

## Menus for the postmodern milieu



The E La Carte (left), a tablet-like computer being developed by a local start-up, is slated to compete with a system from TableTop.

By [Scott Kirsner](#)  
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**It sounds like a cautionary tale: a dropout from MIT's prestigious master's program in chemical engineering winds up waiting tables at various Cambridge restaurants.**

For Rajat Suri, it was research. Suri is the cofounder of E La Carte Inc., a start-up developing a new tablet-like computer for use in restaurants as a digital menu and ordering device. He hopes he will be more successful as an entrepreneur than he was as a server: "I didn't make great tips," he acknowledges.

E La Carte is just one company trying to bring technology to the table, helping restaurants operate more efficiently and profitably and making customers happier. The company's system is currently being tested at the Uno Chicago Grill in Harvard Square, and has also been used at The Asgard Irish Pub near the MIT campus. Others are testing similar systems at the Uno in Waltham and at Au Bon Pain locations in Boston and Cambridge.

E La Carte's technology could solve some common diner frustrations, and perhaps even get you to spend a little more on your meal. You can peruse the menu using a little computer with a color touchscreen, and place your order as soon as you're ready. (The computer is connected to the restaurant's existing cash register system via Wi-Fi.) There are trivia questions and other games to occupy you and your friends while you wait. You can offer feedback to the restaurant about your meal, split the bill among several members of your party, figure out the tip, and pay with a swipe of your credit card.

Suri believes the ability to order an extra beer or a round of desserts without having to flag down a server will also increase the size of the average check. Imagine this scenario: having tickets for a concert at 8 p.m., but not being able to order dessert because the waitress is too busy tending to other tables.

Suri doesn't see E La Carte replacing waitstaff, but rather letting them focus more on customer satisfaction than writing down orders. "If the device can take care of some of the onerous part of the job, it lets the waiter spend more time with the customer as a person," he says.

His company has raised more than \$1 million so far from an investor group that includes Skip Sack, a longtime Applebee's franchisee in New England (and also owner of The Asgard), and Ron Conway of SV Angel, one of the early backers of Google. The company participated in the Y Combinator "accelerator" program for start-ups in Silicon Valley over the summer and now maintains two offices, in California and Massachusetts. (Both are apartments that double as offices, Suri said.)

typical customer deal will be structured, but the company may ask for a fee based on how much the system increases sales at a restaurant; he says the data so far show that usage of the E La Carte system, which sits on each table, “consistently results in a 10 percent higher ticket average.”

Uno executives weren't eager to talk about the test, which began in May, but Richard Hendrie, senior vice president of marketing at Uno, admits that some guests may find the system intimidating. “There are some people who say, ‘Give me a break — I have enough technology in my life,’ ” he said. “And we don't want them to be stressed about whether the order got through, or where the waitress is. We should be in the de-stressing business.” But Hendrie said that guests can decide whether to use the system, and that feedback has been “good so far.”

My own experience earlier this month using the E La Carte technology was mixed: I enjoyed being able to place my own order and pay for it quickly, without the usual routine of credit card pickup and return. But my waitress, new on the job, didn't add my iced tea onto the bill (she took that order in person). And somehow, she explained, the veggie pizza I ordered was made with pepperoni instead, and had to be redone. Human error, it seems, can still enter into the equation at least until the arrival of the pizza-making robots.

Uno, which emerged from bankruptcy protection over the summer, is testing another ordering system, from Dallas-based Tabletop Media LLC, at its Waltham location. The Tabletop Media device puts less emphasis on order entry and more on entertainment and payment.

“Taking a table's orders is pretty complicated,” said John Regal, Tapletop Media's chief marketing officer. “You want a dirty martini with a twist, and your spouse has some food allergies and needs to ask questions.” (Another chain, California Pizza Kitchen Inc., is reportedly testing the Tabletop system in Texas and California, but Regal said that nondisclosure agreements prohibited him from commenting.)

Tabletop's system enables diners to watch movie trailers and buy movie tickets or sign up for a restaurant's loyalty program. But Regal said the main complaint that people have at restaurants “is that they can't pay the check when they're ready to leave and that's especially a big deal when they have kids with them.” As with E La Carte's device, you can swipe a credit card, but Tabletop's computer also includes a receipt printer (E La Carte's just sends you an e-mail receipt). Tabletop declined to say how much the units will cost.

Since May, Boston-based Au Bon Pain has been testing order-taking software that runs on one of Apple's iPad tablet computers. But this system, developed by Texas-based OrderTalk Inc., is currently used only by Au Bon Pain employees, to expedite the process of taking sandwich orders during the lunch rush. Orders pecked into the iPad get sent wirelessly to the sandwich makers behind the counter, instead of requiring the customer to hand over a slip of paper.

OrderTalk chief executive Patrick Eldon said Au Bon Pain has been using the system in four Boston-area locations, and plans to roll it out more widely soon. And if restaurant chains want to enable customers to use their own iPads or smartphones to place orders and pay their tabs, Eldon says his company's software can do that. The company would not say how much the systems cost.

For start-ups working on new restaurant ordering technology, two big questions loom. The first is whether the established makers of cash registers (or “point of sale” systems) will decide to get in the game themselves or simply acquire one of the start-ups. The second is whether it will be more cost effective, and more convenient to customers, to invite them to use their own smartphones or tablet computers to place orders, or to install dedicated devices at the table, as E La Carte and Tabletop do.

Those questions may be the industry's 21st-century version of “two for dinner?”

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