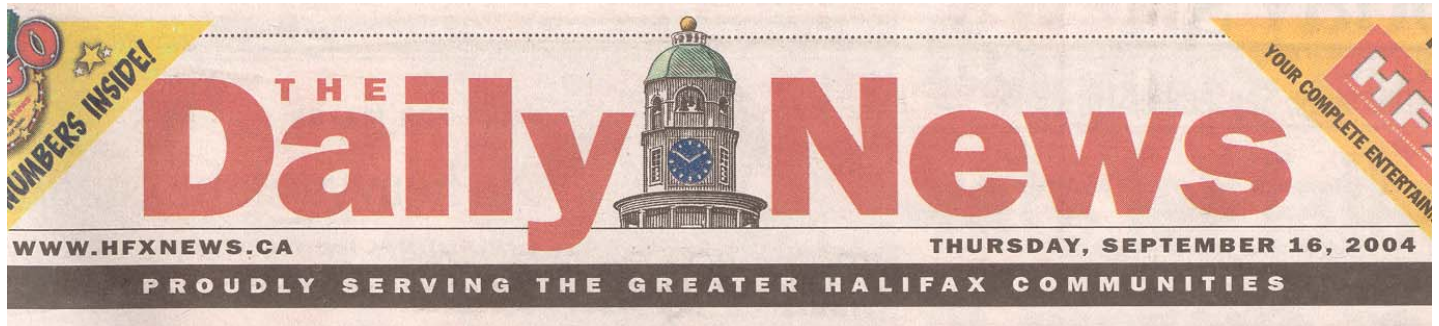


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PROUDLY SERVING THE GREATER HALIFAX COMMUNITIES

DAILY Life

Wait staff armed with high-tech gadget



TORONTO
By The Canadian Press

Waitress Rachel Ng has a new weapon against the lunch rush.

The weight of a pack of cigarettes, only thinner so it cradles perfectly in her palm, the handheld PC is becoming a digital replacement to the traditional pen-and-paper method of serving tables. Because it works with wireless technology, the kitchen gets the order seconds after the customer has made the request.

But does restaurant gadgetry equal better service for hungry patrons? Absolutely, Ng says.

"You have more time to chat with the customer, because you're not worried about running to punch in the next order," said Ng, 27, who works at Spring Rolls, a bustling pan-Asian restaurant across the street from the Eaton Centre in the heart of downtown Toronto. "They think (the units) are really cool."

Other advantages, she adds, are fewer order errors and more detailed food-allergy notes for cooks.

After taking an order on the Write-On Handheld point-of-sale system, Ng can move to another table rather than run to the kitchen or a computer terminal at the other end of the restaurant. By the time she takes the fourth table's order, plates are being served by "runners" to her first customers, she says.

That's because the instant an item is entered into the handheld, the food order appears on a screen in the kitchen. Using a stylus, the device combines touch-screen and handwriting recognition.

In a demonstration, Ng — who keeps the PDA tethered to a black belt — was able to continue being interviewed from the moment she took an order until the food was brought to the table.

Hospitality experts say the gad-

gets, popping up in restaurants in North America and Europe, are a welcome addition at busy restaurants and pubs, because they streamline work in chaotic environments.

"It's very practical," said Gabor Forgacs, assistant director at the School of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Ryerson University in Toronto.

"It speeds up the whole process of taking an order and getting the order to the production area. It also eliminates miscommunication opportunities."

"From a customer standpoint, you're getting more accuracy,"

said Alex Malison, CEO of Maryland-based Action Systems Inc., which makes Write-On Handheld. "The whole idea is that the information is right there. Pencil and pad doesn't give you information."

Will wireless technology eliminate restaurant wait staff?

Malison says no.

"The reason you go to a restaurant is because you don't want to wash the dishes, or you want to chat," he said.

"To ask the customer to start punching in things themselves? That's not really what eating out is about."

WIRELESS SERVICE: Rachel Ng uses wireless device to take an order.

CANADIAN PRESS