

Arrive

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FOOD HALLS

THE OLD SCHOOL AND PERENNIAL FAVORITE
FOOD COURT GOES HIGH-END

BY LIZ JOHNSON



Forget Orange Julius and Sbarro. Those were the food courts of your youth.

Today, up and down the East Coast and across the country, you'll find hand-crafted foods, artisanal breads, specialty drinks and bespoke goods under a new roof: the food hall.

The polar opposite of the sterile stalls of suburban malls, this new brand of grab-and-go is European in style and vision, bringing high-quality ingredients, high-end beverages and high-market provisions to a shopper—and eater—eager for a lot more than a fast-food lunch.

And you can hardly turn a corner without running into one.

The boom in food halls—four have opened in New York in the past four years, and three more are coming

soon—is the result of a shift in values, says Heather Sperling, the creative director of UrbanSpace, which is opening a 10,000-square-foot marketplace at 230 Park Ave. this year.

“There’s been an increase in how much people care about the provenance of their food,” she says. “There’s a value shift. People really want to know that they’re spending their money on worthwhile things. It’s true in food and in design and objects. Shopping small and knowing you’re spending your money on something really worthwhile—and supporting someone who has the right values and is doing what they’re doing for the right reasons.”

Of course, some food halls have been

doing this all along; they’ve just been calling themselves markets. Pike’s Place in Seattle, Ferry Terminal Market in San Francisco, even Harrods in London and Le Grand Épicerie in Paris.

But today’s food halls have a way of making the experience transcend the venue.

ARE YOU EXPERIENCED?

Huddle at a small table for four at Gotham West in Manhattan and slurp a steaming hot bowl of Ivan Ramen Slurp Shop’s Tokyo Shoyu Ramen. You’re in Japan, if only for a moment. Belly up to the bar at Rappahannock Oysters at Union Market in Washington, D.C., and bask in the joy of a briny bivalve. You might as well be on the Chesapeake Bay. Stand at a tall marble table in the very center of the commotion at Eataly in Manhattan, and taste a platter of prosciutto. The din around you goes silent, and you’re whisked away to Florence, at least in your imagination.

“IT’S THE IDEA OF FOOD AND EATING AS AN EXPERIENCE AND ENTERTAINMENT. IT’S NOT JUST A MEAL, IT’S AN EXPERIENCE. IT’S ENGAGING AND DIVERSE.” —HEATHER SPERLING

And when you’ve finished your meal, buy a pound of freshly made pasta, a loaf of crusty bread, a bottle of grassy green olive oil. Take it home. Supper is better.

“It’s the idea of food and eating as an experience and entertainment,” says Sperling. “It’s not just a meal, it’s an experience. It’s engaging and diverse.”

Diverse, indeed. Not only with vendors—barbecue and sushi under the same roof!—but also among the food halls themselves.

Some are modeled after Les Halles,

the venerable, much lamented former market that was torn down in the 1970s in the name of urban renewal in the heart of Paris. Others, like one that food celebrity Anthony Bourdain has announced he’s planning in Manhattan, will bring to mind the hawker stands in Singapore. (Those, in reality, are more like mall food courts, but with the most delicious chicken and rice you’ve ever tasted. And no Orange Julius.)

Others, like Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston and Reading Terminal Market

in Philadelphia, are reinventing themselves: filling their stalwart and historic buildings with modern businesses run by innovative entrepreneurs.

And one, Union Market in Washington, D.C., is becoming the jumping-off point for the redevelopment of an entire neighborhood.

A market since the 1930s—first outdoor, then indoor—Union Market is today home to more than 100 standout food businesses striving to be the best in their field.

“Who are the best food trucks, the best baker, the best bread,” asks Jodie McLean, president of EDENS, the developer of the market, describing the thought process behind choosing vendors for the revitalized market. “The best dairy, produce, fish—who’s doing the best seafood you can source within the D.C. area?”

“And how do we take this to make it a great experience that will inspire people to come here and at the same time slow down and have a human interaction that you can really only get through a shared meal together?”

There’s already office space in the neighborhood, and an off-shoot of the Angelika Film Center. Also in the works: a residence. McLean is banking on the Union Market food hall being so good

that people will choose to live, work and play near it.

Going to a food hall “really is a cultural experience,” says Sperling, of UrbanSpace. “So you get to see all of this creativity, all these different styles. I love walking through our markets and seeing how everyone sets up their booth, to the marketing and branding and the actual menu. It’s an amazing snapshot of food culture, and what’s happening in food right now.”

“They’re exciting, delicious, affordable, democratic places to eat,” Stephen Werther, the CEO of Wink Retail Group, partners with Bourdain in the New York food hall, told The Associated Press. “It’s really just America catching up with some of the wonderful ways the rest of the world eats.”

HERE ARE A FEW OF OUR
FAVORITE PLACES TO
EXPERIENCE IT.



**THE PLAZA FOOD HALL,
MANHATTAN**

Among the first of the new breed of markets, the food hall opened in 2010 and has expanded twice. Vendors include chef Daniel Boulud's Epicerie Boulud, Todd English Food Hall, Luke's Lobster, Chi Noodle and Dim Sum Bar, and a wine cafe called Vin Sur Vingt.

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