Original Research

Culinary job-placement benchmark 2026: how many trainees arrive, and how many *stay*

By **Diego F. Parra** · Updated 2026-08-12 · Social Impact

QUICK VERDICT

Short answer: the sector places well and retains badly, and a restaurant content calendar is currently the cheapest instrument to fix the second half. Entry is not the bottleneck — the National Restaurant Association (2025) reports that 51% of American adults held their first formal job in a restaurant or foodservice operation — but retention is: the ILO and ECLAC (Labour Overview 2024) place youth informality in Latin America at 62,4%, and informality is the revolving door through which trained graduates leave. In a training program the metric that matters is not how many signed a contract, but how many are still on payroll twelve months later. An operator who publishes on a stable editorial cadence — openings, kitchen life, promotion ladder, Open Badges micro-credentials — turns the social channel into a talent pipeline and lowers replacement cost; one who publishes on impulse pays for every vacancy twice.

A restaurant owner in Bogotá wrote to me in January with the exact question this analysis tries to answer: he had sent nine young people through a four-month subsidized training program with a certificate at the end, and by October only three were still on payroll. He was not asking about the curriculum. He was asking why he had paid for the same vacancy three times.

That question sounds like an operations complaint, and it is really a development-economics question. Latin American foodservice is the widest and leakiest gateway into formal employment the region has: a lot of people walk in, and nearly as many walk out. The National Restaurant Association (2025) documents that 51% of adults held their first formal job in restaurants or foodservice, a share no other sector reaches. On the other side of the ledger, the ILO and ECLAC (Labour Overview 2024) report 62,4% informality among the region's young workers. Placing is easy. Sustaining is what costs money.

This document is an expert synthesis of public data — not primary research with a proprietary sample — authored by Diego F. Parra and Masterestaurant, and ordered under the SATE Institute editorial mandate: translate restaurant micro-operations into the development indicator they move. The thesis is uncomfortable for everyone involved: most culinary training programs measure enrollment well, measure placement poorly, and do not measure retention at all, which is the only metric that connects to SDG 8. And the instrument that repairs the weak half fastest does not sit in a classroom. It is sustained employer communication, meaning a restaurant content calendar that treats employer brand the way a good operator treats the menu, with planning and with a number attached.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

Side-by-side comparison

	PROGRAM WITHOUT RETENTION M&E (SECTOR BASELINE)	PROGRAM WITH M&E PLUS PLANNED EMPLOYER BRAND (MASTERESTAURANT READING)
Access to a first formal job in foodservice	✕ 51% of adults held their first formal job in restaurants (National Restaurant Association, 2025)	✓ 51% of adults, same gateway (National Restaurant Association, 2025); the differential is not entry, it is staying
Youth informality in the graduation environment (Latin America)	✕ 62,4% youth informality (ILO/ECLAC, Labour Overview 2024)	✓ 62,4% as regional baseline (ILO/ECLAC, 2024), reported per cohort instead of quoted as background
Female informality, a core segment in front of house and cold kitchen	✕ 54,3% of employed women in informality (ILO/ECLAC, 2024)	✓ 54,3% (ILO/ECLAC, 2024), broken out by shift and by location on the tracking board

	PROGRAM WITHOUT RETENTION M&E (SECTOR BASELINE)	PROGRAM WITH M&E PLUS PLANNED EMPLOYER BRAND (MASTERESTAURANT READING)
Wage floor for the entry role (United States)	✕ US$ 14,92/hour median for food and beverage serving workers (BLS, May 2024)	✓ US$ 16,23/hour median for waiters and US$ 16,12/hour for bartenders (BLS, May 2024): a published ladder is worth +8,8% on the median
Employer survival at five years (job stability)	✕ 51,4% of restaurants pass the five-year mark (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024)	✓ 51,4% at five years and 34,6% at ten (BLS, 2024): worker retention is capped by business survival
Employer size and in-house HR capacity	✕ 9 out of 10 restaurants employ fewer than 50 people (National Restaurant Association, 2025)	✓ 9 out of 10 under 50 employees (NRA, 2025): with no HR function, the social channel IS the recruiting channel
Employer mortality as an employment shock	✕ More than 72,000 US restaurant closures in 2024 (National Restaurant Association, State of the Industry 2024)	✓ 72,000 closures (NRA, 2024) against the 17% first-year failure rate measured by Parsa et al. via Oregon State University (2024): real risk lives in years two through five

Finding 1 — Why restaurants hire well and retain badly

Because the entrance is wide and the corridor inside is narrow, and those are two separate problems almost nobody keeps apart. The National Restaurant Association (2025) documents that 51% of adults had their first formal job in restaurants or foodservice, a share no other industry reaches, which makes the sector the largest formalization mechanism the region owns without ever having designed it on purpose. The other side of the ledger comes from the ILO and ECLAC in Panorama Laboral 2024: 62.4% informality among Latin American youth, 54.3% among women, 78% among older workers. Whoever walks in through the kitchen walks in formal; whoever walks out often walks straight into the informal circuit and never returns. That stretch, the one about staying, is what no training program measures and what decides whether the public money bought anything at all. Counting placements against graduates is the most common arithmetic trick in the sector, and it produces success rates near 80% that mean nothing.

Finding 2 — The denominator that inflates every result

A trainee who quits in month two vanishes from the denominator, and the failure vanishes with him; what remains is a cohort scrubbed clean of its own problems. Masterestaurant argues, and here Diego F. Parra takes a side with no comfortable middle, that the only indicator comparable to the 62.4% youth informality series published by the ILO and ECLAC (Panorama Laboral 2024) is 365-day retention measured over ENROLLED students, not over graduates. The gap between those two denominators can run twenty or thirty points. An honest program reports both figures side by side and explains the distance; one that publishes only the first is selling its own dropout rate as a quality filter. Measuring at thirty days captures the excitement of being hired, while measuring at 365 captures the full cycle: high season, low season, the first Sunday somebody switched the shift and the first time the chef yelled across the line.

Finding 3 — Your time window decides what you are measuring

With 51.4% of U.S. restaurants surviving past five years according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024) — and barely 34.6% making it past ten — a short window blends two phenomena that have nothing in common: worker retention and employer survival. Someone who leaves because the place shut down did not desert the trade. Telling them apart means cross-checking each exit against the status of the establishment, one extra column on the spreadsheet that hardly any operator keeps. Without that column, the metric cannot say whether the training failed or the business did. Say your line cook trained for four months, got a PDF diploma, and eight months later goes looking for another job: the new employer can verify nothing, so he pays as if there were no training at all, and the worker concludes that getting trained pays nothing. That closed loop explains a large slice of the turnover owners blame on lack of commitment.

Finding 4 — What happens when the certificate does not travel

The trade's reference numbers in the United States — US$ 16.23 an hour for waiters and US$ 16.12 for bartenders per the BLS (2024), against US$ 14.92 for food and beverage serving workers overall — show that a competence signal is worth one to two dollars an hour when the market recognizes it. When it does not, the signal is worth zero. A verifiable online credential, listing hours and stations mastered, turns training into wages. Here is the uncomfortable thesis: the cheapest instrument for fixing the retention stretch sits outside the classroom, in the employer's sustained communication. A restaurant content calendar that handles employer branding with the same discipline the menu gets — monthly planning, a named owner, a result metric — makes visible on the outside what already happens inside: who got promoted, which station the prep cook learned, how many training hours the team piled up. With 9 out of 10 U.S.

Finding 5 — The content calendar as a retention instrument

restaurants running under fifty employees (National Restaurant Association, 2025), most operators have no HR department and no budget for one, and the calendar covers that absence for a few hours a month. This is not marketing in disguise. It is the only public record documenting the internal trajectory of people who otherwise show up nowhere but payroll. Saturation kills more calendars than laziness does, and the mistake that repeats most among independent operators is launching daily posts across three networks only to abandon everything by week six. Four monthly pieces sustained across a year beat forty in the first quarter followed by silence, because employer branding builds by accumulation rather than by spike. A split that works: one internal-trajectory piece, one trade piece with a hard number, one about the kitchen or a product, one about community or a supplier. Given that 48% of U.S. restaurants are minority-owned against 36% in the private sector, and 47% are at least 50% women-owned against 43% elsewhere (U.S.

Finding 6 — Four posts a month, not forty

Census Bureau via National Restaurant Association, 2022), real trajectory material is abundant. What is missing is somebody who writes it on the same Tuesday every month. Ask for three numbers before signing any training agreement, and if the program cannot produce them, you already know what you are dealing with. First, enrolled against still-employed at twelve months, in that order and with no cosmetics in between. Second, how many exits came from the establishment closing — a relevant figure when more than 72,000 U.S. restaurants shut down in a single year, per the National Restaurant Association's State of the Industry 2024 — against how many were voluntary resignations. Third, the entry wage compared with the same position without a credential in the same city. Those three numbers say more than any placement rate, and the third one never appears in a brochure. The development indicator that matters is not how many people entered the formal system: it is how many were still inside a year later, earning more than on day one.

Finding 7 — From the shift to SDG 8: the missing translation

A restaurant's micro-operation connects to SDG 8 decent work through a very concrete route, and it deserves saying without metaphor: every twelve-month stay on a formal payroll is twelve months of social contributions, a credit history that starts, and a household that exits the informality statistic. In Spain, where hospitality employs 1.32 million workers and contributes close to 4.8% of GDP with roughly 112 billion euros (Hostelería de España, 2024), that arithmetic already sits inside the national accounts. In Latin America it does not yet, because the 62.4% youth informality series from the ILO and ECLAC (2024) cannot tell who passed through a restaurant. Start with what you do control: open the payroll sheet, add the hire-date column, and publish your first internal trajectory this month. The first difference is the denominator. Counting placements over graduates inflates the result; counting 365-day retentions over enrollees deflates it and makes it comparable with the 62,4% youth informality series published by the ILO and ECLAC (Labour Overview 2024).

Finding 8 — Five differences that change the outcome

A serious program reports both and hides neither. Second comes the time window. Measuring at 30 days captures hiring enthusiasm; measuring at 365 captures a full cycle of high season, low season and the first scheduling conflict. With 51,4% of restaurants clearing five years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024), a short window confuses worker retention with employer survival. Third: the competency signal. A PDF certificate does not travel; an Open Badges micro-credential does, because it is machine-readable and verifiable in seconds. Where 9 out of 10 restaurants employ fewer than 50 people (National Restaurant Association, 2025) and therefore run no selection function, a portable credential replaces the process the employer cannot afford. Fourth, and almost nobody works this one: the candidate flow the restaurant generates on its own. Posting a vacancy once the vacancy exists is reacting; publishing craft, kitchen and promotion ladder all year is building a funnel.

Finding 9 — Five differences that change the outcome — in practice

A restaurant content calendar that plans those pieces converts a communication expense into a measurable drop in replacement cost. Fifth is the explicit wage floor. When the median for food and beverage serving workers sits at US$ 14,92 per hour and waiters at US$ 16,23 (BLS, May 2024), publishing the real range and the path to the better-paid role sets expectations from day one. Wage silence protects no one: it doubles turnover in the first quarter.

POINT BY POINT

Scorecard head to head: what wins each criterion

DEFINITION OF PROGRAM SUCCESS

A · PROGRAM WITHOUT RETENTION M&E (SECTOR BASELINE)

30-day placement, self-declared by the graduate

B · MASTERESTAURANT 365-day retention verified against payroll

Verdict: B wins. A short window overstates the result precisely in the region where the ILO and ECLAC (2024) measure 62,4% youth informality, the mechanism that swallows graduates between month two and month eight.

COMPETENCY SIGNAL HANDED TO THE EMPLOYER

A · PROGRAM WITHOUT RETENTION M&E (SECTOR BASELINE)

PDF attendance certificate

B · MASTERESTAURANT Open Badges micro-credential per verifiable competency

Verdict: B wins, by a wide margin in the small segment: with 9 out of 10 restaurants under 50 employees (NRA, 2025), a portable credential substitutes for the selection process the operator cannot fund.

ORIGIN OF THE CANDIDATE FLOW

A · PROGRAM WITHOUT RETENTION M&E (SECTOR BASELINE)

Reactive posting once a vacancy is already open

B · MASTERESTAURANT Restaurant content calendar running four fixed lanes

Verdict: B wins. Reacting forces you to hire whoever is available; planning lets you hire whoever fits, and that gap shows up in month three, when the emergency hire has already quit.

WAGE TRANSPARENCY IN THE JOB POSTING

A · PROGRAM WITHOUT RETENTION M&E (SECTOR BASELINE)

Range withheld, negotiated at interview

B · MASTERESTAURANT Range published with ladder and differential

Verdict: B wins. The gap between US$ 14,92 for serving workers overall and US$ 16,23 for waiters (BLS, May 2024) is the staircase; showing it sets expectations and cuts early exits driven by mismatch.

BUDGET UNIT OF ANALYSIS

A · PROGRAM WITHOUT RETENTION M&E (SECTOR BASELINE)

Cost per placement

B · MASTERESTAURANT Cost per 365-day retention

Verdict: B wins outright. Cost per placement rewards the program that places fast into jobs that do not last; cost per retention is the only figure a multilateral investment officer can defend against SDG 8.

TREATMENT OF EMPLOYER RISK

A · PROGRAM WITHOUT RETENTION M&E (SECTOR BASELINE)

The employer is assumed to still be there

B · MASTERESTAURANT Territorial prefeasibility and formal-employer density

Verdict: B wins. At 51,4% survival by year five and 34,6% by year ten (BLS, 2024), placing into a territory of fragile employers means placing twice; the 17% first-year failure rate measured by Parsa et al. via Oregon State University (2024) confirms the real risk arrives later.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

What almost every program measures today BASELINE

- ✕ Enrollment and graduation — certificates issued, the easiest number to collect and the least correlated with SDG 8.
- ✕ Placement at 30 days, self-declared by the graduate, with no payroll verification and no check on contract continuity.
- ✕ Participant satisfaction from an exit survey, a perception indicator that rises when the program was pleasant rather than when it was useful.
- ✕ Territorial coverage expressed in municipalities reached, never crossed against the real density of formal employers in that territory.
- ✕ Nothing at all on retention at 6 and 12 months, which is precisely where the region's 62,4% informality (ILO/ECLAC, 2024) does its work.

What separates a program that sustains employment MASTERESTAURANT

- ✓ Verified retention at 90, 180 and 365 days against payroll or social-security records rather than the graduate's recollection.
- ✓ Open Badges micro-credentials per verifiable competency — cold line, recipe costing, allergen handling — readable by an employer without an interview.
- ✓ Territorial prefeasibility before opening seats: how many formal employers sit inside the participant's commuting radius, and what turnover they run.
- ✓ Employer brand published on a schedule: a restaurant content calendar showing kitchen, shift, promotion ladder and the real entry wage.
- ✓ Cost per retention rather than cost per placement as the budget metric, the only figure defensible before a multilateral investment committee.

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THE NUMBERS THAT MATTER

The 2026 benchmark scorecard

51%

of adults held their first formal job in restaurants or foodservice

62.4%

youth informality across Latin America and the Caribbean

54.3%

informality among employed women in Latin America

51.4%

of US restaurants pass the five-year operating mark

16.23 USD

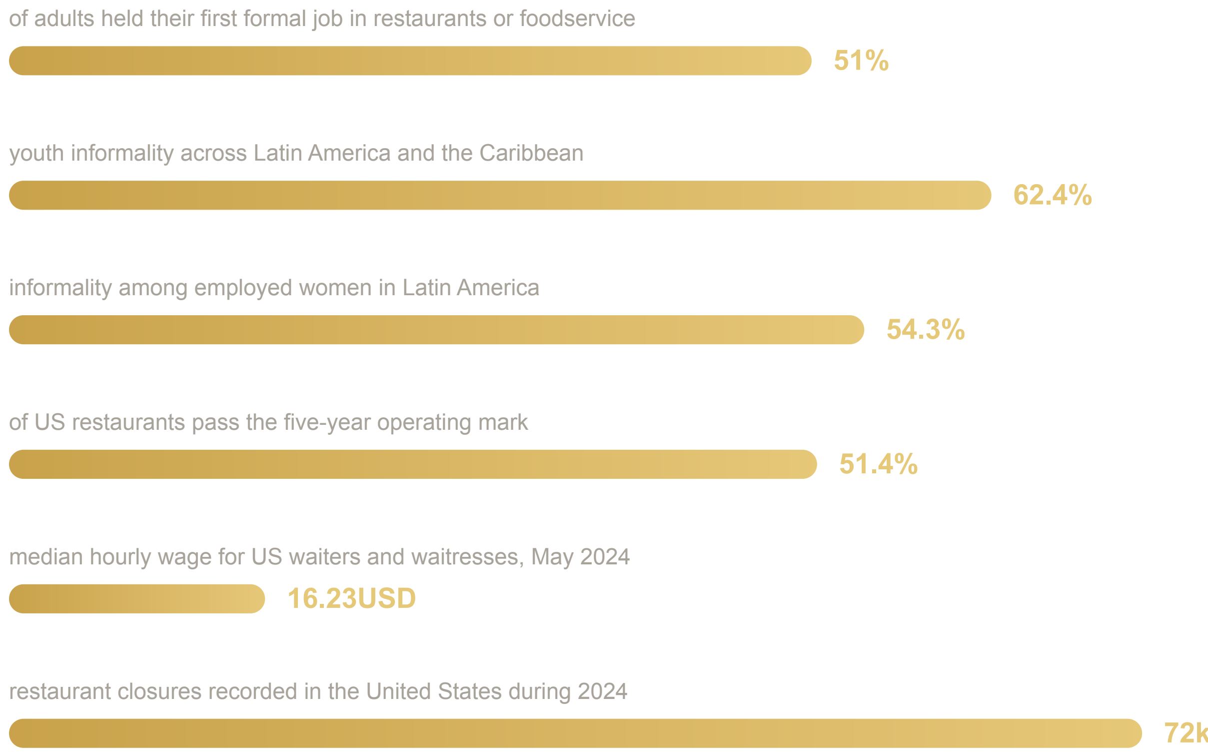
median hourly wage for US waiters and waitresses, May 2024

72k

restaurant closures recorded in the United States during 2024

VISUALIZATION

The numbers, visualized



Sources: National Restaurant Association 2025 · ILO/ECLAC Labour Overview 2024 · U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024 · National Restaurant Association State of the Industry 2024

Chart by masterestaurant.com

REAL CASE

“Nine people trained, nine hired, three still on payroll a year later. Once we put the communication on a fixed schedule — two kitchen pieces a week, one promotion-ladder piece a month, the wage range always visible — the vacancy stopped being an emergency: we went from refilling each front-of-house role three times a year to refilling it once, and replacement cost stopped eating the contribution margin of the dinner shift.”

— Operator of a three-location group in Bogotá, on the 2025-2026 cohort

HOW TO APPLY IT IN YOUR RESTAURANT

How to place yourself, and what to do this week

1. **Define the four metrics before you touch the calendar**
   Write on one page the operational definition of placement (signed formal contract, verified against payroll), retention at 90 and 365 days (person active on payroll at the cutoff date, unit: percentage over enrollees), cost per retention (total budget divided by 365-day retentions, unit: USD) and time to fill (days between separation and effective start). Without those four definitions any dashboard you build later will measure something different every quarter. The external reference for comparison is the 62,4% regional youth informality published by the ILO and ECLAC (Labour Overview 2024).

2. **Locate your segment before setting the target**
   A single location under 50 employees — the case for 9 out of 10 restaurants according to the National Restaurant Association (2025) — cannot carry the same dashboard as a ten-unit group. For the single site, a sensible target is 180-day retention with one weekly post; for the 3-to-10 group, 365-day retention broken out by unit; for multi-unit, 365-day retention cut by shift and position. Setting a multi-unit target inside a twelve-person restaurant guarantees the board gets abandoned by month two.

3. **Build the restaurant content calendar on four fixed lanes**
   Four lanes, no more: craft (how something real gets done in your kitchen), people (who joined, in what role, at what entry wage), ladder (which Open Badges micro-credential opens which position, and at what wage difference) and house (product, service, community). Two pieces a week on Reels or TikTok plus one long piece a month is enough to keep the funnel alive. Discipline lives in the cadence, not the volume: ten posts in one week and none for the next five builds no employer recognition at all.

4. **Publish the wage range and the ladder, not just the opening**
   With the median for waiters at US$ 16,23 per hour and bartenders at US$ 16,12 (BLS, May 2024) against US$ 14,92 for food and beverage serving workers overall, a visible gap separates the entry role from the next rung. Publish it. A candidate who sees the staircase before signing renegotiates less and stays longer. In tipped markets — where the federal direct cash wage has stood at USD 2,13 per hour since 1991, per the U.S. Department of Labor (2026) — spelling out how the income is composed stops being transparency and becomes turnover management.

5. **Close the M&E loop with a quarterly cut and one decision**
Every three months, cross retention against candidate source: internal referral, organic post, training program, job platform. Whichever source produces the best 365-day retention takes next quarter's budget. This is where the exercise stops being communication and becomes unit economics: if cost per retention falls while the median wage for the role rises, contribution margin on the shift improves even when average ticket has not moved a cent.

FAQ

Questions that come from the committees

What is the right metric for a culinary job-placement program?

Verified 365-day retention over enrollees, not 30-day placement over graduates. The first can be contrasted with the 62,4% regional youth informality reported by the ILO and ECLAC (Labour Overview 2024); the second measures only the enthusiasm of the signing month and collapses at the first scheduling conflict.

Does a restaurant content calendar help recruiting, or only sales?

It does both, and right now it weighs more on recruiting. With 9 out of 10 restaurants under 50 employees (National Restaurant Association, 2025), almost none run a selection function: the social channel is the recruiting channel. Publishing craft, wage range and promotion ladder all year fills the funnel before the vacancy exists.

Do Open Badges micro-credentials change anything against a traditional certificate?

They change verifiability. A PDF certificate needs someone to read it and trust it; an Open Badges micro-credential is machine-readable, states which specific competency was demonstrated and who issued it. In a sector where 51% enter through their first formal job (National Restaurant Association, 2025), that signal cuts hiring time and hiring error.

How does staff turnover connect to a restaurant's credit risk?

Through replacement cost and operating variance. A location refilling a front-of-house role three times a year loses productivity and pushes up food cost variance, which erodes the cash flow servicing its debt. With more than 72,000 US closures during 2024 (National Restaurant Association, State of the Industry 2024), payroll stability is real credit information rather than a soft subject.

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
Mipymes en línea con presencia pasiva (sin transacciones digitales)	**más del 60% de las que están en línea**	CEPAL — Inversión digital en América Latina y el Caribe 2024
Penetración de la IA en empresas de América Latina frente a Europa	**menos del 4% en ALC vs. más del 20% en Europa**	CEPAL — Inversión digital en América Latina y el Caribe 2024
Participación femenina en hotelería, restauración y turismo	**60% a 70% de los trabajadores**	OIT — Sectoral Brief: Hotels, catering and tourism (Gender)
Mujeres en puestos ejecutivos de restaurantes de EE. UU.	**38% (frente al 63% en nivel inicial)**	Restaurant Business — Women in the restaurant workforce 2024
Emisiones de CO2 equivalente por comida enviada a vertederos de EE. UU. 2020	**55 millones de toneladas de CO2e**	EPA — Quantifying Methane Emissions from Landfilled Food Waste 2023
Metano de comida enterrada no capturado en vertederos de EE. UU.	**61% escapa a la atmósfera**	EPA — Quantifying Methane Emissions from Landfilled Food Waste 2023