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Drinks now claim 30% of Americans’ away-from-home spending

Technomic projects 4.4% foodservice beverage growth over five years, helped by consumers who trim meals yet keep drink splurges

Tuesday, November 17, 2026



Beverages are taking a larger share of Americans’ spending away from home, a shift that could matter across restaurants, bars and other hospitality businesses as consumers trim some meal purchases but keep buying drinks on their own. According

to Technomic data presented in November at Informa’s Future of Beverage conference in Dallas and reported Monday, November 16 by Nation’s Restaurant News, drinks now account for about 30% of consumer spending away from home and are projected to grow 4.4% in foodservice over the next five years, faster than the industry overall.

For restaurant operators, the change suggests beverages are becoming a more independent sales driver rather than just an add-on to lunch or dinner. Technomic said consumers are still spending in the category, but their reasons for buying are shifting. Taste remains important, but buyers are increasingly asking what a drink does for them, whether it is worth the price and whether it offers something they cannot easily make at home.

The research pointed to three forces behind that spending: functionality, affordable indulgence and experiences built around beverages. In practical terms, that means demand is moving toward drinks tied to energy, hydration, gut health, immune support, stress relief and protein, while also favoring items that feel special enough to justify a purchase in a tighter budget environment.

That change is especially important as some consumers pull back on full meals from foodservice. Technomic’s Beverage Navigator Program found that 29% of respondents agreed with the statement that they had been cutting back on meals from foodservice but still splurged on beverage-only occasions. The finding indicates that standalone drink occasions are holding up even when broader restaurant spending is under pressure.

For hospitality businesses, that creates a different kind of opportunity. Beverage traffic may come from consumers looking for a small personal treat rather than a full dining occasion. Technomic said presentation and premium ingredients can turn a drink into an experience, helping justify spending even when budgets are tight. The company also said consumers are drawn to drinks that feel interactive, colorful and social-media friendly.

Alcohol is following a more mixed pattern. Technomic said “mindful moderation” emerged as the leading alcohol trend, driven by both health concerns and higher prices. Its data showed that 44% of consumers believe moderate alcohol consumption

is part of a healthy lifestyle, while 34% said they are ordering alcohol less often because drink prices have risen.

That puts added pressure on bars and restaurants that rely on alcohol for margins. At the same time, it supports continued expansion in zero-proof and low-alcohol options. Technomic said Gen Z and Millennials are leading the moderation shift, and operators are responding with more spirit-free choices. According to the presentation, spirit-free limited-time offers grew 225% from 2021 through 2025. In the first five months of 2026, nonalcohol limited-time offers had already surpassed the total number of such launches recorded in all of 2025.

The research also found growing interest in international flavors and formats, another area that could influence menus. Overall, 28% of consumers said they want to see more global ideas in the U.S. beverage market. That rose to 33% among Millennials and 37% among Gen Z consumers. Technomic highlighted examples from other markets including vegetable-based teas in Thailand, fruit-forward coffee drinks in Malaysia, ube lattes in France and corn-based textured drinks in China. Those examples were presented as illustrations of global innovation rather than evidence of established demand in the United States.

Nation’s Restaurant News said Technomic described the broader shift in beverage behavior as a move from occasion to intention. In that view, drinks are increasingly becoming the main ritual instead of a companion to a meal. Consumers are buying them as small, deliberate moments during the day, whether for energy, comfort, novelty or self-reward.

That dynamic also raises the importance of customization and product transparency. Technomic said personalization is becoming an expectation, and consumers want clearer information about ingredients, benefits and product impact. For restaurants and beverage sellers, that means menus may need to do more than name a drink and list a flavor. They may also need to explain what the product offers, why it costs what it costs and what makes it different from something available at home or in a grocery store.