

# Fancy South Florida vending machines dispense raw steaks, \$30 champagne and cake

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Icebox Cafe, a 14,000-square-foot restaurant that has a vending machine called Icebox Pantry, sells grab-and-go versions of its restaurant menu. On-the-go eaters in South Florida seeking restaurant-quality food can now discover high-end eats in the oddest of places: fancy vending machines. Restaurants, food halls, hotels, hospitals and shopping malls now tantalize customers with touchscreen machines [vending \\$30 grass-fed ribeyes](#) and food made and shipped directly from local restaurants. Here's a sample:

ADVERTISING

- The sixth-floor Terrace Grill at the trendy Dalmar Fort Lauderdale hotel is home to a Moet & Chandon machine offering \$30 champagne mini-bottles.
- The Jarden Smart Market at the Palm Beach Outlets sells grab-and-go salads, cold-pressed juices and other restaurant-quality food.
- Customers can punch up 50 international flavors of licorice and 45 types of hard pretzels from machines at Delray Beach Market.
- At the Carlo's Bakery machine at Sawgrass Mills Mall, a video of TLC's "Cake Boss" Buddy Valastro implores customers to indulge in \$7 slabs of rainbow cake.

Call them modern-day [automats](#), or maybe the next generation of vending. Robert Siegmann, owner of 12 fancy machines in Broward and Miami-Dade counties, calls them surefire pandemic moneymakers.

The owner of health-food eatery Icebox Cafe in Hallandale Beach says vending machines don't replace restaurants, but [in the age of hospitality worker shortages](#), they do replace wait staff.



An Icebox Pantry vending machine inside Icebox Cafe in Hallandale Beach sells grab-and-go Moroccan chicken bowls, chipotle turkey on fresh multigrain, cheesecake bites and tres leches cake. (Susan Stocker / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

“[Restaurants] are suffering from labor issues, so this is a way to solve that dilemma,” Siegmann says. “It’s a huge gamble right now to invest a million dollars in a full-service restaurant. Or you could spend \$15,000 on a vending machine, get it branded and install it, and if doesn’t work, just unplug it and put it somewhere else.”

The machines are also heavier and stuffed with gadgetry that prevents customers from bear-hugging and rocking the machines in frustration. Yes, food still gets stuck, but “much less often” than break-room snack machines of yesteryear, Siegmann adds.

“We’re now dealing with highly technical vending machines and with those advances come a certain amount of glitchiness that you have to manage,” he says.

Still, that’s hardly deterring restaurants from crowding into the fancy vending machine arena. New York City’s Brooklyn Dumpling Shop will bring dumpling automat machines to five locations between Miami and Orlando over the next year. The machines are contactless – customers order with smartphones – and fresh dumplings sit behind tiny glass windows that resemble mini-microwaves. Flavors include Reuben, lamb gyro and bacon pepper-jack cheeseburger.

In a press release touting franchise opportunities with a company called Fransmart, owner Dan Rowe says these automat machines “will be in every top market across the country in no time.”

“The revival of the automat concept is ingenious, especially in combating the current labor shortage issue we’re seeing across the country,” he states.

### **Selling ‘like gangbusters’**

At Icebox Cafe's kitchen, it takes 25 chefs, line cooks and production packers to replenish Siegmann’s 12 Icebox vending machines with Moroccan chicken bowls, chipotle turkey on fresh multigrain, cheesecake bites and tres leches cake. An 8-foot-tall orange touchscreen machine in Icebox’s dining room charges \$6.50 to \$9 per grab-and-go item. It takes debit, credit, Apple Pay and Google Pay, but not cash.



Zoriada Medina prepares chipotle chicken sandwiches bound for Icebox Cafe's 12 fancy vending machines in Broward and Miami-Dade counties. (Michael Laughlin/Sun Sentinel)

Pastry chef Maggie Valliant bakes 60 cakes each morning in Icebox's kitchen. Forty of them wind up at Icebox machines parked in strategic places with heavy foot traffic, including the lobby of the Alluvion Las Olas luxury residential tower, an Audi dealership in North Miami and at the University of Miami. The rest are served to customers at the Icebox Café restaurant and its two stores at Miami International Airport.

“Every three days, we have to restock the machines,” Valliant says, smearing buttercream across red velvet cake. “People take pictures of the machines all the time and it makes me happy, you know? They’re doing that because of how good my food looks.”



Siegmann started Icebox Cafe's fleet of vending machines a few months before COVID-19, then added more when his grab-and-go meals sold “like gangbusters” amid pandemic shutdowns. Millennials and Gen-Zers use them the most, and Siegmann is negotiating with college campuses, shopping malls and hospitals to carry more.



A blackened chicken bowl and other food items are available at Icebox Cafe, Tuesday, October 26, 2021. (Michael Laughlin/Sun Sentinel)

“Consumers are more tech-savvy, demanding more foods on the fly and on their own time,” he says. “If you install machines that give less financial risk to companies who don’t have to deal with food waste and worker costs, that is humongous savings.”

Fancy vending boxes are also more sophisticated. Their artificial intelligence unearths up-to-the-minute consumer data that restaurants covet: customer

food habits, age groups, top-selling dishes. It's all accessible from a smartphone.

That's what attracted Palm Beach chef Thierry Beaud. Concerned that shutdowns would kill business at his upscale raw bar PB Catch and French bistro Pistache, Beaud partnered with fellow restaurateurs Hess Musallet (Field of Greens) and Dylan Lipton (Benny's on the Beach) to create Jarden Smart Market.

"We were worried what the future had in mind for us, so we invested in business models that were safer and less transmitting of the virus," Beaud says of their vending machine side hustle.

Their Jarden Smart Markets vend colorful, layered salads inside recyclable jars, plus kombucha, cold-brew coffee and cold-pressed juices. Chefs make the salads at partner restaurants and send them to machines at Palm Beach Outlets, downtown West Palm Beach and Palm Beach's Worth Avenue. Next, a Jarden will debut at Wellington Regional Hospital on Oct. 29.



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The Jarden Smart Market debuted this spring from Palm Beach restaurateurs Thierry Beaud (PB Catch, Pistrache), Hess Musallet (Field of Greens) and Dylan Lipton (Benny's on the Beach). It sells salads-in-a-jar, kombucha, cold-brew coffee and cold-pressed juices at Palm Beach Outlets, Palm Beach's Worth Avenue and downtown West Palm Beach. (Jarden / Courtesy)

The machines are temperature-controlled, and customers can scan ingredients before buying on a 27-inch touchscreen, Musallet adds. The chef says Jarden [is inspired by Chicago-based Farmer's Fridge](#), whose 400 vending machines in six states have sold 3.7 million meals.

“We’re bringing our culinary experience and knowledge of what the market needs,” Musallet says. The Jarden machines may sit in luxury surrounds, but their customer base is employees working in these areas, not wealthy people. “Places like universities and public schools don’t have easy access to healthy food. How many times have you been in a hospital cafeteria and thought, ‘I can’t eat that?’”

Beaud is trying to change the stigmas about vending machines of old, the kinds that dispensed potato chips and preservative-loaded cookies.

“Vending used to equal crap,” he says. “Automats used to have TV dinners with high sodium and starch. But young people are more open to things that involve cool technology and a digital experience.”

## **Eye candy**

[At Delray Beach Market](#), the fancy Licorice.com vending machine with 50 international flavors is treated just like any other restaurant, says Bob Higginbotham, the food hall’s food and beverage director.

The market’s customers — their demographic is 25- to 45-years-old — are already tantalized by too many options, primed for the dopamine hit of colorful boba teas and burgers and cakes in every direction. A red-and-black-



striped licorice machine selling gift-wrapped tubes of old-fashioned candy for \$15 is not just eye-catching but Instagrammable, he says.



The Licorice.com touchscreen vending machine sells 50 international flavors of licorice at the Delray Beach Market food hall. The candies sit inside gift-wrapped tubes that cost \$15. (Adam Struhl / Courtesy)

“The power of the impulse buy at the market is huge, and the licorice machine stands out,” Higginbotham says. “It’s not generating as much revenue [as the hamburger stand](#), but for us, it’s a substantial source of income.”

Boca Raton’s Adam Struhl and his father, Warren, operate the licorice machine, which sells flavors from Finland, Australia and Holland. A frequent traveler, Struhl, 30, understood the powerful allure of convenience: He can’t

count the “embarrassing” number of times he’s had to buy headphones out of airport terminal vending machines.

“Everyone has a licorice story, or has family members who like it,” says Struhl, whose vending machine debuted in April. “Now, more than ever, people want an experience, and when you punch the touchscreen, you get to scroll through the flavors, and read about the history, argue with your friend about which one that you’re going to get.”

In two weeks, Struhl will debut a second smart vending machine next door, Pretzels.com, selling 45 varieties of hard pretzels (\$12 per tube), with flavors from strawberry margarita to bacon-bourbon jam. While he sources the licorice from international suppliers, Struhl’s team bakes the pretzels at a warehouse in Delray Beach.

Higginbotham is already a fan. “I typically don’t get excited about hard pretzels,” he says. “But I have to tell you, it was delicious.”





A Carlo's Bakery "Cake ATM" at Sawgrass Mills Mall, next to the Oasis entrance, sells slabs of rainbow, red velvet and carrot cake. The machine comes from TLC "Cake Boss" Buddy Valastro. (Phillip Valys / Sun Sentinel)



The trendy Dalmar Fort Lauderdale hotel sells \$30 Moët & Chandon mini-bottles on its sixth-floor Terrace Grill and pool deck. (Phillip Valys / Sun Sentinel)