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U.S. food courts reborn as 'food halls'

- *The spate of new options — like Seattle's Melrose Market — caters to the country's emerging culinary sophistication.*

By MICHELE KAYAL
Associated Press

In Singapore's equivalent of food courts, hawkers sell steaming bowls of noodles, giant crabs in pepper sauce and slices of pungent durian. In Barcelona, patrons at the La Boqueria nibble finely aged ham and buy fresh produce to prepare at home. In the United States? Historically, it's been a wasteland of spongy pretzels, giant sodas, greasy fried rice and endless burgers.

But that was Food Court 1.0. Recently, shoppers from New York to Seattle have witnessed a reboot of the food court experience, as sumptuous farmers markets-slash-gourmet eateries become increasingly common.

"They're exciting, delicious, affordable, democratic places to eat," says Stephen Werther, the chief executive officer of Wink Retail Group, which has partnered with food personality Anthony Bourdain to create a New York food hall — today's preferred nomenclature — featuring dishes from around the world. "It's really just America catching up with some of the wonderful ways the rest of the world eats."

Bourdain joins other name-brand chefs such as Todd English, who opened a food hall in New York's Plaza Hotel in 2010 and Mario Batali, whose Italian-themed Eataly, now in New York and Chicago, may be the best known of the country's food halls.

"In history, markets and collective food areas have been around forever," says Sam Ochs, editor of QSR Magazine, which covers the quick service and fast-casual dining industry. "What Mario Batali and Anthony Bourdain are doing is to brand it and make it something that's a little bit bigger in terms of its scale and its exposure."

And that has paved the way for others, Ochs says. In Washington, D.C., retail developer Edens revived a vintage venue to create Union Market, a 40-artisan food hall that is just over a year old. In Seattle, a high-end "shellfish deli" and other local vendors reside in Melrose Market, a four-year-old project housed in a renovated auto garage that smacks of cool. In Chicago, the French Market brings together more than 30 vendors, from a crepe shop to a kosher deli and a bakery from Top Chef veteran Stephanie Izard.

"Customers really want authenticity, they want the story behind the food," Ochs says. "With customers wanting to connect to the food, taking this old model of a market goes a long way. A market can tell a lot of different stories."

Markets, of course, have been around for decades, even in the United States. Venues such as Seattle's Pike Place Market and North Market in Columbus, Ohio have long attracted tourists. And of course there is San Francisco's Ferry Building Marketplace, a farmers market and collection of high-end purveyors such as Recchiuti Confections and Cowgirl Creamery that opened in 2003.

But for most Americans, the food hall experience has mostly been limited to the mall food court, a pale imitation of what the rest of the world has long enjoyed.

The spate of new options caters to the country's emerging culinary sophistication. When market operator Sebastien Bensedoun opened his first market in a Chicago suburb 16 years ago, he says it nearly failed. But when he launched Chicago French Market in the West Loop in 2009, the country was ready, says Bensedoun, whose family is the largest operator of markets in and around Paris.

"People are cooking much more than they used to be," says Bensedoun, who now operates 16 markets in the Chicago area. "You can see the young generation coming to the market. In 1997 that was not the case. People were not buying as they are now."

Bensedoun says he often receives calls from other regions asking him to come open a market. Recent interest, he says, has come from cities in Florida, California and Texas. His next project, he says, will be to open a food hall in New York City.

Difficult economic times also have fostered the trend of multiple independent vendors in a communal space. At the same time large retailers have been reluctant to take on new spaces, smaller merchants have seen an opportunity to share rent, utilities and other costs. The growth of Internet shopping, some say, also has supported the trend toward food halls.

"Food and beverage venues can afford to pay the rent in renovated buildings like ours or in new buildings versus retailers that are getting squeezed by the Internet and the big box stores," says Scott Shapiro, co-developer of Seattle's Melrose Market. "Looking at it from a landlord's perspective, our tenants are people who can have a sustainable business. It tends to be more food and beverage focused."

The shopping mall food court pre-dates today's food halls by at least several decades, according to figures from the International Council of Shopping Centers, a New York-based trade association that tracks the first shopping mall food court as we know it to a Paramus, N.J., shopping center in 1974. Industry experts say even these venues are evolving.

"The food court still exists, but it's giving the consumer multiple different options," says ICSC spokesman Jesse Tron, noting that healthier and more diverse options are becoming increasingly common at shopping centers. Well-known chefs also are opening mall venues, Tron says, and even kiosks are sometimes being used for experiences such as rotating sushi.

But true food halls likely will continue to represent the top of the food chain in communal eating.

"Food halls are not a new idea," Bourdain's partner Werther says. "Food halls are a wonderful old idea whose time has come around again."