

A growing appetite for apps: For some restaurants, COVID ushered in the digital era

By **Angela Yang** Globe Correspondent, Updated August 8, 2021, 3:15 p.m.



Aweke Kifle (left) and Yarad Aklilu ordered lunch at Bluestone Lane in Harvard Square. MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

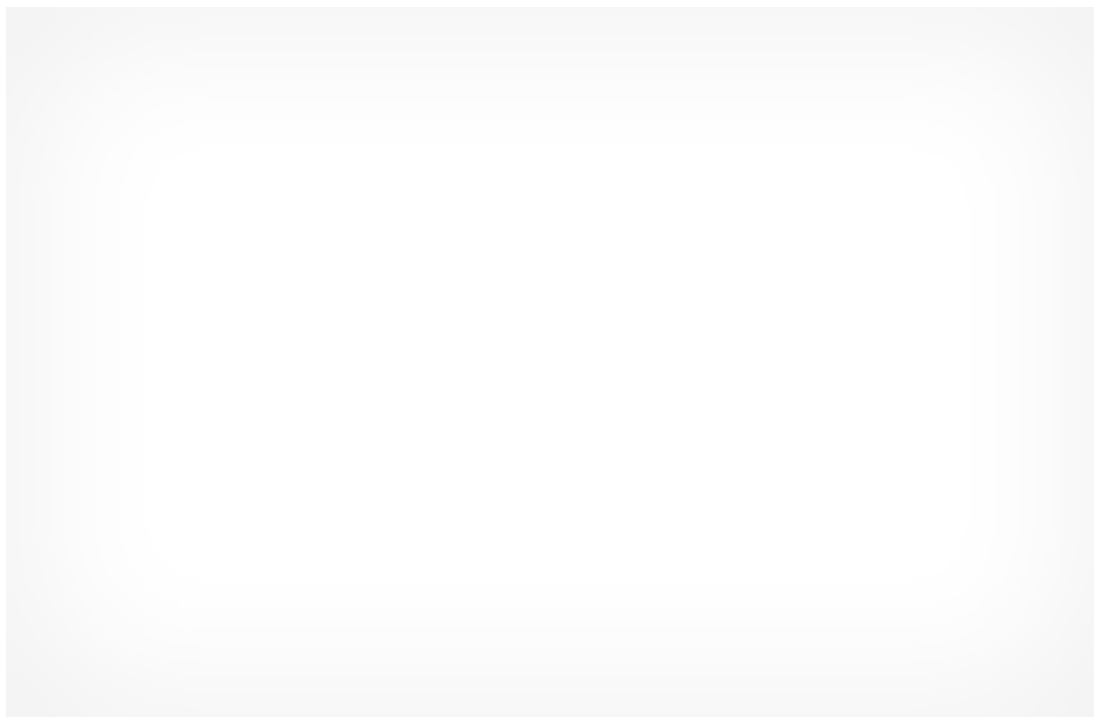
QR codes on restaurant tables. Payments made without cash or cards. Orders placed through a tap on a phone screen. More than a year of social distancing has transformed the way brick-and-mortar businesses operate, and the digitized adaptations are likely here to stay.

The pandemic, especially in its early months, convinced many formerly hesitant consumers to ditch cash for contactless forms of payment, and businesses – especially restaurants – are embracing it. At New York-based coffee chain Bluestone Lane, with locations in Harvard Square and downtown Boston, patrons are routinely ordering in-store or ahead and requesting delivery – all through a mobile app.

Bluestone Lane began offering digital ordering in 2019, so it was in position to quickly make all transactions contactless in March 2020 when COVID-19 became a health threat. While chains such as McDonald's, Sweetgreen, and Starbucks have been mobile-centric for years, the pandemic pushed others in the industry to swiftly reprioritize.

Today, more than 90 percent of Bluestone Lane's business comes from electronic payments. Liam Farrow, head of the chain's digital team, said he thinks the shift will be permanent.

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“We’re doing better than we were in 2019, and we’ve actually got less locations,” Farrow said. “Moving to digital has really transformed the business.”

Its app enables the cafe to display well-arranged visuals of every item whereas

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traditional menus simply listed each option as printed text — a change that has brought in significantly more business, according to Farrow.

“People eat with their eyes,” he said. “Being able to see the items, people are ordering more because they look delicious.”

Mobile payments have also made transactions more efficient, saving servers the time it would normally take to bring checks back and forth from tables.

Even businesses that have long relied on in-person transactions have turned to technology since the pandemic struck. Customers can expect to find QR codes to access menus at nearly every restaurant in Boston now, said Natalia Urtubey, the city’s director of small business.

“Digitization was really one of those things that if you didn’t do it, you would be left behind, unfortunately,” Urtubey said. “It’s been a really great way of bringing visibility to businesses, because it makes them more searchable and user-friendly.”

Restaurants were forced to change practices much faster than most other types of businesses when the pandemic hit because they were deemed essential from the beginning, she said, whereas retail stores that shut had some time to prepare before reopening.

Rocco’s Cucina and Bar, an Italian sports bar and grill in the North End, began placing QR code stands on its tables during the summer of 2020.

“We couldn’t have any menus so we really didn’t have a choice,” co-owner Annette Zagarella said.

Now she plans to keep them — they’re convenient, adaptable, and economical.

Her staff members no longer have to wipe down the laminated menus bound in leather folders, and prices can be updated with ease. The cost of printing had also been getting “outrageously high,” she said.

Those reasons are why Kevin Dami, small business adviser at Boston-based digital marketing company Tactical Moves, believes the popularity of QR codes will endure post-pandemic.

Tactical Moves had been helping businesses set up QR code menus for years, but demand for the service surged during spring of last year, with inquiries rolling in from small businesses around the country.

In years prior to the pandemic, the technology had been tough to implement because the ability to read QR codes wasn't yet embedded in phones' operating systems: Apple first integrated a native QR code reader into its camera app in late 2017, and Google's Android phones added the feature in late 2018.

But in 2021, scanning one of the square patterns comes intuitively to many cellphone users, and businesses are recognizing that.

"People are still inquiring about it, where we've never had them inquire before," Dami said.

At point-of-sale company Harbortouch POS of Boston, inquiries from businesses for contactless payment systems remain high. These kinds of payments include the use of tap-to-pay cards and Apple Pay or Google Pay, which can make in-store payments via phone or a smartwatch.

Aside from not having to hand a piece of plastic to the cashier, customers enjoy the convenience of not having to bring a wallet, said Harbortouch managing partner Max Artemenko. That convenience factor makes it likely stores will continue to use the technologies after the public health crisis ends.

"A lot of people of every generation have been using Apple Pay," he said. "Customers drive what businesses do, so if you have enough people who ask you for it, then you're probably going to get it."

Many cash-only businesses had no choice but to adopt credit card transactions almost immediately when the pandemic began, according to Urtubey, because many customers didn't want to handle paper bills. (Massachusetts law, however, prohibits stores from discriminating against cash buyers.)

Urtubey said that although there's still reason to be wary of "predatory" credit card fees, allowing card payments brings in more customers who might not carry cash. Still, some restaurants have decided to postpone reopening until people are willing to use cash again.

Some brick-and-mortar businesses in Boston launched online platforms so they could continue making sales during the shutdowns of 2020, Urtubey said, which also allowed them to reach new audiences.

Janet Merriman, a Merrimac-based Web designer for more than two decades, said that when the pandemic arrived, her clients began making different kinds of inquiries. Suddenly, websites were not just for marketing, but were expected to function as communication and sales platforms capable of processing higher volumes of data.

"For a few of my clients, all of a sudden they needed to grow their business in a different way," said Merriman, founder of Theatrium Web Design, "and other people were just trying to keep their head above water."

She began hearing from clients who had been meaning to redesign their websites, but were too busy to think about it prior to the lockdown. Restaurants needed to change their menu structures to offer online ordering, and businesses of all kinds requested help posting COVID-19 statements and updates.

Urtubey said communicating and engaging with potential customers across various online platforms is essential these days, and Boston offers free resources to help small businesses make the necessary shifts. It hires business development experts and pairs them with small businesses, in addition to hosting workshops on topics such as social

media marketing and legal technical assistance.

Part of her goal, she said, is also to make sure the benefits that came with digitization stay in place so people continue to feel comfortable shopping in stores.

“We’ll really need the consumers to show that shopping locally and being present in the commercial districts is still a priority for shoppers,” Urtubey said. “Obviously, during the pandemic we saw a lot of people go online, but we also saw a return to local in ways that I think are really beautiful.”

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