UK Restaurant Industry Predictions 2026

toast

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If 2025 taught us anything about running restaurants, it's that the only certainty is uncertainty.

So what does the next year hold for UK hospitality businesses?

Whilst day-to-day activities like shift scheduling and inventory management will always remain a consistent part of the agenda, there's no crystal ball for the wider economic and strategic changes that are constantly taking place inside and outside of the industry.

So, we did the next best thing and surveyed 400 UK restaurant owners, asking them for their 2026 hospitality industry predictions. Read this rundown to explore the key takeaways from the survey as well as the topics and challenges that are top-of-mind for operators and industry leaders in 2026.
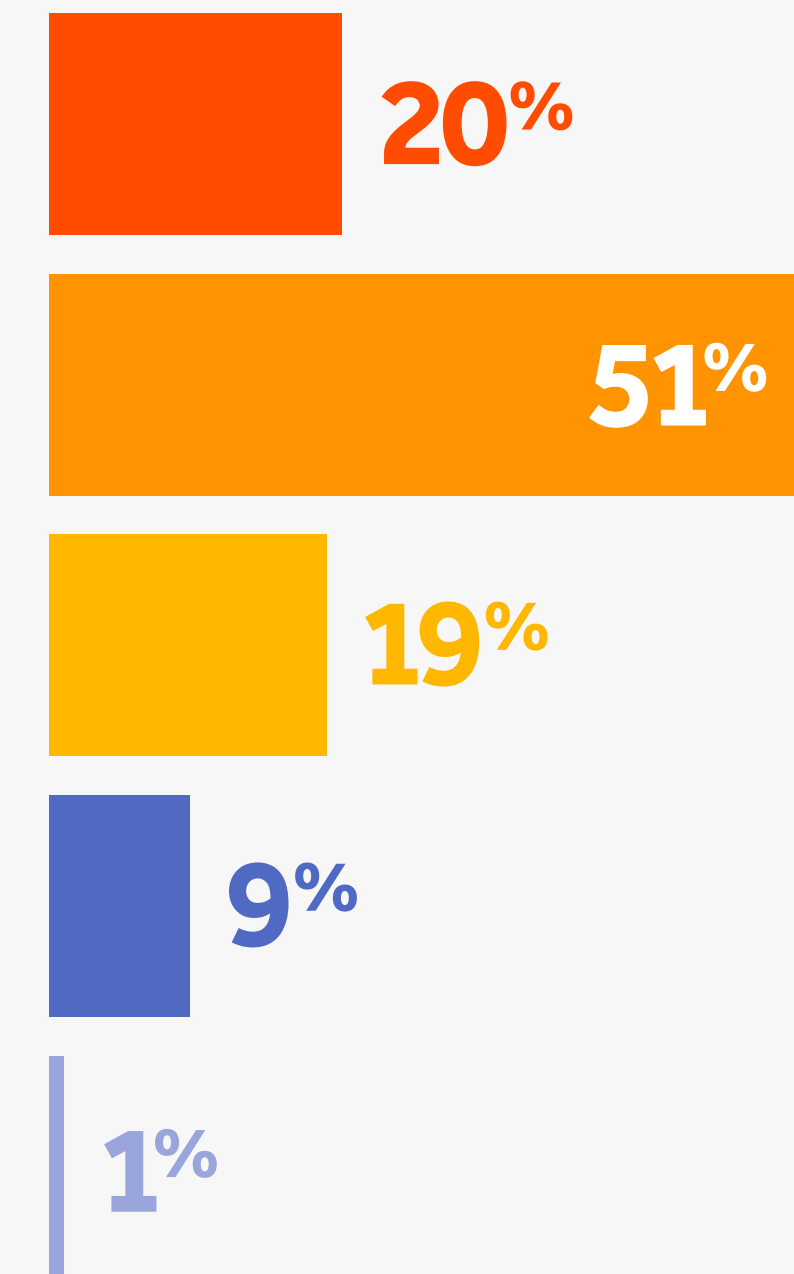
Prediction 1: Uncertain economic conditions will demand focus

After a turbulent 2025, which saw **consumer inflation and the cost of ingredients rise**, restaurant operators are approaching 2026 with optimism, tempered with economic concern.

While over 50% of restaurant owners think that rising ingredient and energy costs will be the biggest challenge that restaurants face in 2026, our survey also found that just over 70% are expecting moderate to significant growth for their business in 2026.

When asked which factor UK restaurant owners thought would have the biggest impact on the restaurant industry in 2026, the most common callout was "economic conditions", referenced by over 30% of respondents. 18% of restaurant owners also called out "increasing costs and inflation" as a major predicted challenge over the next year.

How do UK restaurant operators expect their restaurant to perform in 2026?

- 20%
- 51%
- 19%
- 9%
- 1%

- Significant growth
- Moderate growth
- Stable / no major change
- Moderate decline
- Significant decline

Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding

Prediction 2: The customer experience can and will be elevated

In challenging economic circumstances, value and service will continue to be crucial differentiators for consumers with lots of choice. And, according to the UK restaurant owners we surveyed, 2026 is the year that service gets an upgrade.
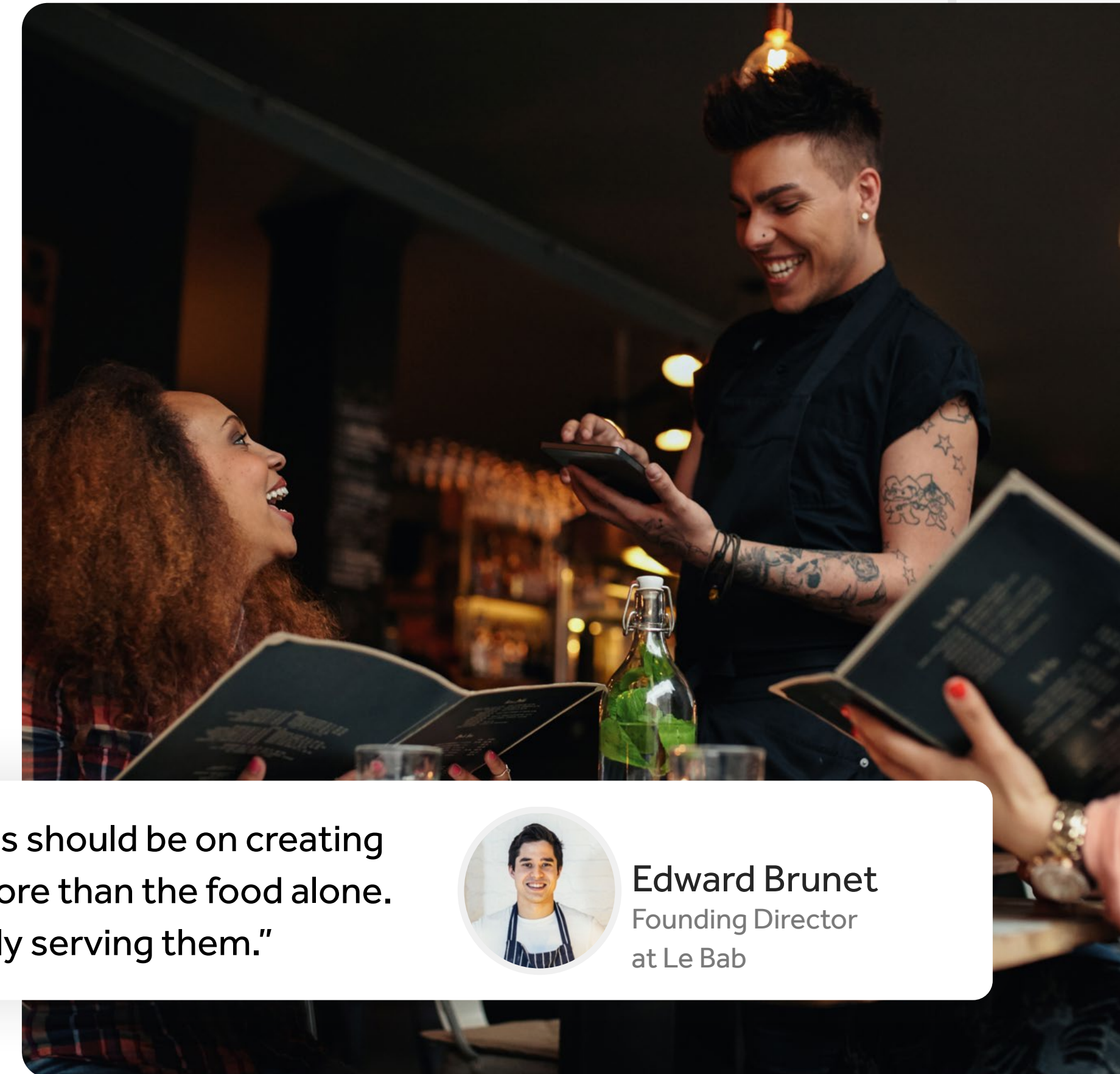
When asked which area of restaurant management they would be focusing on in 2026, 31% of operators said they would be making improvements to the customer experience, while 21% wanted to improve speed and efficiency at their restaurant.

Boosting customer satisfaction can take many forms. From creating the right mood and atmosphere with lighting, executing faultless, personalised service, to leveraging **POS technology** that makes ordering more efficient. But one thing that Edward Brunet, Founding Director at Le Bab, urges restaurant operators to remember is that dining out in 2026 should be an unforgettable experience:

"In 2026 and beyond, the focus for restaurants should be on creating dining experiences that are memorable for more than the food alone. It's all about hosting guests, rather than simply serving them."

Edward Brunet
Founding Director
at Le Bab

Prediction 3: AI and automation will be at the top table

According to our survey, 80% of restaurant owners report being at least "somewhat ready" to adopt new technologies. And it's a good thing too, because AI is now fully mainstream in the restaurant space.

Artificial intelligence is already being leveraged in restaurants, with day-to-day tasks like tracking restaurant sales and inventory, or crafting restaurant slogans, being made quicker and more efficient.
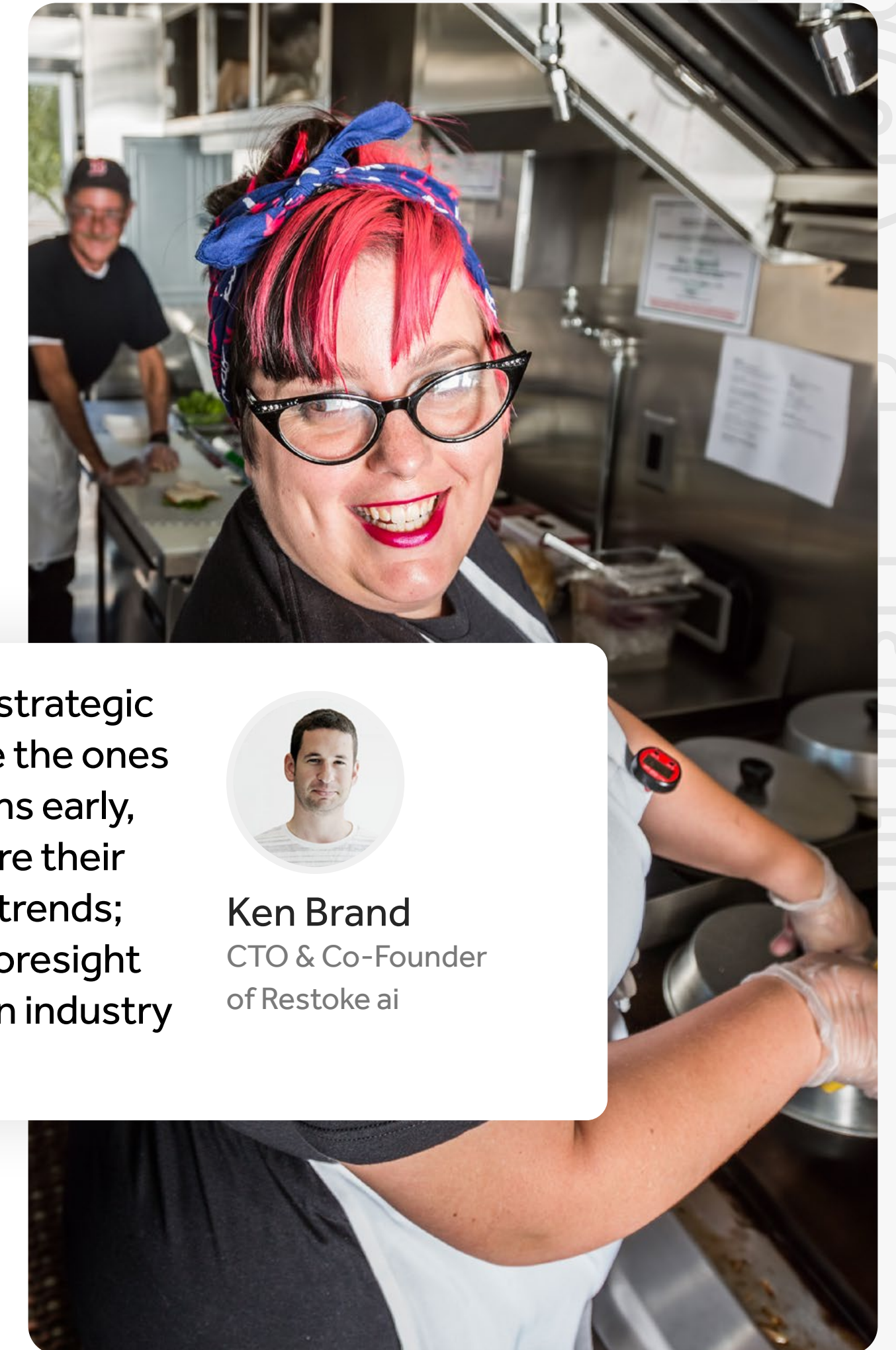
Our survey asked UK restaurant owners to make a bold prediction about the restaurant industry in 2026, and the number of responses that centred around the significant integration of AI and automation we received was remarkable. Some operators suggested fully automated restaurants, robot staff, and AI-driven operations like ordering and personalisation.

For Ken Brand, the CTO & Co-Founder of Restoke ai, it's all about making better business decisions:

> "The real value of AI in hospitality isn't in novelty, it's in the strategic clarity it gives operators. In 2026, the strongest venues are the ones using quiet, behind-the-scenes intelligence to see problems early, understand what's driving their performance, and act before their competitors do. It's not about replacing people or chasing trends; it's about making better decisions every day. That kind of foresight becomes a genuine competitive advantage, especially in an industry where margins are tight and timing is everything."

Ken Brand
CTO & Co-Founder
of Restoke ai

As the number of strategic use-cases for AI and automation in hospitality continues to grow, so does the excitement around what can be achieved with the technology.
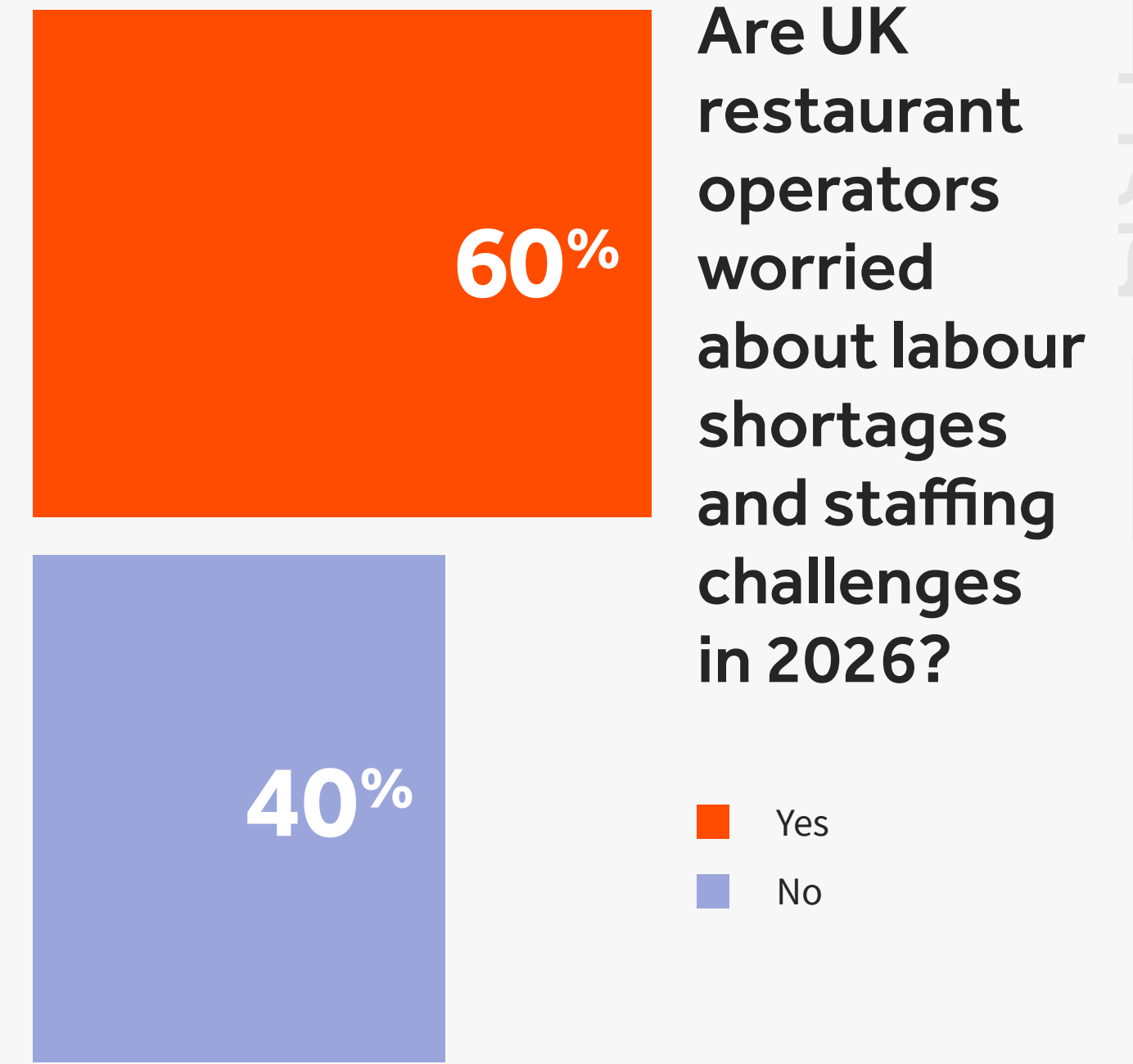
Voice of the UK Restaurant Industry

Prediction 4: Labour challenges will continue to be top-of-mind in 2026

If you're looking to future-proof your staffing and hiring practices, you can find plenty of tips in our staffing and hiring eBook.

A 2025 Toast survey of over 300 UK restaurant owners revealed that a staggering 50% faced moderate to extreme hiring challenges in 2025.*

When you consider the impact of **National Insurance hikes** and **immigration reforms** in 2025, it's no wonder that 60% of restaurant owners have concerns around labour shortages and staffing challenges in 2026.

However, research into hospitality staff satisfaction has shown that happy staff are **five times more likely to stay the course**. To avoid high staff turnover when labour shortages are a certainty, indicates that factors like giving employees clear career development paths and offering a competitive salary and benefits like flexible working are key to retaining them long term.

Are UK restaurant operators worried about labour shortages and staffing challenges in 2026?

60%

40%

■ Yes
■ No

Data taken from the Toast Market Diligence Survey 2025. Toast conducted a blind survey of 307 UK restaurant decision-makers operating 25 or fewer locations in the UK from March 10th, 2025, to May 2nd, 2025.
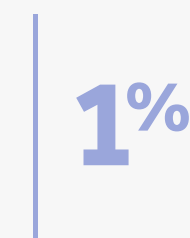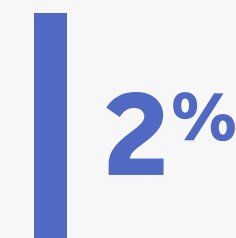
Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding

Voice of the UK Restaurant Industry

Prediction 5: Delivery and off-premise dining will remain crucial for restaurant revenue

According to Toast consumer research, over 50% of consumers in the UK dine out or order delivery food at least once a week. So it's no surprise that over 50% of UK restaurant owners in our survey pinpointed **online ordering** and delivery platforms as the most influential technology trend for restaurant operations for 2026.

The food delivery phenomenon has signalled a shift in consumer behaviour, **with 43% of consumers** reporting that they've eaten out less in the last 12 months. So, the news that a combined 88% of owners believe off-premise dining, including takeout and delivery, will be "extremely" or "somewhat important" to their revenue in 2026 makes total business sense.

How important do UK restaurant operators think off-premise dining will be to their revenue in 2026?

- 41%
- 47%
- 11%
- 2%
- 1%

■ Extremely important
■ Somewhat important
■ Neutral
■ Not very important
■ Not important at all

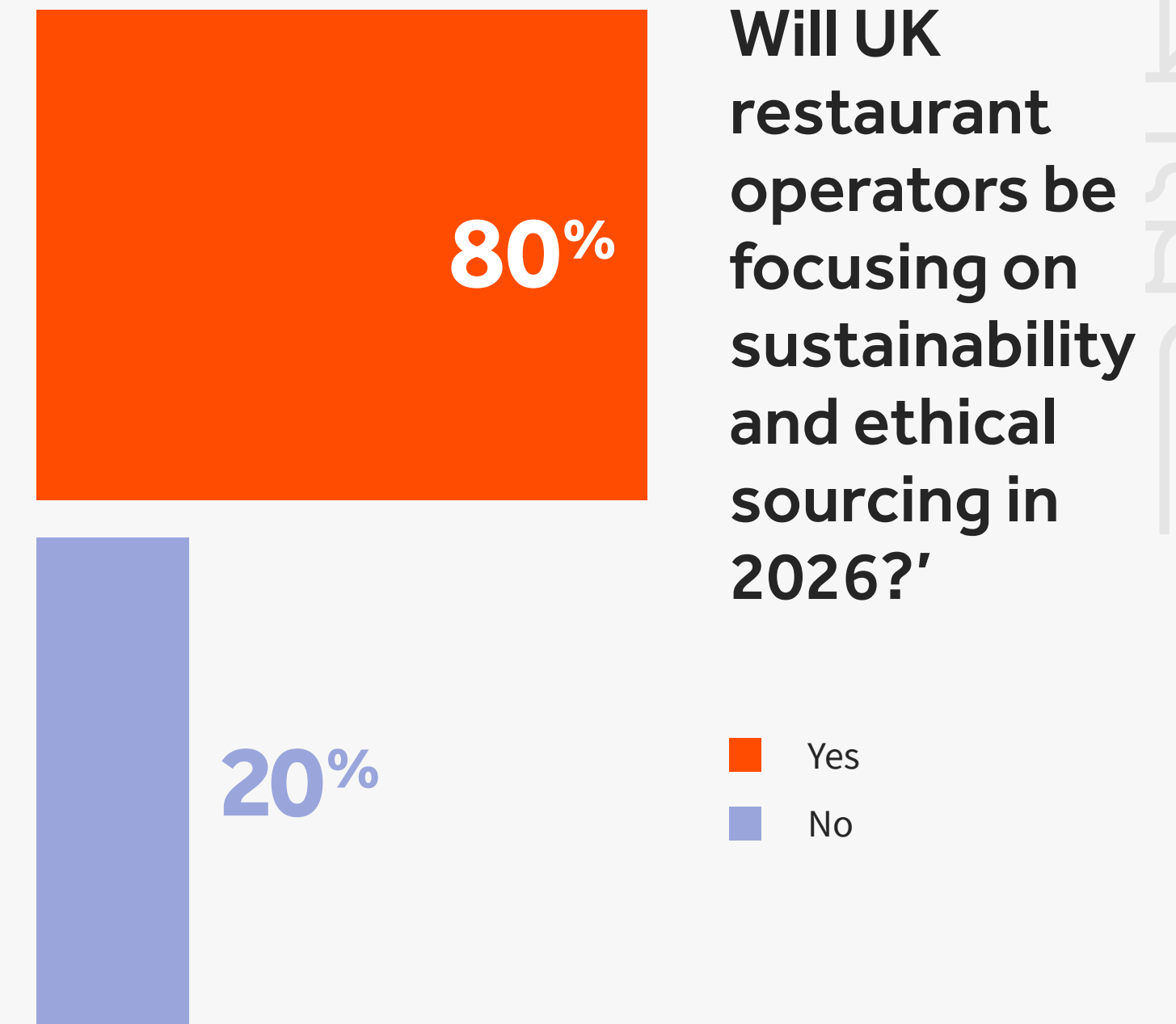Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding

Prediction 6: 2026 will see an increased focus on restaurant sustainability

The reality is, consumers are becoming increasingly planet-conscious. So much so, they're willing to pay a **'sustainability premium' of approximately 10%**. So, in 2026, we can expect to see practices like reducing food waste, shortening supply chains, and creating seasonal menus continue to become industry standard.

80% of the UK restaurant owners we asked said they would be focusing on sustainability and ethical sourcing in 2026.

When it comes to trends shaping menus in 2026, a commitment to "local and sustainable sourcing" is cited by restaurant operators as the most influential consumer trend. For inspiration on what a sustainable restaurant model looks like, look to restaurants like Fallow in London's West End, or Hawksmoor in Manchester.

80%

20%

Will UK restaurant operators be focusing on sustainability and ethical sourcing in 2026?'

■ Yes

■ No

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The future of UK restaurants relies on adaptability and change

As part of our restaurant industry predictions survey, UK restaurant owners were asked to describe what they think will define a successful restaurant in 2026. One operator said that success meant:

> "the ability to adapt to changing consumer expectations with technological advancement"
>
> UK Restaurant Operator

which sums up the mood of 2026 so well.

The UK hospitality industry is in a period of transformation. We're in a time where the only consistent theme seems to be change. Restaurants are grappling with economic pressures, prompting them to turn to AI and automation for efficiency.

Simultaneously, there is a clear and strong commitment to meeting consumer demands for improved customer experience and a renewed focus on sustainability and ethical practices. In all of the uncertainty, one thing's for certain - the path forward is dynamic, requiring operational agility to navigate rising costs while strategically investing in technology, values, and practices that reflect the modern consumer.

Voice of the UK Restaurant Industry

To get insights and predictions on the changing restaurant industry, Toast conducted a blind survey of 400 UK restaurant owners using the survey platform Pollfish. The survey took place from October 31st, 2025 to November 7th 2025.

Respondents were not made aware that Toast was fielding the study.
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