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**CURB SERVICE** Kwany Spinks checks out the order he placed with Outback Steakhouse on West 23rd Street in Manhattan.

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WHO has never been put on hold while trying to order pizza, hot wings or moo shu pork? Who has never opened a delivery bag and discovered a Coke instead of a Diet Coke, or that the brown rice is as white as the napkins the restaurant neglected to include?

"I hate calling up to order food," said Lewis Friedman, a Manhattan real estate broker. "It throws me over the edge. They put you on hold. They get the order wrong. It's always a crap shoot."

But all that changed last month when he saw a sign in the window of Lenny's, a chain of sandwich shops in Manhattan, encouraging customers to place orders online. Mr. Friedman returned to his office, logged on and, at long last, felt in control of his gustatory future.

"I'm in the driver's seat," he said. "I can click that I use skim milk. I can click that I like light skim milk. I can click for Equal as opposed to Sweet'n Low or Splenda."

The comedian Jim Gaffigan has teased Americans about how fast they want their food. "That's why we really love those value meals," he said. "You just have to say a number: 'Two!' Soon you won't have to speak. It will just be a noise. 'Ennnghhh!' "

Mr. Gaffigan must have a crystal ball. Small and large chains, even individual restaurants, are now enabling customers to order without speaking: They can order online before pulling into a drive-through; they can text-message an order, and soon, they will be able to experience one-click ordering on their cellphones, for pickup or delivery. Push a button, and a hoagie is on the way.

The restaurant industry is investing in such technology to woo the thousands of consumers like Mr. Friedman who fly through life with their thumbs on their BlackBerrys. Hoping to make ordering a burger as routine as ordering a book from [Amazon](#), a number of chains are emphasizing the dot-com after their corporate name to lure the hungry and time-pressed to their Web sites.

As for all those supposed concerns about unhealthy eating and the retreat from home cooking — who are we fooling? The average American 18 and older buys a snack or a meal from a restaurant five times a week on average, according to a 2006 survey by the National Restaurant Association. More people eat at their desks and in their cars. And children are weaned on drive-through, pickup and delivery.

The biggest regret Americans seem to have about fast food is that it isn't snappier: A survey last year by QSR magazine, a restaurant industry publication, found that 68 percent of people are willing to wait no more than five minutes in a drive-through line. And in an age where everything from sneakers to cars is customizable, people think they should be able to get exactly what they want, when they want it.

"It has really, really exploded in the past year or two," said J. Patrick Doyle, the executive vice president of Team USA, the name Domino's Pizza uses for its corporately owned locations. "I predict pizza will be one of the top 10 items purchased online within the next 12 to 24 months."

Though online ordering has been around at some locations for about five years, most people still call in or wait in lines to place their orders. About 13 percent of Americans placed online food orders from a restaurant last year, according to the National Restaurant Association, up from about 10 percent in 2004.

But Philip DeSorbo Jr., a project leader for the retail technology department at Subway, which has nearly 28,000 restaurants in 87 countries, said these days many people would rather send an e-mail message than leave a voice mail message. "I think online will eventually surpass picking up the phone," he said.

Igniting the trend are consumers like Mr. Friedman, who may seem like the finicky protagonist of Dr. Seuss's "Green Eggs and Ham," but who is just your average multitasking, high-speed wireless American.

Now each weekday morning he places an online order with Lenny's. Soon an iced coffee and an Atkin's Special (egg whites, turkey, onion, tomato, roasted red pepper) are made to his typed specifications and delivered to the reception desk.

"I'm saving time," said Mr. Friedman, who orders breakfast and lunch online. "I'm so adept at it now that I can actually do business on the phone while I'm placing my food order."

People like him see advantages to online and text ordering. It is faster; there is no being placed on hold or inadvertently hung up on; and you need not ask about the specials or explain that the jalapeños should be on the side. It is more accurate; you type in the order and delivery address yourself. There is no need for cash. Favorite orders and credit card information can be saved so re-ordering is a matter of a few mouse clicks. A delivery can be scheduled days in advance. And thanks to electronic menus, there is more drawer space in the kitchen.

Yet as recently as 2001, Jim Kargman, the president of QuikOrder, a company that provides the technology for online ordering, found some fast food chains reluctant to adopt online ordering. "Now it's basically become mainstream," said Mr. Kargman, whose clients now include Pizza Hut and Domino's.

Industry executives have found that those inclined to use online or text ordering are less defined by race or age than by whether or not they have access to high-speed Internet connections. Online orders on corporate Web sites or sites like [SeamlessWeb.com](http://SeamlessWeb.com), an aggregate site for restaurant ordering, come from working parents in search of no-fuss family dinners, ravenous college students and professionals working overtime.

"The heavy user for fast food is the heavy user for computers and hand-held devices," said David Palmer, a restaurant analyst for UBS, the financial services company.

For that reason, perhaps no group understands the benefits of new ordering methods better than college students, who grew up zooming through cyberspace. In response to student demand for a way to text food orders to restaurants in between classes, [Campusfood.com](http://Campusfood.com), an online network of restaurants available on more than 300 campuses, began offering text and SMS message ordering in April. The first big push for the service will be this fall.

“It’s exactly like sending a regular text message like I do with my friends all the time,” said Rebecca Minsky, 21, a junior at [Cornell University](http://Cornell University) who has been using Campusfood.com since her freshman year. When she leaves the gym she texts her order; by the time she arrives home, dinner is ready.

In fact, Ms. Minsky used Campusfood.com so often that she ended up interning for the company this summer.

“What they like is it’s really on their own terms,” said Jim Ensign, the vice president for marketing communications for Papa John’s International.

The advantages for restaurants include fewer phone calls to answer, higher sales prices (the average pizza sale is \$2 to \$5 higher than over the phone, said Mr. Kargman of QuikOrder), and access to the e-mail addresses of thousands of customers.

What is good for the industry, though, is not necessarily good for the consumer. “I’m sure it will be popular among the heavy users of fast food who will be encouraged to eat even more of it,” said Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at [New York University](http://New York University) and the author of “Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health” and “What to Eat.” “And that’s too bad,” she said, “because there are healthier eating options, obviously.”

Still, she said, the industry is giving people what they want: “How clever of them to take advantage of that kind of technology.” Ms. Nestle also pointed out that consumer interest in these new ways of ordering is an intriguing commentary on class, as it shows how reluctant people are to speak with fast food workers — often teenagers and immigrants with accents.

Pizza is the nation’s most delivered food category, Mr. Kargman said, so it is not surprising that the world’s three largest pizza chains (Pizza Hut, Domino’s and Papa John’s) are at the forefront of electronic ordering. Nationwide, nearly 30 online orders on average are placed every minute

at Pizza Hut, and the company said in June that its online ordering business grew sixfold in the last three years.

The major national pizza chains have about 41 percent of the pizza-restaurant business, according to the Associated Press.

“This is one way among many that the chains are trying to grow within this mature market,” said Mr. Palmer of UBS. “Other ways include offering breakfast, staying open later, introducing premium items, or credit card payment capability, offering wi-fi.”

“I only order online,” said Andy Claude, 31, who works in the investment industry in San Diego and who has been ordering from Papa John’s for about five years. “When you order on the phone, sometimes you say ‘extra cheese’ or ‘half pepperoni’ and it doesn’t always come that way.”

Pizza, however, is not the only cuisine that has gone digital. A little more than a year ago, Chipotle, the Mexican chain, began offering online ordering, which it calls DSL (Don’t Stand in Line). In the first six months of this year it did 350,000 transactions online, up from 250,000 in the first half of last year, said Chris Arnold, a spokesman.

About three months ago, an Outback Steakhouse on West 23rd Street in Manhattan began offering curbside take away, said Chris Eldridge, the proprietor. Customers place an order online and type in the make and color of their car. When they pull up to the restaurant, their food is carried out to them.

Of course there are consumers who have ordered online only to have their food never arrive or arrive with fixings they won’t so much as poke at. Nonetheless, industry professionals generally agree that online orders are more accurate.

Restaurants like Subway and Papa John’s are experimenting with text messaging. At the National Restaurant Association show in May, Mr. Kargman of QuikOrder announced that he had acquired patented technology called FavOrder that will allow customers to place orders on Web sites and via cellphones and PDAs with a single click. Cellphone one-click ordering will be available to the public later this year.

“The reality of it is, there’s a lot of us that are resistant to change,” said Tom Santor, a spokesman for Donatos Pizza, a chain with 176 restaurants in the United States. “But guess what? It ain’t doing us any good. This train has done left the station.”

People like Alison Strianse of Brooklyn are riding it into the future.

“I’m hooked on [Delivery.com](https://www.delivery.com),” she said, which she uses to order lunch. “You literally don’t have to leave your desk.”

When she learned about the Web site from a friend a few weeks ago she looked at him and thought: “You’ve changed my life.”