

Dining In 2026: All Roads Lead To Value

How shifting consumer priorities are reshaping value perceptions across QSR, fast casual, and casual chains.

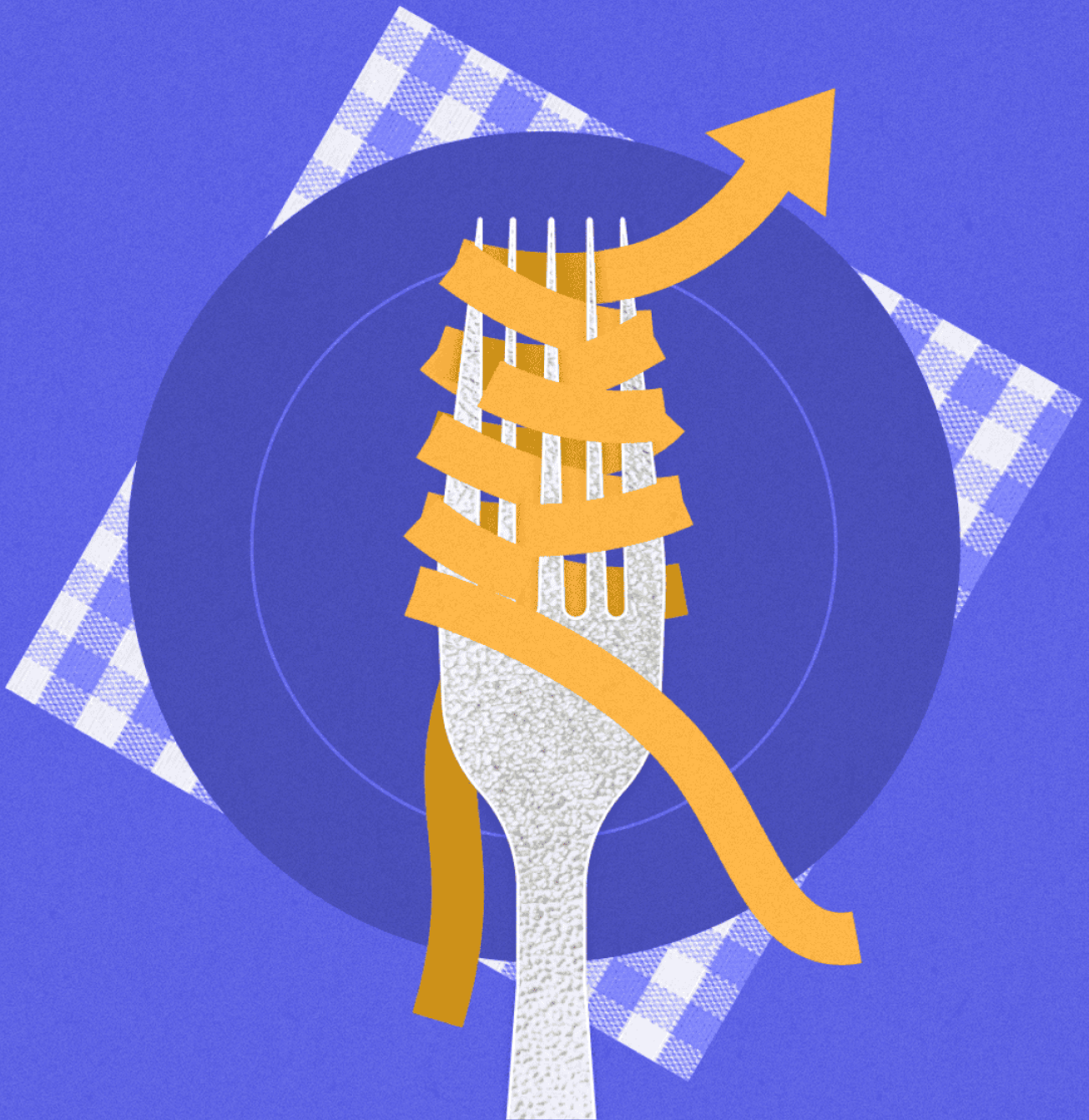


Table of Contents

Key Takeaways:	2
The New Definition of Value	3
Dining Traffic Remains Unstable in 2026	3
Breaking Down the Industry	4
QSR's Value Proposition Under Pressure From Grocery Stores & Superstores	4
Fine Dining and the Fast Casual Middle Hold Firm	5
Inside the Playbooks of Fast Casual Standouts	6
Chipotle Creates Value With LTO Experiences and Loyalty Perks	6
CAVA Expansion and Differentiated Dining Experience	8
Casual Chains Thrive On Everyday Value	10
The State of Dining in 2026	11

Key Takeaways:

- Overall dining traffic remains under pressure, with visits trailing last year's levels in most months of 2026.
- QSR chains continue to face headwinds as rising menu prices weaken traditional value perceptions and consumers increasingly consider grocery and food-at-home alternatives.
- Fine dining traffic has increased, highlighting the resilience of affluent consumers and the enduring appeal of occasion-driven experiences.

- Fast casual has emerged as one of the industry's strongest-performing segments by balancing affordability with elevated dining experiences.
- Several casual dining chains have maintained positive traffic momentum by pairing everyday value with the benefits of full-service dining.
- Across the industry, consumers appear to be evaluating value through a broader lens that includes experience, quality, convenience, and affordability.

The New Definition of Value

As [consumer sentiment](#) hovers near historic lows and the cost of goods remains elevated, value has become a defining theme across the dining industry. Yet within the sector's diverse restaurant categories – and for individual brands – the question is no longer whether consumers are seeking value, but what value actually means. A closer look at chains across the industry suggests that, amid ongoing economic pressure, perceptions of value are evolving. For some consumers, value may be tied to affordability and promotions; for others, it may come from quality, convenience, or experience. The result is a market with multiple paths to winning consumer traffic.

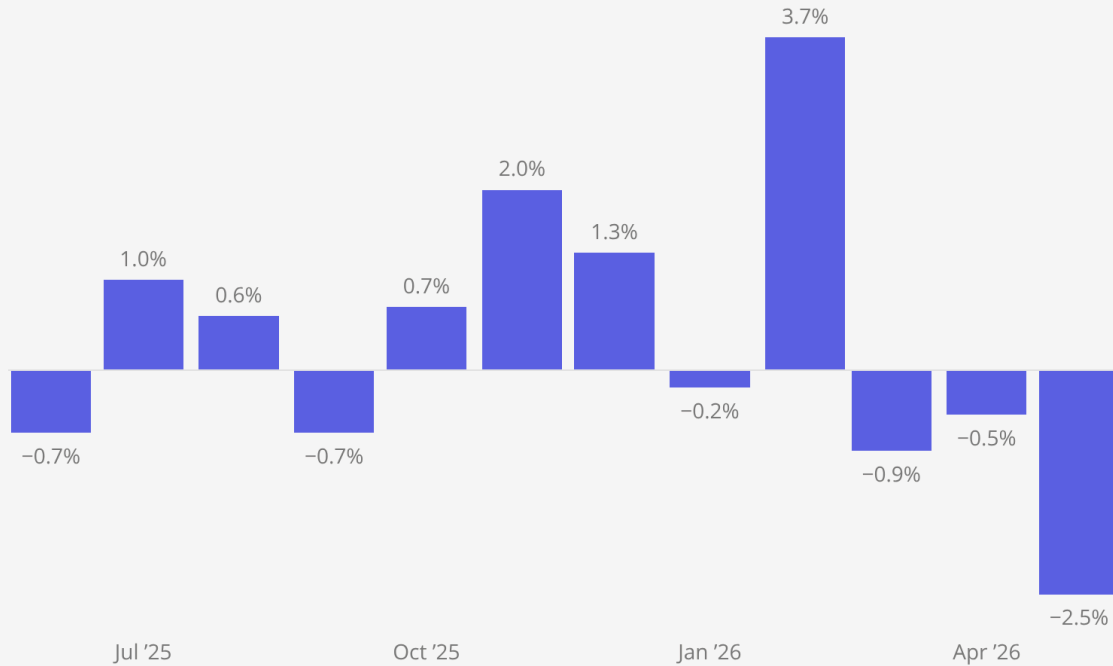
Dining Traffic Remains Unstable in 2026

After an [uneven](#) but largely resilient 2025, dining traffic in 2026 tipped into a sustained decline.

Monthly visits to the overall dining industry have trailed year-ago levels throughout 2026, with February standing as the lone exception. That month saw a 3.7% year-over-year (YoY) increase in visits, driven in part by comparisons to the period of initial tariff announcements in early 2025. But broader trends remained challenged, and May's 2.5% YoY decline marked the steepest monthly drop of the past twelve months as rising gas prices and weakening consumer sentiment appear to have added pressure to an industry already navigating a difficult [environment](#).

Dining Traffic Trails Last Year's Levels for Most of 2026

Monthly Visits to All Dining Categories Compared to Previous Year



Breaking Down the Industry

These headwinds, though, have not landed evenly. Across the dining sector, some segments have faced more intense pressure than others, with much of the divide coming down to how consumers are perceiving value against experience.

QSR's Value Proposition Under Pressure From Grocery Stores & Superstores

Over the past several years, inflation and [rising](#) menu prices have gradually weakened a cost-based value proposition that has long been central to the QSR segment. More



recently, elevated gas prices have added another deterrent, making a trip through the drive-thru a [less compelling](#) choice for some consumers.

Strong performance at grocery stores and superstores suggests that competition for share-of-stomach is increasingly extending [beyond](#) traditional restaurant rivals. With expanding selections of ready-to-eat and pre-prepared meals, these channels are offering consumers a combination of value, convenience, and quality that can increasingly match limited-service dining options. At the same time, ongoing pressure on household budgets appears to be driving more consumers toward lower-cost meals made at home, creating additional headwinds for the QSR segment.

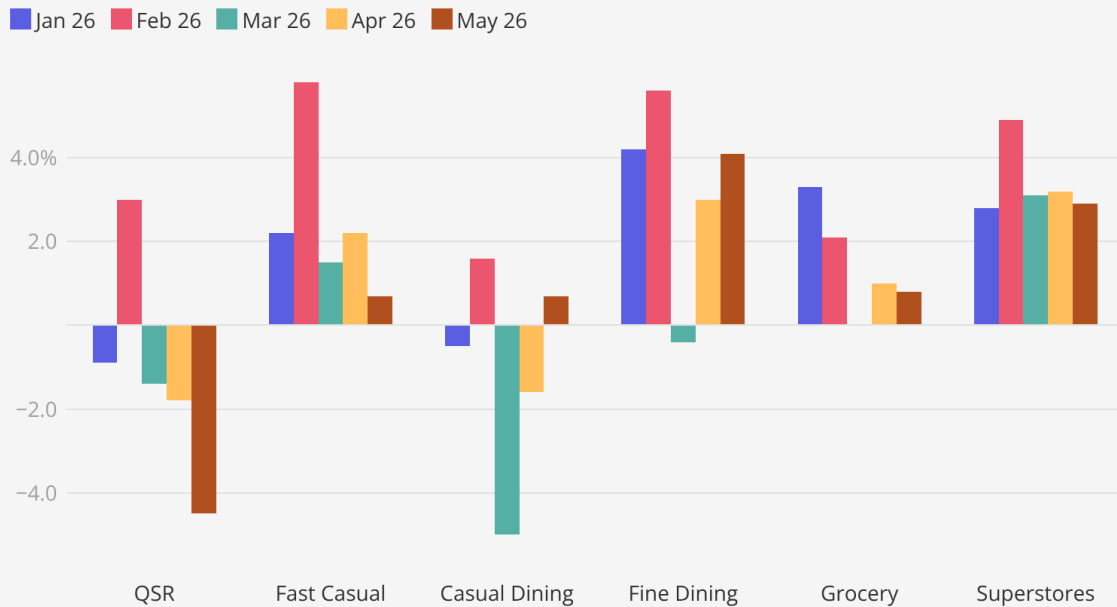
Fine Dining and the Fast Casual Middle Hold Firm

Yet for many consumers, there is still a time and place for dining out, and in the face of mounting economic pressure, several dining formats have found foot traffic success. Fine dining has posted traffic growth in nearly every month of 2026, with March standing as the lone exception. That decline was likely influenced by a calendar shift, as March 2026 contained one fewer Saturday than March 2025 – a meaningful headwind for full-service restaurants given the outsized role weekends play in driving visits. The segment's sustained growth points to the resilience of higher-income consumers and the enduring appeal of premium, occasion-driven dining experiences.

Fast casual and casual dining have also proven relatively resilient. The fast casual category saw positive YoY foot traffic in every month of 2026 so far, while casual dining's performance has rebounded since the March calendar shift that likely weighed on YoY traffic. A second calendar shift in May 2026 led to an extra Saturday in the month, which likely helped the segment's overall trend. These trends suggest that both fast casual and casual dining occupy an increasingly attractive middle ground where value is defined as a combination of affordability and experience. At the same time, years of menu price hikes at QSR chains have altered the cost equation in fast casual and casual dining's favor, narrowing the price gap between fast food and more elevated dining formats. As that gap has narrowed, consumers may be placing greater emphasis on experience and quality when deciding where to dine.

Fast Casual and Full Service Segments Drive Growth, QSR Faces Growing Competition From Other Meal Channels

Monthly Visits Compared to Previous Year



Inside the Playbooks of Fast Casual Standouts

The balance between price and elevated experience has made fast casual a favorite for value in the dining industry in 2026. A closer look at two of the segment's largest players, CAVA, a relatively young concept, and Chipotle, a legacy chain [navigating](#) operational challenges, shows how brands can deliver on that value proposition in different ways and win in today's dining landscape.

Chipotle Creates Value With LTO Experiences and Loyalty Perks



[Chipotle's](#) traffic trends in 2026 have improved compared to 2025, with the brand offering a clear example of how fast casual brands can create value by pairing menu innovation with loyalty perks.

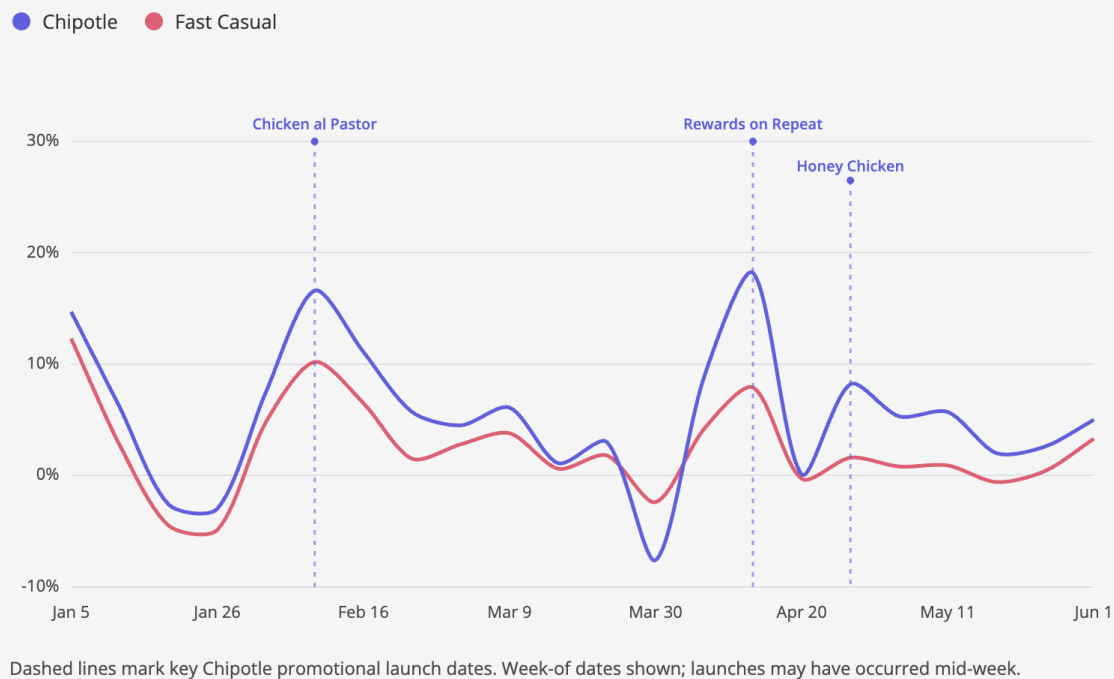
Chipotle outpaced the broader fast casual category in YoY visits nearly every week of 2026 so far. And the graph below shows that the chain's strongest traffic gains tended to coincide with major menu launches and loyalty initiatives – a key component of its ongoing "Recipe for Growth" strategy.

The return of fan-favorite Chicken al Pastor in the week of February 9, 2026 helped drive a 16.6% YoY increase in visits. Two months later, the launch of ["Rewards on Repeat"](#) – a refreshed loyalty program offering freebies upon sign-up – generated the period's largest weekly traffic gain, with visits rising 18.2% YoY. And the introduction of Honey Chicken on April 28 provided another boost, as the chain continued to rotate limited-time protein offerings and give customers reasons to return.

These performance peaks suggest that Chipotle has been particularly effective at pairing menu novelty with loyalty perks to reinforce a value proposition anchored by quality and experience.

Chipotle's "Recipe for Growth" Drives Traffic With Loyalty and LTO Launches

Year-over-Year Change in Weekly Visits, Chipotle vs. Fast Casual, Jan.-Jun. 2026



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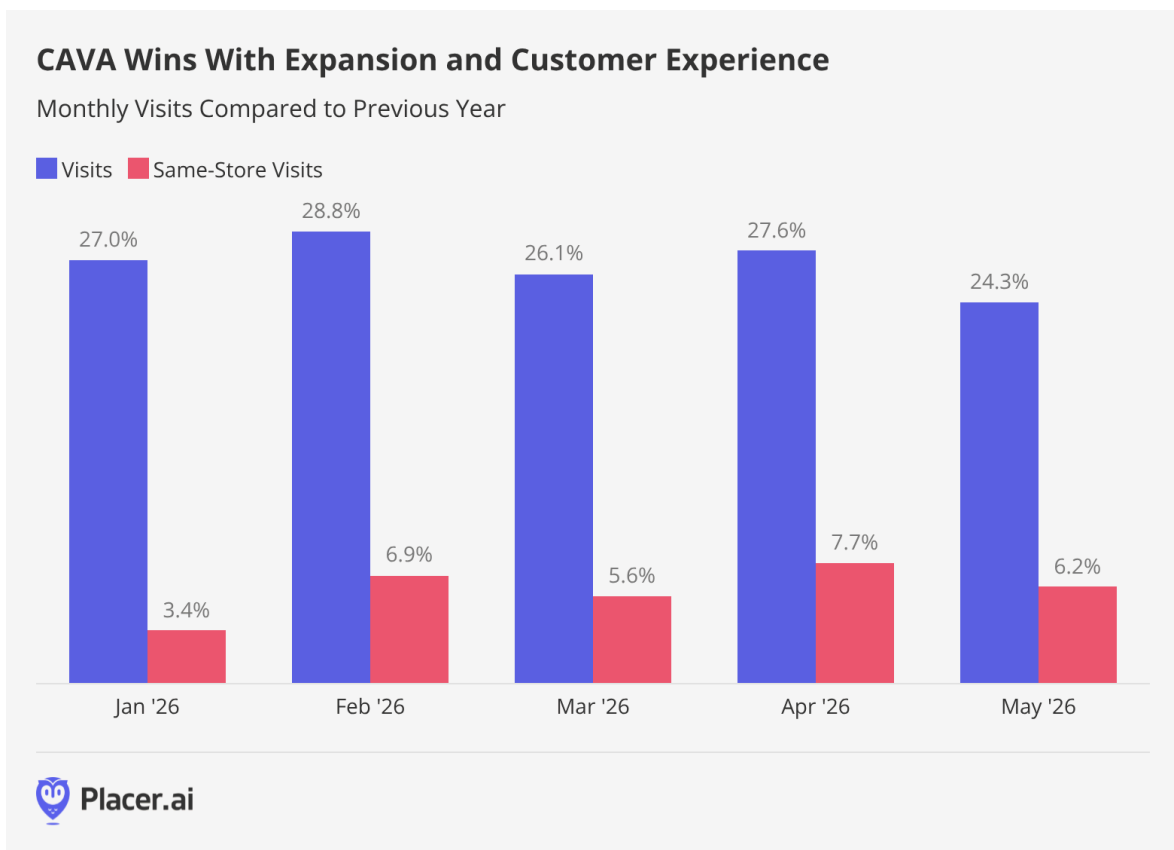
CAVA Expansion and Differentiated Dining Experience

If Chipotle illustrates the power of menu innovation and loyalty-driven engagement, CAVA highlights a different approach to creating value – one rooted in variety, customization, and a consistently differentiated dining experience.

CAVA's overall visits climbed well above 20% YoY in every month of 2026, a pace largely driven by aggressive unit [expansion](#). Meanwhile, same-store visits, which measure traffic at locations open for at least twelve months, sustained positive YoY

growth – evidence of genuine demand at existing restaurants alongside a rapidly growing footprint.

While Chipotle leans on limited-time offers, CAVA's growth rests on a consistent, customizable experience. A deep roster of [proteins](#) paired with a wide range of bases, dips, and toppings, gives the chain built-in variety that helps keep the concept feeling fresh. In addition, CAVA's Mediterranean-inspired menu offers flavors and combinations that are less easily replicated at home, helping the brand maintain a differentiated experiential value proposition and drive growth.



Though Chipotle and CAVA are at different points in their evolution and have taken different paths to growth, both highlight the enduring appeal of fast casual's balance of value and quality. In a dining environment where consumers are increasingly weighing cost against experience, the segment's ability to deliver on both has helped make it one of the industry's strongest-performing formats.

Casual Chains Thrive On Everyday Value

Fast casual isn't the only dining segment benefiting from consumers' evolving perception of value. In 2026, several casual dining chains have found success by [pairing](#) accessible price points with the elevated experience of a sit-down meal.

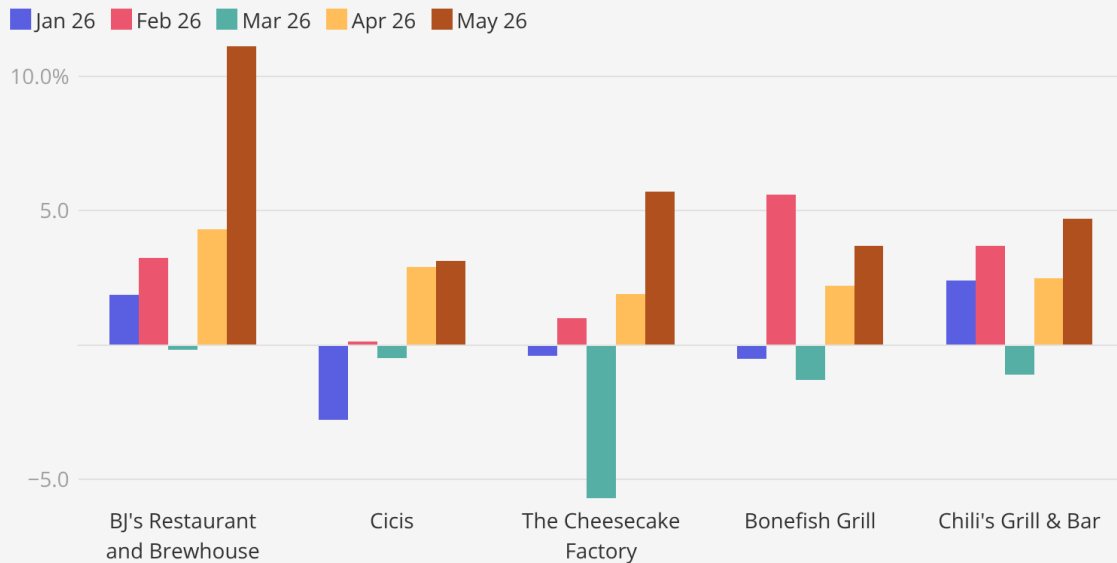
Brands such as BJ's Restaurant & Brewhouse, Chili's Grill & Bar, Bonefish Grill, Cicis, and The Cheesecake Factory all posted positive YoY visit growth in multiple months this year, demonstrating that even in a challenging economic environment, diners are motivated when they feel they are getting more in return. These results are particularly notable given the impact of calendar shifts, which weighed on March 2026 comparisons – and provided a tailwind to May performance.

Unlike many fast casual chains, these brands have not relied heavily on a steady stream of limited-time offers to drive traffic. While menu [innovation](#) remains part of the playbook, promotions often serve as ticket builders or [engagement tools](#) rather than primary traffic catalysts. Instead, these successful casual dining chains have focused on creating [everyday value](#) that diners can depend on, narrowing the price gap between limited-service restaurants and full-service dining.

The result is a value equation that encompasses table service, a more relaxed dining environment, and a place to socialize or celebrate an occasion. In an environment where consumers are increasingly weighing cost against overall experience, that combination appears to be helping several casual dining chains maintain positive traffic momentum.

Casual Chains Reshaping the Value Equation

Monthly Visits Compared to Previous Year



The State of Dining in 2026

Although dining traffic has softened in 2026, the industry's performance suggests that consumers have not stopped spending on restaurants altogether. Instead, they have become more selective about where they dine and what they expect in return.

Across segments, the strongest performers have found different ways to deliver value. For some brands, that means menu innovation, loyalty engagement, and differentiated experiences. For others, it means dependable affordability paired with the service and atmosphere of a sit-down meal. As economic pressures continue to shape consumer behavior, the data suggests that value is no longer defined by price alone, but by the balance of cost, convenience, quality, and experience.