

# MARKET WATCH

## Food Halls Go Upscale

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Staff

Once a bastion for buffet service and quick cuisine, food courts have received a major revamp over the past few years. A new breed of venue has emerged—one that celebrates local chefs, emphasizes healthier eating habits, and incorporates beverage alcohol to create a dining destination with myriad food and drinks options. While upscale-casual food halls have had a small presence in major markets for a few years, they're now expanding rapidly in large cities and entering smaller urban locales.

Some food halls incorporate several on-premise operators in a single space, while others are managed by one restaurant company that oversees a variety of concepts under its own umbrella. Several also house a market that allows guests to buy fresh produce, packaged foods, and wine, beer and mixers in the same locale, creating a multifaceted approach. These operations play into consumers' need for variety, quality and affordability.

Omaha, Nebraska-based Flagship Restaurant Group also debuted a food hall concept in late 2015, and the company is already thinking about expansion. Called Flagship Commons, the large space is located within Omaha's Westroads Mall. The venue offers counter-style versions of a couple of the company's established brands, as well as new on-premise operations. "Food halls have always been popular, but they lost culinary focus," says Flagship co-owner and COO Anthony Hitchcock. "Now we're starting to see life breathed into them again with an emphasis on quality, nutrition and locally sourced ingredients. We thought a food hall would be a fun and challenging project that we could pull off due to the success of our established concepts."

Part of the appeal for Flagship Restaurant Group was that it could own and operate the entire venue and control the full space's environment. Flagship Commons features an outpost of Blatt Beer & Table and an offshoot of Blue Sushi Sake Grill, both of which have stand-alone locations in Omaha. In addition, the hall has counters that offer falafel and kebabs, salads, tacos, ramen, and pizza. Several of the venues have their own themed drinks offerings—Mexican beers and Margaritas at Juan Taco, craft beer on tap at Blatt, sake at Yum Roll, and Japanese brews at Yoshi-Ya—and the space also houses a separate drinks venue called The Bar.

“The food hall offers an experience,” says Tony Gentile, Flagship’s co-owner and corporate executive chef. “It’s a destination for people—not just to eat, but to be social. It’s a communal gathering space. The variety of food and drinks hits several demographics on different levels.”

Along with sushi, the Yum-Yum Bowl is a popular item at Yum Roll. Guests create their own meal by picking from a variety of meats, vegetables and sauces that are served over rice (\$7 to \$9). The handcrafted specialty pizzas at Weirdough also do well (\$3.75 to \$4.50 a slice), and the burgers and bratwurst at Blatt Beer & Table are local favorites. The Bar at Flagship Commons takes a two-pronged approach. The venue employs bartenders at certain times during the week to make classic cocktails like a Cruzan rum-based Mojito, a Tito’s Handmade vodka-based Moscow Mule and a Cabrito Silver Tequila-based Margarita (\$6.75 to \$8). Wine (\$6 to \$12.50 a glass; \$24 to \$50 a 750-ml. bottle) and beer (\$4 to \$7.50 a draft pour, bottle or can) are available at all times. The brew selection includes both mainstream brands and craft offerings from Boulder Beer Co., Ska Brewing Co. and Omaha favorite Brickway Brewery. Guests are allowed to walk around the food court area with their drinks, but can’t bring them into the mall.

“People often visit the bar before or after they shop,” Gentile says. “This type of food hall gives consumers an opportunity for fresh, minimally processed and made-from-scratch food, and it allows for multiple types of appetites. Food halls have been around for a while, but certain criteria weren’t being met. These types of halls are now part of the food movement.”

<http://marketwatchmag.com/food-halls-may-2016/>

