

# Foodservice Updates

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Addressing malnutrition risk amid rising food costs

Updating HACCP plans for ready-to-eat  
and grab-and-go expansion

How automation is reshaping stewarding and prep tasks

Training managers to lead hybrid human-  
technology teams

## Addressing malnutrition risk amid rising food costs



Rising food costs are forcing foodservice operators — especially those in senior living and adult care — to make difficult decisions about inventory. Yet cutting corners can come at a steep price: malnutrition remains one of the most persistent and costly challenges in senior care. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, malnutrition contributes to higher hospitalization rates, longer lengths of stay, and increased risk of falls and infections among older adults.

(Continued on page 3)



*As food prices continue to rise, operators face the dual challenge of managing costs while preventing malnutrition — an issue the CDC links to higher hospitalization rates and poorer outcomes among older adults.*

### **malnutrition**

*(From page 2)*

At the same time, operators are navigating sustained inflation in food prices. The Consumer Price Index for all food increased about 2.6 percent year-over-year as of November 2025, with grocery (food-at-home) prices up 1.9 percent and food-away-from-home (restaurant and foodservice meals) up about 3.7 percent over the same period. Data from the United States Department of Agriculture shows food-at-home prices remain well above pre-pandemic levels, with proteins, dairy, and fresh produce — core components of nutrient-dense menus — among the most affected categories. For senior living communities operating on fixed reimbursement or resident fee structures, absorbing these costs is not sustainable.

Operators can respond by shifting strategy rather than simply reducing portions or quality. Many are prioritizing nutrient density over volume, using items like fortified grains, eggs, legumes, and dairy to deliver protein and calories cost-effectively. Others are tightening menu engineering, identifying high-waste items and reallocating spend toward foods with higher consumption rates. For example, several multi-site senior living providers report improved intake after replacing underperforming entrée options with familiar comfort foods enhanced with added protein or healthy fats.

Technology is also playing a role. Digital nutrition tracking and production systems help teams identify residents at risk earlier while reducing overproduction. In an environment where every dollar matters, addressing malnutrition is no longer just a clinical responsibility — it's a financial and operational imperative. Investing in smarter menu planning and targeted nutrition interventions can protect both resident health and the bottom line.



*Nearly half of U.S. foodservice operators say they are increasing automation to help address ongoing labor shortages, using technology to support — not replace — human teams.*

## How automation is reshaping stewarding and prep tasks

Automation has been moving into foodservice kitchens across the U.S., transforming both stewarding and food preparation by handling repetitive tasks and easing labor pressures. Nearly half of U.S. restaurants plan to increase automation explicitly to address staffing shortages, according to technology research from the National Restaurant Association.

In the back of the house, automated prep systems can chop, mix and portion ingredients with precision and consistency, freeing culinary staff to focus on more complex cooking and plating. Robotic arms and smart appliances that flip burgers, operate fryers, or standardize portions can help reduce time spent on manual prep and improve quality control during peak service periods.

Stewarding is also benefiting: Automated dishwashers and mechanized cleaning systems can reduce the physical strain on staff and accelerate turnaround times during busy shifts. Meanwhile, integrated kitchen technologies — from AI-driven inventory tracking to predictive maintenance — improve workflow efficiency and lower the risk of bottlenecks.

While human oversight continues to be necessary for quality control, technologies like collaborative robots are assisting with tasks such as peeling and cutting produce at major chains, relieving crews of labor-intensive prep. (Chipotle is one brand using these robots to assist crew members in cutting, coring, and peeling avocados before they are hand mashed to make guacamole. Others are automating tasks like mopping and sweeping.)

Initial investment in this technology can be substantial, but operators that leverage automation gain measurable improvements in speed, consistency, safety, and staff satisfaction. When labor is a perennial challenge in foodservice, selective automation can be a strategic tool.

## Training managers to lead hybrid human– technology teams



*Research from the National Restaurant Association found that nearly 47 percent of operators expect technology and automation will become more common to address labor shortages. This will not be to remove human service, but to support teams where repeatable tasks can be automated, and to allow more time for human-centered guest engagement.*

As foodservice operations ranging from senior living dining to full-service restaurants adopt automation and AI tools, the role of managers is evolving. Foodservice leaders must not only oversee people, but also guide teams where humans and technology work side by side. That means blending traditional supervisory skills with new competencies in change management, tech fluency, and workflow optimization.

A 2025 industry analysis by Future Today Strategy Group stressed the importance of balancing automation with reskilling programs and managerial training that help staff work alongside smart systems. In practice, this training teaches managers when to use automation for repetitive tasks (like digital inventory forecasting or automated prep) while still empowering staff to handle high-touch guest interactions that enhance satisfaction.

As operators implement new technology, it's important to invest in hands-on training for supervisors to ensure they can interpret data, troubleshoot issues, and coach employees through change. Training initiatives increasingly include AI literacy modules, scenario planning for hybrid workflows, and communications skills to support team acceptance of new tools, according to the Society for Human Resource Management. For foodservice operators committed to innovation, equipping managers with these capabilities is a competitive differentiator. They're supporting productivity, staff retention, and guest experience in a tech-augmented workplace.



*As grab-and-go menus expand, updating HACCP plans helps operators manage time-temperature controls, allergen risks, and cross-contamination in high-volume production.*

## Updating HACCP plans for ready-to-eat and grab-and-go expansion

As operators expand ready-to-eat (RTE) and grab-and-go offerings to meet demand for convenience, updating Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) plans is essential for food safety and compliance. The U.S. RTE food market is projected to grow significantly, with estimates showing the category is expanding from about \$46.3 billion in 2022 to over \$63 billion by 2030. This growth reflects rising consumer demand for convenient, portion-controlled meals in retail, healthcare, and foodservice settings.

RTE and grab-and-go items — including chilled entrees, salads, and heat-and-eat meals — present unique hazards because they bypass conventional cooking or reheating steps that reduce pathogens. As these offerings scale, operators must reassess their HACCP plans to identify risks tied to cooling, holding, packaging, and transport. Critical limits for time/temperature controls, cross-contamination prevention, and allergen segregation become even more important as production volumes increase.

Real-world examples abound: major distributors and healthcare foodservice partners are introducing more pre-assembled salads and heat-and-serve entrees, speeding service but also tightening risk profiles. Updating HACCP plans ensures that critical control points — such as rapid chilling after preparation and strict cold chain monitoring — are documented, validated, and verified.

In practice, this means retraining staff, incorporating continuous temperature logging, and aligning supplier specifications with your HACCP risks. With RTE and grab-and-go continuing to rise, proactive HACCP updates aren't just good practice — they're fundamental to safe, scalable foodservice operations.