

Why food belongs in the future of rewards

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We eat because we need to.
But we also eat to **celebrate, connect, explore, indulge, entertain, and remember.**

Food rarely stays just food.

A favorite dish can take you back to childhood.

A restaurant reservation can become an anniversary tradition.

A cooking class can turn into a new hobby.

A meal shared with friends can become the part of a trip everyone talks about years later.

We eat because we need to. But we also eat to celebrate, connect, explore, indulge, entertain, and **remember**. And those food experiences happen everywhere — at restaurants, on the go, at home, and while traveling. In fact, **90.6%** of U.S. adults reported eating at a restaurant within the previous 90 days.¹

It's one reason food represents such a compelling opportunity in reward strategy and why we created Culinary Marketplace, a curated collection of food, beverage, dining, and culinary rewards designed around the many ways people experience food today.

But popularity is only part of the story. Research into how people eat, connect, and remember suggests food holds a much more meaningful place in our lives.

Food fits the way people live today

Going out to eat is only one part of the picture. Takeout, drive-thru, and delivery are now part of everyday routines. The National Restaurant Association found that **47%** of adults get takeout at least once a week, **42%** use a drive-thru weekly, and **37%** order restaurant delivery at least weekly. Among Gen Z and Millennials, nearly six in ten use takeout or drive-thru at least weekly.²

Convenience matters, but it isn't the only reason people turn to food. DoorDash found that **98%** of consumers surveyed have ordered food delivery to satisfy a craving.³ That says something important: food isn't always about meeting a basic need. Sometimes people choose it because they want something special, comforting, indulgent, or simply different from the usual.

That range of motivations matters when thinking about food as a reward.

Sometimes the appeal is convenience after a long day. Sometimes it's trying the restaurant everyone has been talking about. Sometimes it's ordering something special that wouldn't normally make it into the weekly budget. Other times, it's discovering a new cuisine, receiving a favorite treat, learning how to make something from scratch, or creating an experience around the table.



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Food creates opportunities for connection

One of the simplest ideas is that food brings people together. The World Happiness Report examined meal sharing using Gallup World Poll data from 142 countries and territories. Researchers found that people who shared more meals with others reported significantly higher life satisfaction and positive emotions and lower levels of negative emotions. Countries where people shared more meals also tended to report greater social support and lower levels of loneliness.⁴

The researchers are careful not to claim that eating together directly causes greater happiness. But the relationship between meal sharing, wellbeing, and social connection appeared consistently across ages, genders, countries, cultures, and regions.⁴

That matters for culinary rewards because the experience can extend beyond the person who earned it. A restaurant reward can become dinner with a spouse. A meal kit can become an evening cooking with the family. A box of specialty foods can be opened at a holiday gathering. A culinary experience while traveling can become one of the stories everyone brings home.

One person earns the reward, but more than one person may get to enjoy what comes next.

Food is personal

At the same time, there is no single culinary experience that will feel meaningful to everyone. Our relationships with food are shaped by preference, culture, family, tradition, convenience, curiosity, and countless personal associations.

For one person, the exciting choice may be an indulgent steak dinner. For another, it's a pastry from a bakery they love. Someone else wants to discover a cuisine they've never tried, make a familiar family dish, learn a new technique, or simply solve the eternal Tuesday-night question of what to make for dinner.

That's why variety matters so much. The goal isn't to decide what kind of food experience participants should value. It's to give them enough choice to find something that fits their own lives.

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Recent research into food and nostalgia reinforces just how individual those connections can be. A 2024 study exploring people's experiences with nostalgic foods identified themes involving social connection, cultural connection, and continuity of identity. Participants described foods tied to family and cultural traditions as a way of maintaining a connection with people and parts of their lives that mattered to them.⁵

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Turn a night out into a tradition. Bring people together around a table. Or simply create one of those small moments that sticks around much longer than anyone expected.

Food has a powerful relationship with memory

Think about a food you associate with childhood. You may remember much more than the taste. Maybe it's the kitchen where it was made. The person who made it. A particular holiday. The smell filling the house. The place everyone sat. The ritual of making it together.

Researchers have specifically studied this connection between food and nostalgia. In three studies, food proved to be a powerful trigger of nostalgia. Food-evoked nostalgia was highly autobiographical, predominantly positive, and connected with psychological functions including positive emotion, social connectedness, and meaning in life.⁶

That helps explain why food can become memorable in ways that extend far beyond a single meal. A culinary reward might introduce a new restaurant that becomes a favorite. Inspire a recipe that finds its way into the regular rotation. Turn a night out into a tradition. Bring people together around a table. Or simply create one of those small moments that sticks around much longer than anyone expected.

More than what's on the menu

Culinary Marketplace gives those moments a dedicated place within **BI WORLDWIDE's Rewards Marketplace**, complementing **Merchandise Marketplace**, **Experiences Marketplace**, and **Mastery Marketplace** with another way for participants to choose what feels meaningful to them. It combines worldwide scale with regionally relevant food, beverage, dining, and culinary offerings that can support everything from date nights and family gatherings to travel, entertaining, holidays, and cultural celebrations.

The best food experiences don't end when the meal is over. They stay with people in the stories they tell, the traditions they keep, and the moments they remember.

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