

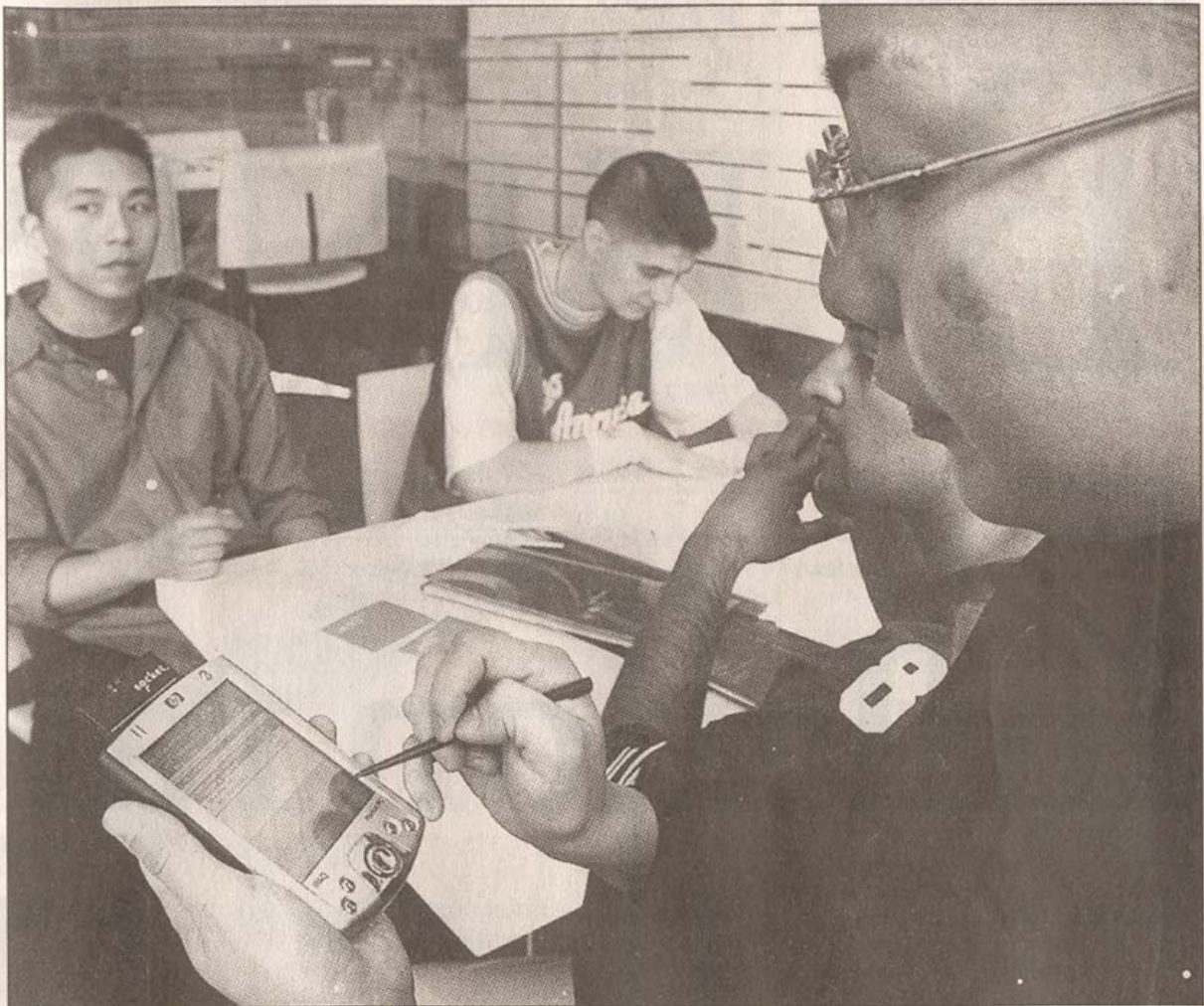
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HIGH-TECH SERVICE: Server Rachael Ng uses a palm-sized wireless device to take a customer's order, which is then directly routed to the kitchen at Spring Rolls restaurant in Toronto.

Handheld PCs replacing servers' pencils and pads

A Toronto eatery finds advantages in the new digital order system.



ORDER PAD: The Write-On Handheld point-of-sale system is becoming a digital replacement for pen and paper.

BY ANGELA PACIENZA
Canadian Press

TORONTO — Server Rachel Ng has a high-tech weapon against the lunch rush — a palm-sized PC.

Thinner than a pack of cigarettes and about as heavy, the handheld computer has become a digital replacement for the traditional pen-and-paper method of waiting tables at the restaurant where she works.

And since it uses wireless technology, the kitchen gets the order seconds after the customer has made the request.

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

“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 downtown Toronto.

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 elsewhere in the restaurant. By the time she takes the fourth table’s order, plates are being served by “runners” to her first customers.

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.

Hospitality experts say the gadgets, popping up in restaurants in

North American and Europe, are a welcome addition at busy diners 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.”

How many times have you been at a restaurant and had the wrong food item brought to you? Or the server forgot to mention “no tomatoes” on your salad?

Those behind the technology say it will change the restaurant experience by expediting the kitchen-to-table process and eliminating errors when the information is relayed to the kitchen or central computer system.

“From a customer standpoint, you’re getting more accuracy,” said Alex Malison, chief executive of Maryland-based Action Systems Inc., which makes Write-On Handheld. “The whole idea is that the information is right there.”

Forgacs said he wouldn’t be surprised if more and more locations start using the handheld gadgets because they make restaurants seem hip and sophisticated.

Mobile payment-processing units also are popping up in restaurants, he added. These units let servers process credit cards without leaving the table.

“The customers like it because at the table you don’t lose sight of your card,” said Forgacs.

“It’s not like somebody grabs your credit card, walks away, out of sight.”