

## Have Some Tech with your Pasta

How many times do friends ask you about technology, what good is it, why does it replace judgment with numbers, and can you tell me what's wrong with my laptop?

You might draw some ideas from Fast Company's profile of Darden Restaurants, parent of Red Lobster, Olive Garden and Longhorn Steakhouse.

Writer Chuck Salter puts an interesting twist on the business.

"Essentially, Darden runs 1,770 just-in-time manufacturing plants that create in minutes a wide range of products selected, consumed, and judged by customers who show up unannounced."

The casual dining restaurants use technology to forecast the number of customers expected each night .

"Guest Forecasting spells out the appropriate staffing and food preparation -- how many fettuccine Alfredo orders to expect, how much sauce to make in the morning. Over the past two years, Darden has reduced unplanned hours by more than 40% and trimmed excess food costs by 10%." They don't want zero waste, because it is important not to run out an item and leave a customer disappointed.

Orders are timed through the kitchen with more software and 8 display screens.

"Meal Pacing displays the optimal work flow for each party on eight screens in the kitchen and monitors each station's progress, with color-coded warnings when one falls behind. The screens also show if the staff is meeting Darden's one-minute rule: Food should arrive at the table within one minute of being ready.

"Meal Pacing, says White, is the ideal restaurant support tool in that it benefits employees as well as guests by taking much of the guesswork out of juggling scores of simultaneous orders. The restaurants can turn tables faster in peak times, which increases revenue. And guest-satisfaction scores are up."

The company knows, because it computerized customer satisfaction surveys 20 years ahead of the rest of the industry and now invites more than 16 million responses a year.

Information technology takes care of lots of details. Then the restaurants can focus on keeping employees happy, because, as one executive says, "It's very difficult for the experience of the guests to exceed the experience of the staff."

And they are constantly improving the menu. Olive Garden has a training course near Florence where it sends 14 top employees 11 times a year, and they come back with new ideas, such as risotto dishes. Red Lobster is rolling out wood fired grilling as an alternative to deep frying and the chain picks up awards for its wine selections.

Darden shows that technology can support a business while offering managers and staff to focus on the dining experience.

Sorry, no good advice on your friend's laptop.