

The Foodservice Trends Report

2026 Q1

Welcome to a new era in QSR packaging.

The QSR industry is facing a challenging new reality: quick is just not quick enough. Consumers not only want but also expect the fastest service experience possible. But speed alone isn't enough, they want it paired with consistently high-quality food.

**Huhtamaki**

Speed. | Space. | Performance.



# This is far from dining as usual.

Smaller kitchens. Rising order volumes. Digital-first, dining-room-free formats. The foodservice industry is evolving like never before. Today, every inch of counterspace and every second of throughput matters. This is a turning point in our industry, and we will be breaking down the four key trends driving this change. One commonality throughout all of this is obvious: packaging won't just be a container anymore, it will need to become an operational optimizer by delivering on these critical components.

5 Seconds Faster = \$8,200 more revenue

## Speed

Packaging designed for quick grabs, easy handling, and minimal prep work can shave meaningful seconds off at the window. Every 5 seconds of saved service time equates to \$8,200 in added annual revenue per store.<sup>1</sup>

70% of QSR revenue is via drive-thru

## Space

Stackable, modular solutions are turning cramped kitchens into efficiently run operational systems. This is critical in an industry where 70% of all QSR revenue flows through the drive-thru.<sup>2</sup>

50%+ of consumers would pay more for packaging that supports quality

## Performance

From insulation to ventilation, it is pivotal that packaging performs. In fact, consumers value it so much that over 50% of them would pay more for premium packaging that supported quality of their food during transport.<sup>3</sup>

A photograph of a restaurant interior showing a long row of orange leather booth seats. The booths are arranged in a staggered pattern along a white-tiled floor. The lighting is bright, and the overall atmosphere is clean and modern.

## Trend 1

# Dining Rooms are Disappearing

Dining rooms in the QSR space are disappearing. Digital formats are reshaping the restaurant experience. Drive-thru-only builds. Ghost kitchens. Seating is being rapidly phased out to make way for more off-premises growth. The future of the QSR industry will belong to a window-first, pickup-driven consumer experience. With some of the most notable names in the industry phasing out seating to prioritize their drive-thru operations, this shift will only continue to grow.

The numbers are in.  
Dining rooms are out.

85%

of ghost kitchens operate  
exclusively through  
online-ordering platforms.<sup>4</sup>

In 2025, U.S. ghost kitchen revenue was

\$98 Billion

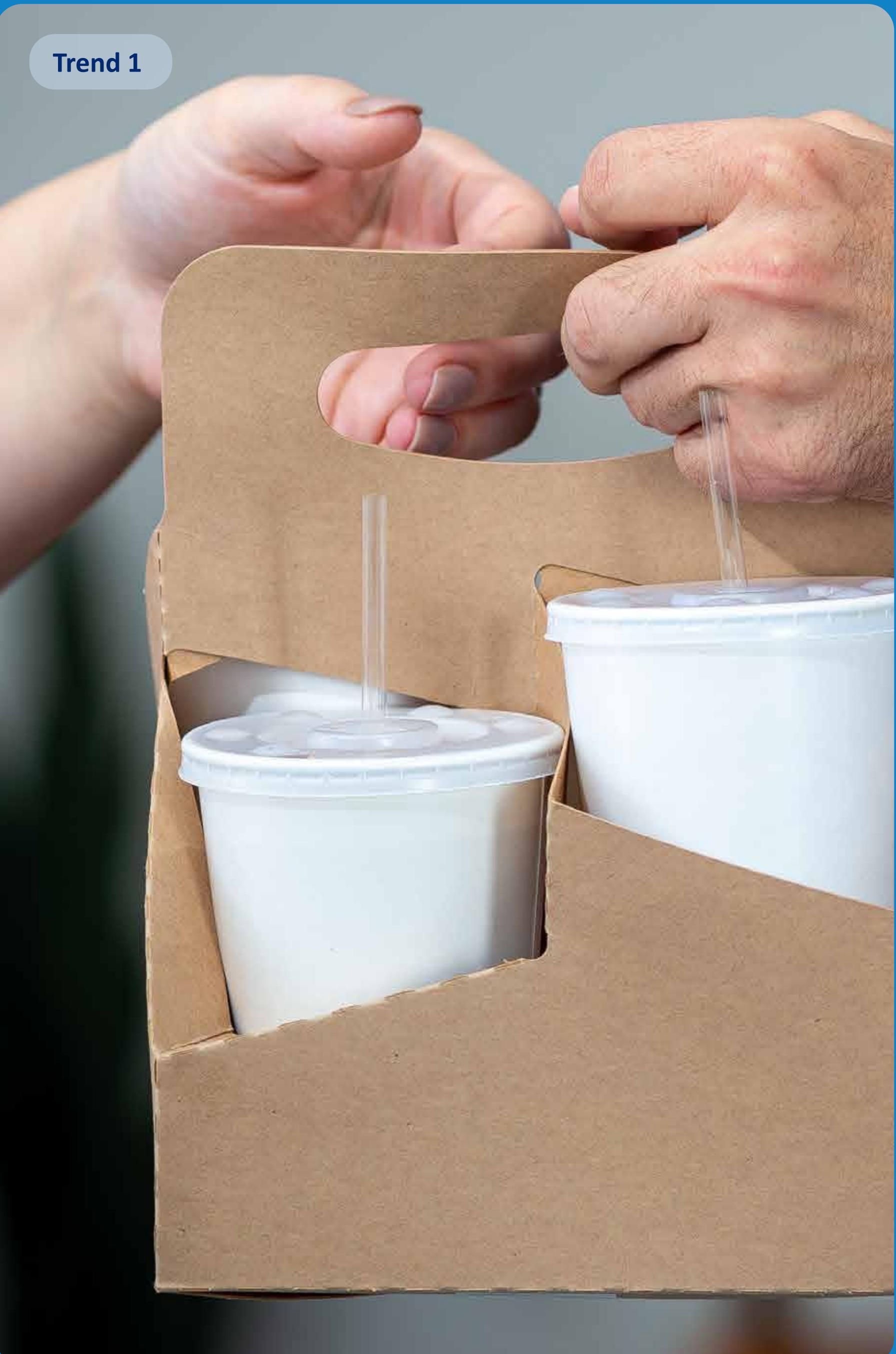
By 2032, it is projected to reach

\$2.9 Trillion

(62% CAGR).<sup>5</sup>

20%

of all North American food  
delivery orders are from  
ghost kitchens.<sup>6</sup>



With fewer available  
brand touchpoints,

your packaging  
serves as more than  
just a container.

It needs to be your brand ambassador designed  
for quick hand-offs and quality control.

Less seating.  
More throughput.



Chipotle has expanded its Chipotlane drive-thru-only stores, some of which have no dining room at all.



Wingstop is pushing toward 100% digital sales with off-premises-only prototypes.



Panera Bread launched Panera To Go: compact, pickup-only store models designed for digital order flows.

## Trend 2

# The Race for Space

Kitchen space is shrinking. Menus are expanding. Order complexity is rising. So, what's the solve? It starts with your packaging. Flexible and adaptive packaging formats clear space, simplify service, and make it easier for teams to deliver faster with less effort. Think space won't continue to challenge your operation moving forward? Think again.



Footprints are shrinking.  
Performance can't.

Compact QSR Models  
can range as low as

500

square feet.<sup>7</sup>

Leading QSR brands are actively reducing SKUs to  
**simplify operations  
& accelerate** speed to service.<sup>8</sup>

50%+  
of operators

have invested in kitchen  
equipment and redesigns  
specifically to boost efficiency  
in compact formats.<sup>7</sup>

Get space-smart today.  
Gain efficiencies tomorrow.



Krystal has introduced drive-thru-only prototypes that cut building footprints from ~2,700 sq. ft. to just 1,200 sq. ft.



7 Brew Coffee is rapidly expanding with 500-sq. ft. double drive-thru huts, proving efficiency can scale small.



Starbucks has launched pickup-only stores (like in New York City) with footprints under 1,000 sq. ft.

## Trend 3

## Quick gets Quicker

Drive-thru speed is no longer a nice-to-have; it's a necessity for customer satisfaction. It's exactly why operators are redesigning lanes, investing in upstream ordering and leaning on innovative packaging as the silent accelerator at the window. The expectations don't stop there. From ergonomics that speed the hand-off to intuitive seals designed to reduce errors, packaging is becoming less of an afterthought and more of a performance tool.

Time is shrinking.  
Demand is growing.

In 2024, total drive-thru  
service time improved

**14**  
seconds faster

year over year, with service time  
itself improving by 17 seconds —  
proof that even small efficiency  
gains compound across systems.<sup>9</sup>

**85%**  
of operators

report struggling to meet  
digital ordering demands.<sup>10</sup>

**27%**

planned to add more drive-thru  
lanes in 2025 to keep up with  
order volume.<sup>10</sup>

Long story short?

Every second  
is money gained  
or dollars lost.

The operators who leverage  
packaging that can move as fast as  
their lines will realize bigger wins  
every day at the drive-thru window.

Efficiency is improving.  
Expectations are rising.



McDonald's is testing AI-powered voice ordering and conveyor-belt-style pickups to shave seconds off throughput.



Taco Bell launched its Defy concept — a four-lane drive-thru with vertical food lifts designed for ultimate speed.



Chick-fil-A is rolling out dual-lane, mega drive-thrus with canopies and staging areas to handle peak traffic.



Trend #4

## Fresh Comes First

Speed and space mean nothing if the quality of your food doesn't hold up. As we continue the movement into an off-premises era, packaging will serve as the last line of your brand's defense between your brand's promise and the consumer's actual experience. From vented lids that keep fries from steaming to insulated bowls that keep hot foods hotter longer, how you serve your food matters as much as what you serve.

## Packaging's pivotal role in food quality.

90%

of consumers say they would order a wider variety of items if the food maintained on-premises quality during delivery.<sup>3</sup>

Delivery and off-premises channels now account for

30% to 60%

of total restaurant revenue, making packaging performance central to the bottom line.<sup>11</sup>

Consumers want packaging that is

**durable & insulated**

enough to maintain the optimal temperature throughout the meal.<sup>12</sup>

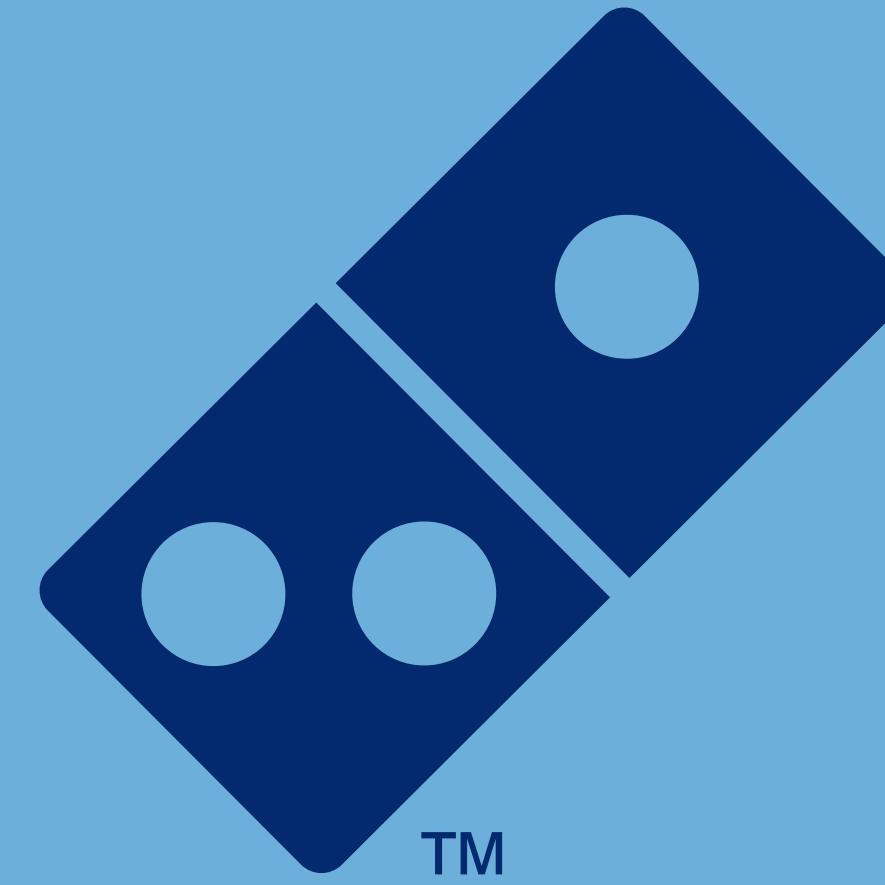
The handoff doesn't end at the window.

# Packaging carries a promise to your customer's home.

And, in a market where loyalty is fickle, keeping your commitment to quality intact is the difference between a one-and-done order and a lifetime customer.



Food quality must go the distance.



Domino's pioneered the use of insulated delivery bags, setting an industry benchmark for hot, fresh delivery.

# sweetgreen

Sweetgreen designs bowls and lids specifically to withstand 30+ minutes of travel time without sogginess.



Chipotle has upgraded its burrito bowls with vented, snap-fit lids to prevent steam buildup during delivery.

# Solving for speed, space and performance.

Every second saved. Every inch reclaimed. Every meal kept fresh. Now more than ever, packaging performance is pivotal. It can bolster efficiency and elevate the dining experience while demonstrating a commitment to your customers in the process.

At Huhtamaki, we innovate with packaging designs that help you drive speed, reclaim space, and preserve performance. We believe in being more than a vendor—we are your partner, always working to support you by answering today's challenges while preparing you for tomorrow's opportunities. That's how we're solving packaging.



# Sources

**1. RSSTS.** (2023, July 25). Boosting monthly revenue using drive-thru timer data. RSSTS.

<https://www.rssts.com/boosting-monthly-revenue-using-drive-thru-timer-data>

**2. Revenue Management Solutions.** (2025, May). Drive-thru trends 2025: QSR. Revenue Management Solutions.

<https://www.revenuemange.com/blog/drive-thru-trends-2025-qsr>

**3. Restaurant Business.** (2024, January 24). Consumers dining off premises want speed, value and better packaging. Restaurant Business Online.

<https://www.restaurantbusinessonline.com/operations/consumers-dining-premises-want-speed-value-better-packaging>

**4. ZipDo.** (2025). Ghost kitchen statistics: Market insights and key trends. ZipDo.

<https://zipdo.co/ghost-kitchen-statistics>

**5. Coherent Market Insights.** (2025, May). U.S. dark kitchens (ghost kitchens/cloud kitchens) market, by type, by ownership, by nature, by application, by food type, and by region. Coherent Market Insights.

<https://www.coherentmarketinsights.com/industry-reports/us-dark-kitchens-ghost-kitchens-cloud-kitchens-market>

**6. ZipDo.** (2025). Ghost kitchen statistics: Market insights and key trends. ZipDo.

<https://zipdo.co/ghost-kitchen-statistics>

**7. QSR Magazine.** (2023, August). The art of compact restaurant design. QSR Magazine.

<https://www.qsrmagazine.com/growth/the-art-of-compact-restaurant-design>

**8. Alicia Kelso,** "Several restaurant chains are reducing the size of their pantries," Nation's Restaurant News, March 6, 2025.

<https://www.nrn.com/restaurant-operations/several-restaurant-chains-are-reducing-the-size-of-their-pantries>

**9. QSR Magazine.** (2024, October). The 2024 QSR drive-thru report. QSR Magazine.

<https://www.qsrmagazine.com/story/the-2024-qsr-drive-thru-report>

**10. Restaurant Dive.** (2024, February). 72% of restaurant operators struggling to meet digital ordering demands. Restaurant Dive.

<https://www.restaurantdive.com/news/72-percent-restaurant-operators-struggling-to-meet-digital-ordering-demands/646203>

**11. Menuviel.** (2025, April). How to optimize packaging for takeout quality. Menuviel Blog.

<https://blog.menuviel.com/how-to-optimize-packaging-for-takeout-quality>

**12. QSR Magazine.** (2023, October 19). Foodservice packaging's impact on customer experiences. QSR Magazine.

<https://www.qsrmagazine.com/growth/consumer-trends/foodservice-packagings-impact-on-customer-experiences/>