gift card bought for them. 

## WHEREFORE THE WORLDWIDE WEB?

Research suggests that nearly 40% of restaurants still don't have a website, but it is no longer an optional extra. Increasingly, your website is the first contact that a customer will have with your business, so it needs to look right and work smoothly. "The most pressing issue," says Livebookings' strategic advisor, Magnus Hultberg, "is that so many restaurants are not getting the basics right". These include:

➤ **MENUS** - ensure menus and prices are on your website and update them regularly. Downloadable PDFs are contentious. Restaurants use this format, intended for hard-copy printing, because it's quick and cheap (compared to using a separate content management system for text), but they can be invisible to Google and clunky if browsing on a phone.

➤ **LOOK SHARP** - if your website is a jumbled eyesore of multi-coloured text and amateur food photography, constructed circa 1998, then people will assume your restaurant is similarly old fashioned. Also, make sure you spell-check and re-read your text. Sloppy presentation suggests a sloppy operation. A good, modern website will cost around £2,000, but you can update effectively for £500 to £1,000. Failing that, a smart holding page (including key info: sample dishes, address, opening times, phone no) is all you need.

➤ **DECLUTTER** - customers want key information from your site. Don't hide it. Don't

bombard them with your chef's CV, profiles of suppliers, or photos from recent parties. Section off that background material, perhaps on a blog. Dump any Flash animation or irritating music too. Flash doesn't work on Apple devices, can be slow to load and adds little.

➤ **KEEP IT LOCAL** - in restaurant terms, the world-wide web is used primarily to make local searches. To make sure your business is listed among the top searches in your area, the experts at Livebookings stress that you should include your location details in your keywords; feature your address and phone number on every page; and register your business on Google Places, so that it appears on your local Google map. Embedding a Google map on your website also heightens your visibility with the search engine. Likewise, encourage your customers to review you on sites such as TripAdvisor and Qype.

➤ **WEB 2.0** - your website should link to your Twitter or Facebook accounts and you will need to exploit those tools effectively. Social media platforms are great for disseminating offers and news, fostering conversations and generally stimulating interest. However, a cluttered blog or Facebook page is no replacement for a clean, professional website. "It's about having an overall digital strategy," says Ben Holden at Manchester web-design agency Cahoon. "A website is one part of your digital visibility. It all needs to be managed together."

## GEEK SPEAK: The days when PDA meant 'public display of affection' and NFC referred to particularly fresh orange juice are long gone. Here are the latest buzzwords to drop in at the next management meeting...

**SAAS or software-as-a-service.** Web-based software, accessed online. Cheaper than bespoke on-site installation, but useful only if you have super-reliable broadband.

**Location-based marketing.** An umbrella term for several things, namely: ensuring that your restaurant is closely associated on Google with your location; and using apps like Foursquare or Facebook Places, to reward regulars who 'check-in' online each time they visit your venue.

**Live, mobile information.** Forget desktop PCs and heavy laptops.

Whether it's managers accessing sales data; chefs planning menus; or a customer making a booking, everyone is going mobile, on tablets/smartphones, accessing information via 'the cloud'.

**QSR.** The shorthand name - it's actually the ConnectSmart Kitchen system by QSR Automations - often given to the leading kitchen automation system, distributed here by Call Systems Technology.

**NFC.** Near-field communication, the technology that enables smartphones to communicate with contactless pay-points.



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