



New York Restaurants Can't Ignore TikTok Anymore

The social media app is upending how new and legacy businesses — from Chinatown to Sheepshead Bay — stand out in the country's busiest restaurant scene

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Madison Shapiro sat in a half-full dining room when she first ate at Nomad's Skirt Steak on a rainy Monday last December. At the time, the clientele at the weeks-old restaurant felt corporate to her — there, in her estimates, because of the steakhouse's proximity to Penn Station.

Shapiro, who works in the marketing department at Shake Shack, is one of the four sisters behind [@sistersnacking](#), a TikTok account that posts NYC restaurant reviews. She was attracted to Skirt Steak's somewhat gimmicky menu after she [read about it online](#): For \$28, customers get a plate of skirt steak, a salad, and unlimited french fries.

She was surprised to find that she actually enjoyed the steak, and the following day, Shapiro and her sisters [posted a positive review](#) of the under-the-radar neighborhood newcomer. Within the first hour, the video had received 100,000 views, Shapiro says. By nightfall, it had reached a whopping 1 million views. It was the most viral restaurant review that the two-year-old account has posted to date.

The online fervor translated into tangible sales at Skirt Steak. According to owner Laurent Tourondel, a line of at least 100 eager customers wrapped around the block the day after [@sistersnacking](#) posted their review. It's largely been [unwavering ever since](#). The level of success, which he credits in part to Shapiro's account, was "a complete surprise," he says. He especially didn't expect Skirt Steak — given its office-heavy Manhattan location — to attract such a young crowd.

Even for places that haven't achieved Skirt Steak's [TikTok-famous restaurant](#) status, some in the industry have keyed into how powerful the platform can be for brand awareness and sales. For savvy businesses, investing time and money into a TikTok page — or having TikTok influencers broadcast the restaurant's food to their own followings — is translating to a real-life impact, for both new and legacy restaurants.

In the world of TikTok, there is more democratization of which restaurants gain traction, as compared to other social media platforms, allowing restaurants to reach a wider audience. Unlike on Instagram, content from an account with very few followers has more potential to go viral due to the structure of the platform's For You page. It algorithmically boosts content onto users' feeds, regardless of whether they follow the account.

The platform has the potential to not just put new openings on peoples' radars, but boost longstanding spots, too.

Liz Yee runs [Kam Hing Bakery](#), a more than 30-year-old Chinatown bakery staple that is best known for its airy sponge cakes. In spring 2020, she made the difficult decision to temporarily close Kam Hing, during a time in which Chinatown in particular was [relentlessly affected by COVID-19](#), and [xenophobic reactions](#) to the virus. The bakery reopened in November 2020, but it really wasn't until about a year later — with vaccines underway and the city somewhat returning — that Yee began noticing, for the first time, more young customers, especially tourists, who'd come into the bakery and tell her that they'd learned about Kam Hing on TikTok.

The influx of new customers has been fascinating to Yee, who doesn't have a TikTok. "Without TikTok, we would never have gotten younger people in because we're not good technology-wise," she says, adding that for decades the primary customers were older Chinatown regulars who weren't able to stop by as frequently during the pandemic due to public health concerns. (While her sister runs a sometimes-updated Instagram account for Kam Hing, the business has no official website.) Thanks to the bakery's appearances on [TikTok](#) due to customer-generated videos, Yee has seen an approximately 20 percent increase to her business this year in comparison to prior years.

Other food businesses, however, are choosing to make TikTok accounts for themselves.

When Salvatore Carlino opened his first restaurant, [Lucia Of Avenue X](#), in January 2022, he had his heart set on Sheepshead Bay, nearby where his family used to run Papa Leone's Pizzeria in Manhattan Beach. Though he was certain he'd be able to tap into his family's South Brooklyn pizza legacy to garner local fans, he knew that his location — further from Manhattan, and less covered by food media — could come at the cost of mainstream fame. (In early May, however, Carlino received a coveted [Pete Wells review](#).) So, he did what many savvy millennial restaurant owners [seem to have done](#) in New York City as of late: He created a [TikTok account](#).

On TikTok, Carlino documents some of the behind-the-scenes of running the slice shop, from garnishing pies with olive oil drizzles and basil leaves to introducing followers to South Brooklyn's legendary [singing window washer](#). With just 160 followers and only a few hundred views per video, his account is much tinier than other food businesses on the platform, like Rahim Mohamed's [TikTok-famous Red Hook bodega](#) that has 3 million followers. For Carlino, making a TikTok account for the pizza shop isn't so much about building a large social media presence. (Lucia is bigger [on Instagram](#), anyway.) It's about spreading his brand to as many platforms as possible, and in this case, banking on TikTok's algorithm to allow him to be found by those who might not know or follow his restaurant.

It's "like playing a scratch-off ticket — it's very hard to stand out," says Carlino.

Still, getting used to filming videos is helpful, even if his TikTok audience remains small. Carlino says that he is now seeing the most follower engagement on Instagram's knockoff TikTok product, Reels, and he anticipates that it will be even more important than TikTok to the shop's business in the future.

Sabino Curcio, co-owner of the almost three-decade-old sandwich spot Anthony and Son Panini Shoppe, says that he has seen a bump in sales from customers coming in from all over the tristate area, which he attributes in part to launching Anthony and Son's [TikTok](#) account in the fall of 2020. (It is hard to quantify exact figures, he says.)

However, while Curcio feeds the panini shop's 30,000 followers with daily content, he believes more customers have stopped by from user-generated content. For example, when [@devourpower](#) [posted a video](#) of the shop's Matt & Steve 2.0 sandwich featuring mozzarella sticks last summer, Curcio says Anthony and Son sold out of sandwiches for the week on the first day — nearly one thousand of them.

Curcio claims that he has never paid influencers to post about his sandwiches, though, in rare instances, he says he has comped meals for influencers that have requested it but doesn't require posts in exchange. Still, Curcio is close with a crew of TikTok influencers who regularly post about his business, like Staten Island-based Danny Mondello, otherwise known as [@meals by cug](#). Mondello tells Eater that he has charged restaurants — although not Anthony and Son — in the past for social media posts, for which he has been paid a few thousand dollars.

When acclaimed Ayat restaurateur Abdul Elenani was opening Al Badawi last fall, he brought in halal-friendly influencers — a growing market Elenani sees — like [@HalalNYC](#) for comped meals at his restaurants. (Farah, whose last name has been withheld to keep her [@HalalNYC](#) account anonymous, actually ended up paying for the meal herself, Elenani says.) These days, he says he never outright pays influencers because it's hard to measure the exact impact on revenue. It's something he learned the hard way through his chain of coffee shops Cocoa Grinder, where he spent around \$400,000 over the course of 6.5 years to market the shops through Instagram influencers, and didn't see an expected sales uptick in return.

Influencers have contributed to filling seats at Elenani's restaurants, however. He didn't hire a public relations firm when opening Ayat in Bay Ridge in October 2020, but the crowds still came, and he kept hearing from customers that they found the restaurant on TikTok in the first six months of its debut. "TikTok is all a part of the game of opening a restaurant now," Elenani says. "That's really only become a thing [for restaurants] in the last year or so."

For those who do hire public relations support, TikTok is increasingly a part of coverage strategies. Ayako Kaneyoshi, director of operations for restaurant-focused public relations agency Hall PR, says that her company is "constantly reaching out to TikTok influencers" to come in and dine at Hall's more casual establishments — like paella spot Socarrat and its sibling cafe, La Churreria — in exchange for videos on their feeds.

When deciding who is a fit to bring in for her clients, Kaneyoshi says that she looks for TikTok influencers with at least 3,000 to 5,000 followers, and checks to see if they have produced videos that have received at least 50,000 views. The goal is to replicate Skirt Steak's success, but in practice, hiring influencers to boost restaurant sales is largely a murky business. "I think it is very hard to see the returns," Kaneyoshi says. "And to be honest, I haven't seen a direct response yet, but it's still very new to us."

For Skirt Steak owner Tourondel, the video app accelerated the speed of Skirt Steak's projected success. Tourondel declined to share information regarding specific financials of the business, but he says that he's currently shopping around for a second location, six months after opening the first restaurant. It's worth noting that other restaurants like Le Relais de Venise L'Entrecôte, open since 1959 (the New York location is temporarily closed), and mini-chain Medium Rare in Washington, D.C., have had similar menus for decades. It's the framing, and enthusiastically engaged online audience, that has made Skirt Steak appealing in a new way.

Still, when that second location opens, Tourondel says he has no intention of proactively reaching out to TikTok influencers to try to manufacture the same social media hits that first put the restaurant on the map. "We're not in the business of bringing TikTok people [in]," he says. "They come to us."