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★ Restaurateurs turn to digital menus, wine lists

In addition to being 'cool,' digital can help connect with customers

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Restaurateur Alan Wong, right, with Mark Shishido, his wine director, shows menus that will be displayed on iPads beginning next month. The digital menus and wine lists will replace the traditional printed versions.

Tina Yuen PBN

Traditional restaurant menus are making way for digital menus on high-tech devices such as Apple's iPads and the trend is catching on here in Hawaii.

Two big-name Hawaii restaurateurs, Peter Longhi and Alan Wong, have signed up with Incentient, a New York-based technology firm that develops transaction software for the hospitality industry, to launch digital menus on iPads at their respective restaurants.

Beyond just the "cool" factor, they say their desire to move toward digital menus on the iPads is to be more "green" because they don't have to constantly reprint updated menus. It also is a tool to educate both staff and customers.

In late April, Longhi converted just his wine lists to digital and kept traditional menus for breakfast, lunch and dinner items at the two Longhi's restaurants in Wailea and Lahaina on Maui. In early August, Wong will launch his digital menu — which will include his wine, dessert and dinner items — at his namesake restaurant on South King Street in Honolulu.

Incentient provides the restaurants with both the proprietary software and the iPads for a monthly management fee of about \$75 per iPad. The restaurants can upload as much information as they want onto the digital menus, including recommended food and wine pairings or, in Wong's case, the local farmers from which he buys his products.

"It's not just a wine menu, it becomes a training tool for us," Wong told PBN. "I think it's not only just a training tool for our staff but when our customers find out we have all this information, we're showing them in terms of farmers, who we deal with and where they come from. It is a little bit about making everyone else aware of that too."

Longhi said using the iPads takes some getting used to. "Once we looked at it we thought it could be something that people could distinguish us from other restaurants," he said. "I'm not saying it has changed the world for our wine program but knowledge is power and overall it's been very well-accepted — plus, it's really cool." The digital menu technology would work best for restaurants with extensive wine lists or those that don't deal in high volume, said Chris Colgate, chairman of the Hawaii Restaurant Association and Oahu regional manager of TS Restaurants' Duke's Canoe Club Waikiki and Hula Grill Waikiki.

"I think there's a home for it in some restaurants but I don't think it would really function at a high-volume restaurant," he said. "In the niche markets, it'll do well. Do we see them being explosive and really going into a lot of restaurants? The jury's still out."

Incentient counts world-renown chefs Wolfgang Puck, Gordon Ramsay and Jose Andres among its clients who use the same SmartCellar technology on iPads that's being introduced here in Hawaii.

"When the banking debit card and airline kiosks were first introduced there was skepticism, but today it's a natural expectation to use your debit card and print tickets from an airline kiosk," said Linda Jameson, director of sales for Incentient, in a statement to PBN. "I see Incentient's technology having the same impact on hotels and restaurants, especially since people want services and information at their fingertips."

Jameson said several Waikiki hotels are in the design process and scheduled to launch their digital menus later this summer.