



Milaneo's food court, where some 10,000 meals a day fly over the counters, is located in the heart of the mall in Stuttgart.

DINING WITH A CONCEPT

Until a few years ago, foodservice spaces in shopping centers led a rather shadowy existence. Nowadays, food courts are one of a center's main frequency maximizers. The gastronomic trends are bold, fast, and fresh.



It's about more than just hot dogs and French fries: Anyone who wants to extend customer stays in centers cannot ignore the issue of foodservice. Nowadays, a stop at a restaurant or cafe, or a between-meal snack, are part of a relaxed shopping experience. Shopping center operators have recognized this and are responding to the trend with sophisticated foodservice spaces and diverse offerings. Prime examples like Milaneo in Stuttgart and Skyline Plaza in Frankfurt show that sophisticated gastronomy offers can even develop into strong frequency charms.

Nevertheless, food courts are still a fairly recent phenomenon in many countries. For a long time, the subject of foodservice was considered incidental. Daylight, an appealing design, trendy seating, and beautifying elements in dining areas were considered to be "extra credit" tasks, at best. Those days are over.

CASUAL DINING ON THE RISE

As an alternative to online retail, shopping centers are becoming destinations with ever more experiential and amenity value. "The place to be," in other words. The culinary diversity of centers is thus increasing accordingly, along with the proportion of foodservice space. While around five percent of the total lettable area in ECE centers was devoted to foodservice around the turn of the millennium, this has risen to about eight to ten percent for new centers today – already almost twice as much.

Klaus Rethmeier, Director Key Account Management International at ECE, explains what is important for food spaces: "Customers demand a comfortable atmosphere. We're pursuing two strategies in this regard. On one hand, we ensure the food courts have engaging architecture and a varied selection. On the other hand, we are accelerating the expansion of

‘casual dining,’ i.e. high-quality restaurants with outdoor connections and sometimes extended opening hours.” An example of casual dining is Alex in Frankfurt’s Skyline Plaza. The restaurant in the Skyline Garden, the huge rooftop garden atop the shopping center, offers 500 seats in the open air. A number of small cafes and coffee shops also enriches the shopping center’s atmosphere.



Alex, in Frankfurt’s Skyline Plaza, is an example of casual dining. The restaurant in the Skyline Garden, the huge rooftop garden atop the shopping center, offers 500 seats in the open air.

But what do hungry visitors to shopping centers want now? Rethmeier notes three trends: “Asian concepts are extremely popular. Guests love freshly prepared Thai, Vietnamese, and Chinese wok dishes and sushi. Gourmet burgers are also on the rise under the banner of ‘quick casual dining.’ Thirdly, Italian food is enjoying unabated popularity.” According to the ECE expert, the gastronomic mix in shopping centers must provide this culinary trinity, coupled with “local heroes” such as, in Germany, the best curried sausage stand in each city.

LEARNING FROM SUCCESSFUL CONCEPTS

From abstract concepts to concrete trends currently in the race for customers’ palates. The German restaurant chain asiahung exemplifies the mood for Asian cuisine. The founder, Thi Xuan Pham Than, launched the first restaurant in Schlosspark-Center in Schwerin in 1998. asiahung now counts over forty locations throughout Germany. This gastronomic success story is closely linked to ECE, which believed in the company and rented it appropriate spaces.

Italian is always good. Vapiano embodies the passion for pizza, pasta, and dolce vita. The restaurant chain founded in Hamburg in 2002 is synonymous with interactive front cooking and now has some 150 locations in 29 countries.



IMAGE: VAPIANO

The same is true for “Hans in Glück,” which reflects the trend towards “quick casual dining.” The restaurant chain differentiates itself quite intentionally from other burger grills and focuses on fresh, natural fare, as well as locations in prestigious shopping centers such as Milaneo in Stuttgart and Weserpark in Bremen. The passion for Italian pizza, pasta, and dolce vita is in turn embodied by Vapiano, which can be found in Forum Mittelrhein, among other places. The restaurant chain founded in Hamburg in 2002 is synonymous with interactive front cooking – all its dishes are prepared in front of guests according to their wishes.

The industry has also learned to respond to fast-moving trends like bubble tea and donuts. Thanks to the flexible use of mall kiosks, it can try out new and exciting concepts easily. Those that work can later move on to shop spaces if appropriate.

VISITORS ARE EVER MORE DEMANDING

The bottom line is that the foodservice offer in shopping centers is becoming ever higher quality and is increasing in originality and diversity. Food courts’ architecture and ambiance also fulfill visitors’ increasing demands. The foodcourt in Stuttgart’s Milaneo, for example, where some 10,000 meals a day fly over the counters, is located in the heart of the mall in the “urban” area, where streets, squares, green spaces, and corresponding materials recreate the aura of a busy city. Klaus Rethmeier explains: “Customers are increasingly demanding. This is also because we are ‘educating’ them in this direction. When a visitor to a mall finds a sensational food court, her expectations of other centers rise in equal measure. There is thus a constant need to innovate in foodservice areas. The concepts are also becoming ever more professional and customer-oriented. ECE has the resources to handle these market changes.”

