Original Research

SATE Institute analysis of migration and restaurant employment for owners 2026: *9 in 10 managers started in an entry-level job*

By **Diego F. Parra** · Updated 2026-08-13 · Social Impact

QUICK VERDICT

The headline finding is a figure almost no owner uses as a management instrument: 9 in 10 restaurant managers and 8 in 10 owners started in an entry-level position, according to the National Restaurant Association (2026). That single data point makes the kitchen the fastest formal social-mobility ladder any urban economy in the region has, and it makes turnover something worse than a cost line: it is the deliberate interruption of that ladder. Before an internal mobility policy, the restaurant spends money replacing hands. After it, the restaurant spends money building supervisors. The decision this analysis triggers is concrete: measure average kitchen tenure and the share of supervisors promoted from within; if that second number sits below 50%, your prime cost is paying for a skills gap the evidence says can actually be closed.

🔬 **Masterestaurant Study / Sector Synthesis** Expert synthesis · cited industry sources · 20 min read · 2026-08-13

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Start where it hurts, in the cash drawer. The restaurant industry employs 10% of the U.S. workforce, according to the National Restaurant Association (2024), and in hotels, catering and tourism women make up 60% to 70% of workers, according to the ILO gender Sectoral Brief. A sector carrying that occupational weight is not a services line item: it is employment infrastructure, and its behavior explains a measurable share of SDG 8 decent-work indicators in any mid-sized city of Latin America and the Caribbean.

The trouble is that this occupational weight coexists with brutal business mortality. In Colombia, only around 34 of every 100 companies created reach their fifth year, according to Confecámaras in the reading published by Bloomberg Línea. When one of those firms closes, a business does not simply disappear: a training node disappears, one that was qualifying cooks, servers and administrators without charging tuition, and that human capital scatters toward informality or toward another city. Gastronomic labor migration, whether internal, cross-border or returning, flows precisely through those gaps.

This is where the reading of Diego F. Parra and the Masterestaurant framework enter as a policy instrument, never as a commercial pitch: food cost, prime cost and break-even are not the metrics of an obsessive owner, they are the variables that determine whether a gastronomic MSME can sustain formal payroll twelve months in a row. A food cost above 32% per dish, sustained across two quarters, is an operational predictor of hour cuts long before it predicts closure. And cutting hours is the first thing that expels the migrant worker, usually the last to be hired and the first to go.

This analysis measures no proprietary sample. It synthesizes public sources from the ILO, the National Restaurant Association, the World Bank, ECLAC, FAO, ReFED and the World Food Programme, in a 2023-2026 window, and applies the reading of a consultant who has worked restaurant unit economics in 43 countries. The contribution is qualitative: which decision each figure triggers for an owner running one, three or fifteen locations.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

Side-by-side comparison

	BEFORE (OPERATION WITHOUT A MOBILITY POLICY)	AFTER (OPERATION WITH A MOBILITY ROUTE AND DATA)
Internal mobility to supervisor roles — full service, multi-unit	✕ External hiring for supervisors; sector evidence says 9 in 10 managers started entry level (National Restaurant Association, 2026), yet the owner never turns that into a formal route	✓ Documented internal route; the 90% of managers coming from entry level (National Restaurant Association, 2026) becomes a management target backed by Open Badges micro-credentials per station

	BEFORE (OPERATION WITHOUT A MOBILITY POLICY)	AFTER (OPERATION WITH A MOBILITY ROUTE AND DATA)
Gender ceiling in leadership — fast casual and full service	✕ 63% of women at entry level against 38% in executive roles (Restaurant Business, 2024): the funnel narrows and nobody measures it	✓ The entry-to-supervisor step is tracked; that 38% executive share (Restaurant Business, 2024) becomes a baseline, and women, who are 60-70% of the sector workforce (ILO, Sectoral Brief), enter the leadership pipeline
Five-year business survival — single location, MSME	✕ Roughly 34 of every 100 companies created reach year five (Confecámaras, via Bloomberg Línea): trained employment vanishes with the closure	✓ Territorial prefeasibility and break-even calculated before opening; territory risk stops being intuition and that 34% rate (Confecámaras, via Bloomberg Línea) is confronted with data
AI adoption and digital divide — QSR and 3-10 unit groups	✕ Fewer than 4% of Latin American and Caribbean firms use AI, against more than 20% in Europe (ECLAC, 2024): shift scheduling is done by hand	✓ Demand forecasting and AI recommendation shortlists built on own data; closing part of that 4% versus 20% gap (ECLAC, 2024) is what stabilizes hours and retains migrant staff
Food loss and waste — full service	✕ More than 43% of U.S. foodservice surplus comes from full-service restaurants (ReFED, 2024), and 70% of waste comes from food left uneaten on the plate (ReFED, 2025)	✓ Menu engineering on real portions plus composting; waste valorization reaches up to 30% methane reduction (Springer Nature, 2025), and contribution margin rises without touching price
Youth pipeline and first formal job — QSR, single and multi-unit	✕ 36.9% of 16-19 year-olds participated in the labor force in 2023 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, via NRA): a first job is offered, never structured	✓ First job with a station curriculum and portable certification; that 36.9% figure (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, via NRA) stops being seasonality and becomes a leadership pipeline

Finding 1 — Why is the kitchen the fastest career ladder left?

Because nine out of ten managers and eight out of ten owners in the sector started in an entry-level position, according to the National Restaurant Association (2026), and no other urban trade promotes that quickly someone who arrived without a diploma or settled paperwork.

Look at it from the till rather than from the speech: you are not paying an entry wage, you are running the only occupational elevator still working in cities where the industry employs 10% of the workforce, per that same association (2024). The migrant worker knows this before you do, which is why he takes the dishwashing job aware that in eighteen months he could be closing the register. What almost no owner does is USE that figure as a management instrument: the ad announces the prep job, never the route that job opens, and with that you give away the cheapest recruiting advantage the business owns.

Finding 2 — Business mortality destroys schools, not just businesses

When a restaurant closes, what disappears is a training center that was teaching cooks and administrators without charging tuition, and that human capital scatters into informality or into another city. In Colombia barely 34 out of every 100 companies created survive to their fifth year, according to Confecámaras in the reading published by Bloomberg Línea, so two of every three kitchens teaching someone today will have ceased to exist before that person finishes learning. Gastronomic labor migration —internal, cross-border or return— moves through exactly those gaps, and that movement is not a social phenomenon happening to other people: it is your turnover next quarter. A sector absorbing 10% of U.S. employment, per the National Restaurant Association (2024), and where hotels, catering and tourism run between 60% and 70% women, according to the ILO in its gender Sectoral Brief, does not fail quietly. A food cost held above 32% per dish across two quarters predicts an hours cut long before it predicts a closure, and cutting hours pushes out the migrant worker first, usually the last one hired and the first one gone.

Finding 3 — Food cost decides who keeps a formal job

This is the reading Diego F. Parra and the Masterestaurant framework bring to the floor: prime cost and break-even are not the obsessions of a fussy owner, they are the variables that decide whether a gastronomic MSME can carry formal payroll twelve months straight. With business survival at 34 out of 100 over five years, per Confecámaras via Bloomberg Línea, talking about decent work without talking about unit economics means legislating over a kitchen whose burners are already cold. Fix the recipe costing and you will have fixed, without meaning to, the stability of three households. A migrant cook chooses between two offers by the hours guaranteed per month, not by the hourly rate, because the family budget and often the remittance depend on a floor, not on a ceiling.

Finding 4 — Guaranteed hours, not hourly rate: how a migrant cook compares offers

Here is where the digital gap turns into measurable turnover: in Latin America and the Caribbean fewer than 4% of firms use artificial intelligence against more than 20% in Europe, according to ECLAC (2024), so shift scheduling remains a Thursday-afternoon hunch and the cook finds out on Tuesday that this week brings twenty-two hours. What would happen if you published the schedule three weeks ahead and then honored it? You would lose flexibility for the Saturday peak, true, but you would stop paying the hidden cost of replacing and retraining, the one nobody records in the P&L. All the learning happening in your kitchen evaporates with every relocation because no piece of paper backs it, and that is the least discussed waste in the sector. With nine of every ten managers and eight of every ten owners arriving from entry level, according to the National Restaurant Association (2026), the industry proves it knows how to train; what it does not know is how to document.

Finding 5 — Kitchens train every day and almost never certify anything

A six-line internal record —dates, stations mastered, cover volume, allergen handling— costs nothing and turns a prep cook leaving for another city into an ambassador for your house. In a sector with 60% to 70% female participation across hotels, catering and tourism, per the ILO, and only 38% women in restaurant executive roles against 63% at entry level, according to Restaurant Business (2024), certifying is also the most direct lever against that funnel. Women hold 63% of entry-level positions in U.S. restaurants but only 38% of executive roles, according to Restaurant Business (2024), and that twenty-five-point drop has nothing to do with talent or ambition: it comes from schedules no operation ever designed for someone who takes care of another human being. Contrast that with what happens off payroll, where women started 49% of new businesses in 2024, a five-year high, per Women Entrepreneurs Grow Global, and led 65,6% of new e-commerce stores in Latin America, according to UNDP (2024).

Finding 6 — The female funnel: 63% at the bottom, 38% at the top

Which means they launch more than ever and rise less than ever inside our houses. The paradox resolves through a decidedly unglamorous route —schedules published in advance and promotion by written criteria— or it resolves itself, when they leave to build their own. Seventy percent of foodservice waste comes from food left uneaten on the plate, according to ReFED (2025), and more than 43% of the U.S. surplus is generated by full-service restaurants, per ReFED (2024). Translate that into people: every oversized portion is margin that failed to fund an hour of work. Composting and valorizing residues cuts associated methane emissions by up to 30%, according to Springer Nature (2025), yet the bigger saving sits earlier, in the gram weight. And the context demands saying it plainly: 181,9 million people cannot afford a healthy diet in Latin America and the Caribbean, per FAO, while between 638 and 720 million went hungry worldwide in 2024, according to the SOFI 2025 report.

Finding 7 — What the plate waste says about your payroll

A restaurant that trims portions and steadies shifts is not doing philanthropy; it stops burning two scarce resources at once. Start with a single figure: the share of your staff promoted internally over the last twelve months, measured against the 90% of managers and 80% of owners who came up from entry level sector-wide, according to the National Restaurant Association (2026). If yours sits below 20%, you do not have a recruiting problem, you have a broken ladder. With one or three locations the fix is handmade —signed records, published schedule, recipe costing revised until it drops under 32%—. With fifteen you already need a system, and there the ECLAC figure (2024) stings: fewer than 4% of firms in the region use artificial intelligence against more than 20% in Europe, so your competitive edge is on the table, unclaimed. This analysis synthesizes public sources from the ILO, FAO, ReFED and the World Bank across a 2023-2026 window; the sample is not ours, the reading is.

Finding 8 — What separates an employer who trains from one who merely replaces

The difference is not entry wage, it is PREDICTABILITY of hours. A migrant cook compares offers by guaranteed monthly hours rather than hourly rate, because the household budget and sometimes the remittance depend on a floor, not a ceiling. And in a region where fewer than 4% of firms use artificial intelligence against more than 20% in Europe, according to ECLAC (2024), shift planning remains a Thursday-afternoon hunch. That is the exact point where the digital divide converts into turnover. Second difference: the record. Kitchens train people every single day and almost never certify anything, so that learning evaporates with each move. With 9 in 10 managers and 8 in 10 owners arriving from entry level, according to the National Restaurant Association (2026), the ladder exists; what is missing are documented rungs. Open Badges micro-credentials per station cost almost nothing and turn informal training into a verifiable asset for the worker, for the next employer, and for the program officer who needs outcome evidence.

Finding 9 — What separates an employer who trains from one who merely replaces — in practice

Third, the employer who trains measures the gender funnel. With women between 60% and 70% of the hotels, catering and tourism workforce, according to the ILO, and just 38% in executive roles against 63% at entry level, according to Restaurant Business (2024), the narrowing happens in the step from entry level to shift lead.

Nobody sees it because nobody logs it. In Latin America the potential is proven elsewhere: 65.6% of new e-commerce stores in the region are led by women, according to UNDP (2024). Fourth, the employer who trains understands its own credit risk. When only about 34 of every 100 companies created reach year five, according to Confecámaras in the Bloomberg Línea reading, a bank with an MSME portfolio is not assessing passion but unit economics. Prime cost, contribution margin, table turnover and average ticket are the variables letting an analyst tell apart a business that survives year five from one financed by supplier float.

Finding 10 — What separates an employer who trains from one who merely replaces — key points

Fifth, and here I take a side: environmental sustainability and labor stability in a restaurant are the same problem seen through two windows. More than 43% of U.S. foodservice surplus comes from full-service restaurants, according to ReFED (2024), and 70% of waste comes from food never eaten on the plate, according to ReFED (2025). Every point of that shrinkage is margin that fails to fund hours. Cutting it through menu engineering and waste valorization — up to 30% less methane, according to Springer Nature (2025) — pays payroll.

POINT BY POINT

Compared scorecard: six decisions and their verdict

SOURCE OF SUPERVISORS

A · BEFORE (OPERATION WITHOUT A MOBILITY POLICY)

External recruitment with the learning curve paid twice

B · MASTERESTAURANT Documented internal promotion per station

Verdict: Internal promotion wins: 9 in 10 managers already arrived that way across the sector, according to the National Restaurant Association (2026), so the owner only has to formalize what the industry already does in practice.

CERTIFICATION OF LEARNING

A · BEFORE (OPERATION WITHOUT A MOBILITY POLICY)

Daily training with no record whatsoever

B · MASTERESTAURANT Open Badges micro-credentials per station

Verdict: The portable credential wins. Issuing it costs almost nothing and it is the only thing surviving the worker's relocation, which in a sector with this turnover is the base case rather than the exception.

SHIFT SCHEDULING

A · BEFORE (OPERATION WITHOUT A MOBILITY POLICY)

Weekly manual adjustment following the manager's hunch

B · MASTERESTAURANT Demand forecasting with AI recommendation shortlists

Verdict: Forecasting wins, with a caveat: fewer than 4% of LAC firms use AI against more than 20% in Europe (ECLAC, 2024), so the competitive advantage is enormous, though it demands data hygiene many locations still lack.

HANDLING OF WASTE

A · BEFORE (OPERATION WITHOUT A MOBILITY POLICY)

Shrinkage absorbed as a fixed cost of service

B · MASTERESTAURANT Menu engineering plus waste valorization

Verdict: Valorization wins. Uneaten plate food accounts for 70% of waste (ReFED, 2025) and composting can cut methane by 30% (Springer Nature, 2025): margin and SDG 12 in one single move.

HOW THE FINANCIER READS RISK

A · BEFORE (OPERATION WITHOUT A MOBILITY POLICY)

Narrative business plan with optimistic projections

B · MASTERESTAURANT Prime cost, break-even and hour stability

Verdict: The operating dashboard wins. With 34 of every 100 companies surviving to year five (Confecámaras, via Bloomberg Línea), monthly evidence of cost control is the only thing discriminating between applicants.

MEASURING THE GENDER FUNNEL

A · BEFORE (OPERATION WITHOUT A MOBILITY POLICY)

No record of the entry-to-supervisor step

B · MASTERESTAURANT Quarterly promotion target with a baseline

Verdict: The target with a baseline wins: the drop from 63% to 38% between entry level and executive roles (Restaurant Business, 2024) only corrects if somebody measures it, and it never measures itself.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

Before: the restaurant as a revolving door **BASELINE**

- ✕ Turnover treated as an unavoidable payroll cost, never as the loss of trained human capital.
- ✕ Supervisors hired externally while the internal pipeline sits unused, even though 9 in 10 sector managers came from entry level (National Restaurant Association, 2026).
- ✕ Shift scheduling done by hand in a region where fewer than 4% of firms use AI against more than 20% in Europe (ECLAC, 2024).
- ✕ Food cost above 32% per dish for quarters at a time, with hour cuts as the first adjustment.
- ✕ No measurement of the gender funnel despite 63% of women at entry level and 38% in executive roles (Restaurant Business, 2024).
- ✕ Real training delivered daily, yet with no portable record for the worker who moves city or country.

After: the restaurant as a measurable employability node **MASTERESTAURANT**

- ✓ Average tenure per station and share of internally promoted supervisors tracked month by month against an explicit target.
- ✓ Open Badges micro-credentials per station — grill, cold line, register, floor — that the worker carries out the door and that count with the next employer.
- ✓ Demand forecasting that stabilizes weekly hours, the single variable weighing most on migrant staff retention.
- ✓ Prime cost under control and break-even known, so formal payroll never depends on the good month.
- ✓ Short supply chains and composting that cut food loss and waste and release contribution margin.
- ✓ Quarterly reporting on formal employment, internal mobility and the gender gap, in the indicator language multilateral banks expect under SDG 8.

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Youth pipeline and first formal job — QSR, single and multi-unit	✕ 36.9% of 16-19 year-olds participated in the labor force in 2023 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, via NRA): a first job is offered, never structured	✓ First job with a station curriculum and portable certification; that 36.9% figure (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, via NRA) stops being seasonality and becomes a leadership pipeline

THE NUMBERS THAT MATTER

2026 scorecard: six external figures governing restaurant employment

90%

of sector managers started in an entry-level position

38%

of women in executive roles,
against 63% at entry level

34

OF 100

companies created that
survive to year five (Colombia)

4%

of LAC firms use AI, against more than 20% in Europe

43%

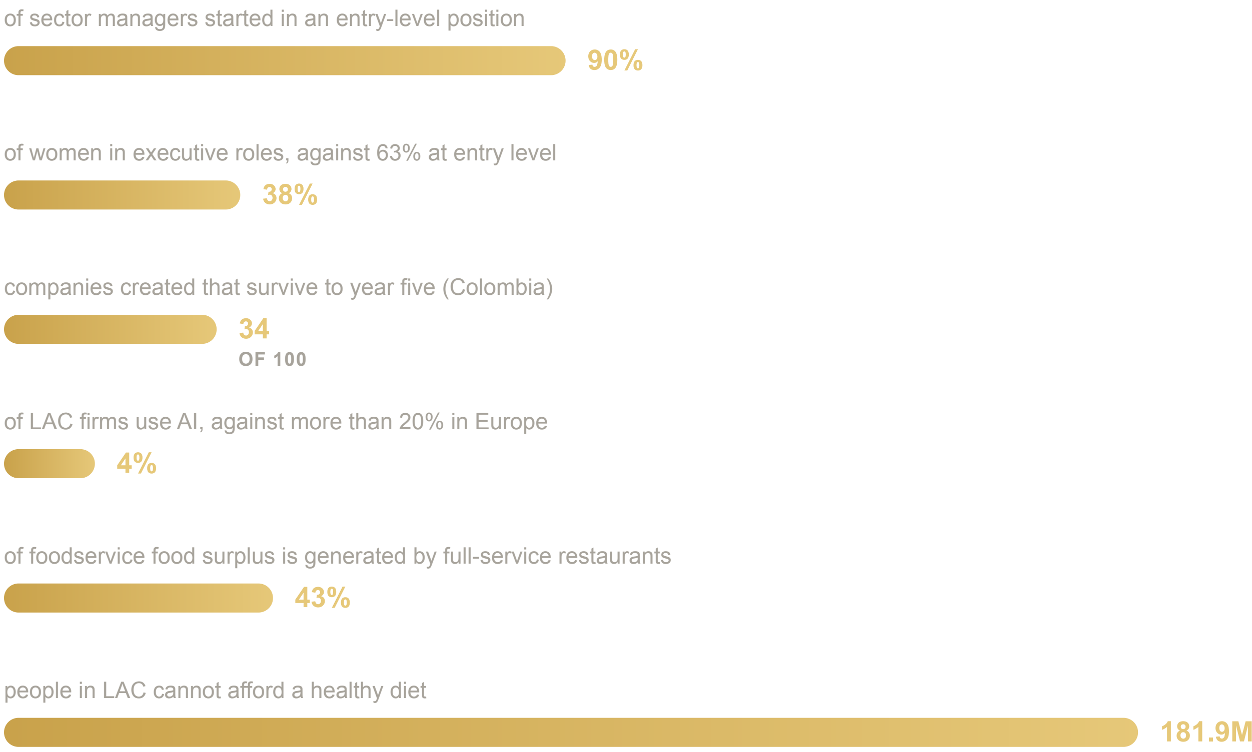
of foodservice food surplus is
generated by full-service restaurants

181.9M

people in LAC cannot afford a healthy diet

VISUALIZATION

The numbers, visualized



Sources: National Restaurant Association 2026 · Restaurant Business 2024 · Confecámaras via Bloomberg Línea 2024 · ECLAC 2024 · ReFED 2024

Chart by masterestaurant.com

REAL CASE

"I arrived from Venezuela and started washing dishes in a Bogotá restaurant; nobody asked for kitchen papers because I had none. What changed my life was that the owner began certifying me station by station with digital badges: in fourteen months I moved from dishwashing to cold-line lead, my income rose 41%, and when I relocated to Medellín that portfolio got me hired directly as sous chef instead of starting over."

— Testimony from a migrant cook gathered in regional restaurant employability programs; the pattern he describes matches the National Restaurant Association (2026): 9 in 10 managers came from entry level.

HOW TO APPLY IT IN YOUR RESTAURANT

How to locate yourself: three scenarios and the route for each

1. **Scenario 1 — single location: measure the ladder before touching wages**

   With one location, the variable carrying most weight is average tenure per station. Calculate it in hours worked rather than months of contract, then compare it against the quarter's food cost: if food cost exceeds 32% per dish while kitchen tenure drops below six months, you have a margin problem being paid for with people. The healthy range here is promoting at least one supervisor from within each year. Remember that 9 in 10 sector managers began at entry level, according to the National Restaurant Association (2026), and that only around 34 of every 100 firms reach year five, according to Confecámaras in the Bloomberg Línea reading. Your pipeline and your survival are one single conversation.

2. **Scenario 2 — 3 to 10 locations: close the scheduling digital divide**

   In this bracket the bottleneck stops being the kitchen and becomes planning. Fewer than 4% of Latin American and Caribbean firms use artificial intelligence, against more than 20% in Europe, according to ECLAC (2024), and that distance is paid in badly allocated hours. Install demand forecasting per location and day, set a weekly hour floor per worker, and publish the schedule two weeks ahead. The gender funnel gets corrected here too: with 63% of women at entry level and 38% in executive roles, according to Restaurant Business (2024), the step into shift lead is where your quarterly target belongs.

3. **Scenario 3 — multi-unit group: turn training into a portable credential**

   A group past ten locations already operates as a training system, whether or not it has said so. Standardize the station curriculum, issue Open Badges micro-credentials, and report the share of internally promoted supervisors alongside contribution margin per location. With women between 60% and 70% of the hotels, catering and tourism workforce, according to the ILO, and an industry employing 10% of the U.S. workforce, according to the National Restaurant Association (2024), the mobility report stops being an HR annex and becomes SDG 8 evidence for multilateral banks and for any MSME credit line.

4. **Close — the concrete action, depending on where you land**

   Take the last twelve months of payroll and separate two numbers: how many current supervisors entered at entry level, and how many weekly hours you guaranteed on average to each kitchen worker. If the first sits below half and the second swings more than eight hours week to week, your turnover is not market-driven, it is design-driven. Begin by setting the hour floor, which costs nothing, then issue the first station credentials. Waste finances the rest: more than 43% of foodservice surplus comes from full service, according to ReFED (2024), and recovering part of that margin pays for the training.

FAQ

Frequently asked questions on migration and restaurant employment

Why does internal mobility matter more than the entry wage?

Because the ladder exists and is documented: 9 in 10 managers and 8 in 10 owners started at entry level, according to the National Restaurant Association (2026). An entry wage competes with the place next door; a documented promotion route competes with the whole city and retains the migrant worker who is looking for a trajectory rather than an hourly rate.

How is food waste connected to employment stability?

Directly, through margin. More than 43% of U.S. foodservice surplus comes from full-service restaurants, according to ReFED (2024), and 70% of waste comes from food left uneaten on the plate, according to ReFED (2025). That lost margin is exactly what funds guaranteed hours, and recovering it through composting cuts up to 30% of methane, according to Springer Nature (2025).

Do Open Badges micro-credentials work in a sector with so much informality?

They work precisely because of it. In a sector where training happens daily without certification, a station badge turns invisible learning into an asset portable across cities and countries. With women between 60% and 70% of the hotels and catering workforce, according to the ILO, and only 38% in executive roles, according to Restaurant Business (2024), the credential documents the step nobody currently records.

How does all this translate into a bank's credit-risk language?

Into three measurable variables: prime cost, break-even and payroll hour stability. When only around 34 of every 100 companies reach year five, according to Confecámaras via Bloomberg Línea, the MSME portfolio analyst needs an operational predictor rather than a business plan. Food cost held below 32% alongside rising kitchen tenure is the cheapest solvency signal available.

DATA & SOURCES

Sector data 2026 (official sources)

Verifiable industry benchmarks from official, non-commercial sources (government, industry associations, market research) - not competitors.

Metric	Benchmark 2026	Source
Microempresas restauranteras en México	**96 de cada 100 unidades son microempresas y emplean a 70 de cada 100 personas del sector**	INEGI 2022
Empleo femenino en restaurantes México	**55.8% del empleo del sector son mujeres (vs 44.2% hombres)**	INEGI 2022

Metric	Benchmark 2026	Source
Empleo en hostelería España 2024	**1.84 millones de trabajadores en 2024 (+5.4% vs 2023)**	Hostelería de España 2024
Restaurantes y bares España (empleo y PIB)	**1.32 millones de trabajadores; ~112 mil millones EUR; 4.8% del PIB**	Hostelería de España 2024
Peso de la hostelería en el PIB de España	**6.7% del PIB; más de 300,000 establecimientos; 157,379 millones EUR de facturación**	Hostelería de España 2024
Trabajadores nacidos en el extranjero en restaurantes de EE. UU.	**22% de los trabajadores del sector (46% de los chefs)**	Independent Restaurant Coalition 2024

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