



Your restaurant is probably invisible...

...to the way people search now.

What's changed in the world of online search and why it matters to you.

Search has fundamentally changed. Diners are no longer 'Googling' and scrolling through a list of options. They're asking AI agents for a recommendation - and getting one answer, not ten. If you're not in that answer, you don't exist.

For twenty years, finding a restaurant meant opening Google, typing "Italian restaurant near me" and choosing from a list. You needed to be in the top few results, but customers still made the decision themselves.

That's changed. A growing number of diners now open an AI agent and ask: "Where can I get a good Sunday roast near Bath with outdoor seating and kids welcome?" The AI doesn't return a list. It picks one or two places and recommends them directly. The customer often books without visiting a single website.

When you do show up, you need to look very good and make the customer experience (that's CX) exemplary.



The marketing jargon is '**no-click attribution**'. It's really important, as it means all the work you've done on your website doesn't matter. Actually, it does, because often the customer will then go and take a look at your website. That's called 'last point validation'. At that point, the customer knows your restaurant's name, so conventional search is easy.

37% of consumers now start their search with an AI agent*. 85% still verify on traditional search afterwards - which means you need to show up in both places, not just one.

Below is a simple example, and nothing to do with AI, and is a useful reminder to give the customer what they want!

When I choose a cafe to meet a friend, I know what I want. Small and cosy outdoor space, kid and dog-friendly, great food and lovely cakes! Oh, and I want to know when they open.

I have a favourite example here: <https://primrosecafe.co.uk>

It's very simple, and a few pictures do all the work - admirably!

The AI agents that matter

Google Gemini & AI Overviews - now appear above Google search results for 78% of restaurant queries. The dominant force.

ChatGPT - used by hundreds of millions for restaurant recommendations. Fast becoming the first stop for dining decisions, especially among under-45s.

Copilot (Microsoft) - built into Windows and Edge. Surfaces restaurant recommendations above traditional search results.

Perplexity - fast-growing AI search engine popular with research-minded diners checking reviews and menus before booking.

Siri & Apple Intelligence - voice-first, mobile-first. "Hey Siri, find me a dog-friendly pub near me for lunch" is now a common discovery moment.

Alexa (Amazon) - smart speaker queries for local restaurants, particularly relevant for older demographics and home-based planning.

The reality check

83% of restaurants are completely invisible in AI-generated recommendations. 78% of restaurant searches now trigger an AI Overview above organic results. 60% of searches in 2026 are resolved without a click - the AI just answered. Noclick attribution.

The critical point: 86% of the invisible restaurants already have a Google presence. They have a listing, photos, and reviews - and they still don't appear. Doing what worked three years ago is not enough.

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What AI actually looks for

Specific, factual Google Business Profile copy. Generic descriptions like “cosy family restaurant serving fresh food” are invisible to AI. You need occasion signals, atmosphere signals, dietary signals, parking, hours, and specific dishes - all in plain language AI can extract.

Reviews with descriptive, specific language. AI models read review content - not just star ratings. Rich reviews allow AI to match your restaurant to a wide range of dining queries. Volume matters too.

FAQ content on your website. AI Overviews pull directly from FAQ sections. “Do you take walk-ins?” “Are you dogfriendly?”, “Do you have vegetarian options?” - direct questions with direct answers. PDF menus are invisible.

Structured data (schema markup). Code added to your website that tells AI exactly what your business is, where it's located, and what it offers. Most restaurant websites don't have it.

Active, consistent presence everywhere. Accurate hours, updated photos, consistent information across Google, TripAdvisor, and your own website. Stale or inconsistent information loses you recommendations.

What's to be done, in order of impact

1. Rewrite your Google Business Profile - replace generic language with specific facts about occasion, atmosphere, dietary options, dishes, parking, and hours.
2. Build a review strategy - ask actively, encourage descriptive language. AI rewards rich, varied content, not just stars.
3. Add an FAQ page to your website - dog-friendly, walk-ins, private hire, parking, allergies. Direct questions, direct answers.
4. Replace your PDF menu with a web page - AI cannot read PDFs. Structured menu pages with dish names and dietary information can directly influence recommendations.
5. Add schema markup - a developer can do this in a few hours. It's the technical layer that gives AI crawlers reliable, structured data.
6. Keep everything current - seasonal hours, new dishes, fresh photos.
AI rewards businesses that appear active.

See below for some interesting information.

Gen Z (18-27) - heaviest users by far

Around 70% use AI tools like ChatGPT weekly. 93% of Gen Z knowledge workers use two or more AI tools weekly. They treat AI as a co-pilot for almost everything - search, research, content creation, decision-making. For restaurant discovery, this group has largely moved away from Google entirely.

Millennials (28-43) - consistent daily users

56% of Millennials use generative AI at work. Their usage is more task-driven than experimental - productivity, research, planning. Strong AI search users, but still cross-reference with Google and review sites.

Gen X (44-59) - growing but selective

Adopting AI when it's embedded in tools they already use - voice assistants, apps, search. Usage is driven by convenience rather than curiosity. This group is increasingly using Google's AI Overviews without necessarily realising they're using "AI."

Baby Boomers (60+) - low but not zero

Just 10% of those 65+ use ChatGPT compared to 58% of 18-29 year olds. Prefer simple, practical AI tools - voice assistants (Alexa, Siri) and AI embedded in familiar apps. 29% of consumers aged 50+ use health-related AI apps.

Why this matters for restaurants

The demographic doing most AI-driven restaurant discovery is 25-45-year-olds, which is also the highest-spending dining demographic. They're not a niche early-adopter group anymore. They're your mainstream Friday night table.

Conclusion

You might now be wondering what you can do to become more visible in the new AI world.

Your AI agent

If you've not really engaged in the AI revolution, the first thing to do is to recognise that this is the new world and it's not going to change. So embrace it and get yourself a paid-up AI agent. I'm a Claude fan, and I pay £20 per month. Claude learns about me, my writing style and much more besides. Claude is also my search engine of choice.

I often find that the way information is presented to me is more digestible for much of my search needs. This is certainly true when I search for a café near the Volvo dealership where I'm going to get my car serviced next week!

Citations

You'll also see how the whole 'citation' process works.

(A citation in AI search is when an AI tool not only mentions your brand but actually links to a specific page on your website as the source for its answer.)

In a nutshell, you need to get great reviews, lots of them, and you need to directly answer the kind of questions your potential customers might ask. You need your menu on your website, NOT as a PDF!

Ask your marketing people to really get on board with the whole search process and remember that your phone or computer quickly learns about you and will not give you clean results - even 'ingognito' browser settings cannot be trusted to deliver clean search results.