

By CHARLES SLATE *The Sun News*

Kristy Blank, a waitress at the BlueWater Bistro in Myrtle Beach, takes a lunch order on a personal digital assistant that transmits the order directly to the kitchen and also updates the restaurant inventory. Managers can track orders table by table from a monitor in the kitchen.

By MARY-KATHRYN CRAFT
The Sun News

At BlueWater Bistro in Myrtle Beach, diners' orders reach the kitchen before their server leaves the table.

All it takes is a tap of the stylus and the click of a button on tiny hand-held computers, and the orders appear on a large computer monitor in the kitchen. Waiters rarely leave the dining room floor, and managers can look at monitors throughout the restaurant to see if customers have received dishes on time.

BlueWater Bistro is among a handful of Grand Strand restaurants using such advanced technology to increase efficiency and improve customer service. Across the nation, restaurateurs are increasingly turning

to technology for similar reasons, according to the sixth annual Restaurant Industry Technology Study: The Growth of Strategic IT Investment.

BlueWater Bistro owner David Hostetler said before he opened the spacious upscale restaurant in November, he looked at various traditional touch screen computer systems where waiters key in orders on a central monitor after writing them down tableside. The hand-held system was alluring

because it offered extra benefits such as constantly keeping managers updated on happenings throughout the restaurant, which is divided into three distinct dining areas.

"When we're packed, the tickets are right there [on the computer screen],

High-tech eateries

Technology could change what you come to expect when you go out to eat | **5E**

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By RANDALL HILL *The Sun News*

Server Daniel McColl of The Isles Restaurant in Ocean Isle Beach, N.C., uses a hand-held pocket PC by Dell to transmit orders from customers directly to the bar and kitchen. He says the device saves time and keeps him off his feet a few steps during his work shift.

DIGITAL

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and we know what's going on. The server can do multiple orders without having to run to a station," he said.

The system has added advantages for Hostetler, who also owns Waccamaw Construction and spends time traveling.

"We can access all that information from a laptop or at home on the Internet," he said. "I'm able to see tables, who's serving who, what, where and when. I'm so busy up and down the beach here, it's nice to be able to check in."

The Isles Restaurant in Ocean Isle Beach, N.C., also uses a hand-held computer system for processing orders. The system was installed when the restaurant opened last year, said manager Kerri Downer. The system is especially helpful at The Isles, which has 350 tables including a separate banquet facility.

"It cuts down on quite a bit of time," she said. "... In a small restaurant, it might not be beneficial to use. With the banquet facility, I think it's going to be very helpful with simple things like placing orders."

Advances in computers in the past two years make it possible for restaurants to rely on the hand-held systems, said Jay Shavitz, president of Infinity Computer Systems Inc. in Myrtle Beach.

Hand-held devices first entered the restaurant industry about 12 years ago, but they had several strikes against them. None had batteries that would last more than a couple of



By RANDALL HILL *The Sun News*

Server Daniel McColl digitally transmits orders from customers Michelle Gray (left) and Beverly Davis, both of Charlotte, N.C., at the Isles Restaurant in Ocean Isle Beach, N.C.

hours, and they didn't have the capacity to hold lengthy menus. Now, restaurant managers can program in entire menus and wine and bar lists. The computers recognize handwriting, and all a server has to do is write an abbreviation on the screen. A list of possible matches sorted alphabetically pops up, and the server clicks on the desired dish.

"If you want to replace a manual way of doing something with a new technology, you can't fundamentally change the way the operator does it," Shavitz said. "All we're doing is replacing a piece of paper with a hand-held computer."

Shavitz's company has installed systems at BlueWater Bistro, The Isles and Sea Island

Inn. Gilligan's at Tides Inn & Suites and Eggs Up Grill in Pawleys Island soon will have their systems running, he said.

Shavitz said he envisions hand-held systems as the future of restaurants.

"People are starting to see it's out of the stages that it's gimmicky. It's to the point where it's a trusted and proven tool."

Restaurateurs are generally conservative when it comes to adopting new technology, according to last year's fifth annual Restaurant Technology Report: Implementation Trends and Strategic Growth of Restaurant IT.

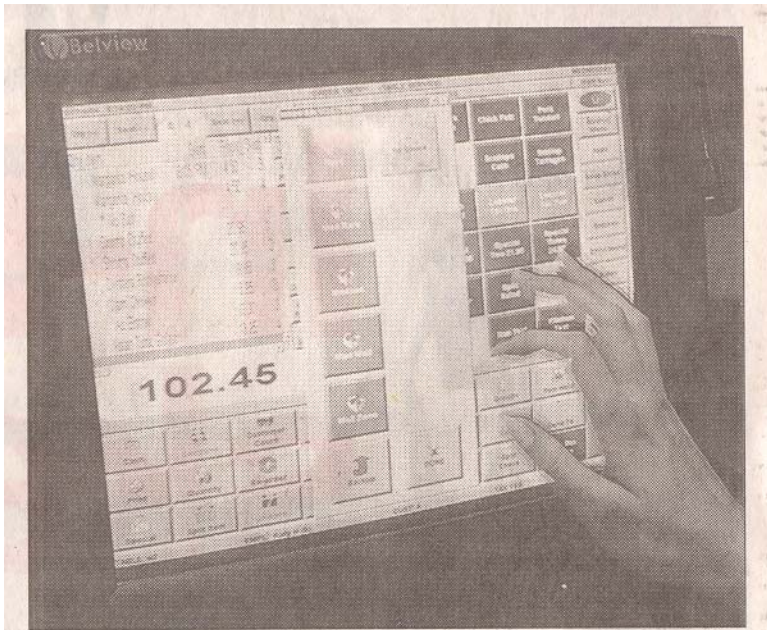
But as they become more familiar with technology and learn how it can be customized

to fit their needs, operators are more willing to invest in it.

"The prevalence of information technology in everyday life is not only increasing owners' awareness of IT and possible restaurant applications, but it is also increasing their comfort level, making them more willing to consider IT options," according to the report.

Attracting customers is another reason restaurants are embracing high-tech advances like wireless Internet service.

Because Hostetler had to install a wireless system throughout the BlueWater Bistro to support hand-held computers, he decided to offer customers the chance to use the system. Diners with wireless



By RANDALL HILL *The Sun News*

Server Katy Henderson uses Restaurant Manager software to total a customer's order at The Isles Restaurant.

The future of restaurants?

- **Restaurateurs** | About 52 percent surveyed said they invest in information technology for productivity or efficiency.
- **Customers** | Expect to find information about a restaurant on the Internet, and they also rely on the Internet for make reservations.
- **Suppliers** | Within two years, most restaurants will conduct some of their supplier transactions over the Internet.

Sources: Sixth annual Restaurant and Technology Study by Universities of Delaware and Nevada at Las Vegas, and Hospitality Technology magazine

equipped laptops can use Blue-Water's Internet system for free.

"With all the people from out of town, it's a good way to get them in to try our bakery," he

said.

Southern Market in the Galleria Shopping Center offers wireless service in its cafe and patio area. Marketing director Lisa Helms said the service mainly attracts vacationers who want to check their e-mail.

A handful of other places such as Starbucks Coffee and the new Internet Bagel Cafe in Surfside Beach also offer wireless services.

Hussien Aboul-Ezz, a marketing consultant from Orlando, Fla., who was using his laptop during a business lunch at Southern Market last week, travels often for his job. He's constantly on the lookout for wireless Internet connection zones.

"I prefer wireless," he said.

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