Restaurant Opening Checklist

Everything to get from an idea to a first service that holds up - in the order you actually need to do it.

A word before you start

I have been cooking professionally for 25 years, worked as an executive chef in restaurants and resorts, taught culinary students, and opened concepts in North Carolina and Georgia - including Trend Urban Cafe, Guac Taco Studio, and Smash'D Burgers & Bourbon in Stone Mountain. Almost every expensive opening mistake I have seen came from doing things out of order: signing a lease before the money was honest, buying equipment before the menu was final, hiring before the systems were written down.

Work this checklist top to bottom. Do not skip a phase because the next one looks more fun. When every box in a phase is checked, you are ready to move on.

"Food is the language I use to bring people together." - Chef Wic

How to use it

Print it and write on it. Put a name and a date next to each phase. A box is only checked when the work is finished and filed - not when it is "in progress." Keep permits, quotes, and signed pages in one opening binder, and keep a copy of everything in a shared folder your manager can reach.

WHEN	PHASES TO FINISH
12+ weeks out	1. Concept and money 2. Legal, licenses and permits (start)
10-12 weeks out	3. Location and lease 4. Build-out and equipment (order long-lead items)
6-8 weeks out	5. Menu and suppliers 6. Money systems and back office
3-4 weeks out	7. Team and training 8. Marketing and opening week
Final 7 days	Day-by-day countdown, soft opening, go / no-go check (last page)

Restaurant name: _____ Target opening date: _____

Owner / lead: _____ Opening budget: _____

1 Concept and money first

A clear concept and an honest budget come before you sign anything. If the numbers do not work on paper, they will not work on a Friday night.

- ☐ Write the concept in one sentence: what you serve, who it is for, and why they come to you instead of the place down the street
- ☐ Decide service style: full service, fast casual, counter, takeout, catering - or a clear mix
- ☐ Set target check average and the price range your neighbourhood will actually pay
- ☐ Visit at least five competitors; note prices, portions, wait times, and what they do better than you plan to
- ☐ Build the opening budget: lease deposit, build-out, equipment, permits, first inventory, payroll before opening, marketing, and opening cash
- ☐ Add a contingency of at least 10-15% - something always costs more or arrives late
- ☐ Separate one-time opening costs from monthly running costs; know your monthly break-even sales number
- ☐ Confirm where every dollar is coming from and when it lands; do not plan on money that is only promised
- ☐ Set target food cost, labour cost, and rent as percentages of sales - and the numbers that will warn you early
- ☐ Open a separate business bank account; never mix opening money with personal money

2 Legal, licenses and permits

Paperwork has the longest lead times of anything on this list. Start it early, write down every application date, and chase it weekly.

- ☐ Form the business entity and get the Employer Identification Number (EIN)
- ☐ Register for state and local taxes, including sales tax collection
- ☐ Apply for the local business license / occupational tax certificate
- ☐ Apply for the health department food service permit; book the pre-opening inspection
- ☐ Confirm zoning allows a restaurant at the address - in writing, before signing the lease
- ☐ Building, signage, and any patio or outdoor seating permits applied for
- ☐ Fire inspection and occupancy approval scheduled
- ☐ If serving alcohol: start the alcohol license application first - it is usually the slowest approval of all
- ☐ Music licensing in place if you will play recorded or live music
- ☐ Insurance bound: general liability, property, workers' compensation, and business interruption
- ☐ Food handler / food safety manager certification for you and your leads
- ☐ One binder (paper and digital) with every permit, license, and approval, with renewal dates listed

Chef's note: Keep a simple log - item, date applied, who you spoke to, what is still missing, next follow-up date. Permits rarely get denied; they get delayed because one document was missing. The log is how you find it fast.

3 Location and lease

The lease decides whether the month works more than any single purchase. Read every line, and get help reading it before you sign.

- ☐ Check the site at lunch, dinner, and on a weekend - traffic and parking change by the hour
- ☐ Confirm parking, visibility from the road, signage rights, and delivery access
- ☐ Confirm utilities can carry a kitchen: gas, electric, water, grease trap, and hood / exhaust capacity
- ☐ Have an attorney review the lease before signing - especially term, renewals, and who pays for what repairs
- ☐ Negotiate a build-out period and when rent actually starts; get it in writing
- ☐ Know the full monthly number: base rent plus common-area charges, insurance, taxes, and any percentage rent
- ☐ Check exclusivity and restrictions: can a direct competitor open in the same centre?
- ☐ Photograph the space as handed over and list existing damage, signed by both sides
- ☐ Get quotes for any work the landlord is not doing, before the lease start date runs

4 Build-out and equipment

Build to the menu - not the other way round. Finalise the menu (Phase 5 draft is enough) before you finalise the kitchen layout.

- ☐ Kitchen layout drawn to scale: receiving, storage, prep, cooking line, pass, dish pit - in the order food actually moves
- ☐ Equipment list built from the menu: every item the menu needs, and nothing it does not
- ☐ For each big item decide new, used, or lease - and check gas vs. electric, size, and door clearance before ordering
- ☐ Order long-lead items first; confirm delivery dates in writing and plan for one late delivery
- ☐ Hood, fire suppression, plumbing, and electrical signed off and inspected in sequence
- ☐ Smallwares list complete: pans, knives, boards by colour, containers, labels, thermometers, scales
- ☐ Dining room set: tables, seating count, lighting, music, restrooms checked and stocked
- ☐ Signage installed and lit; hours and contact details on the door
- ☐ Run every piece of equipment under real load for a full test day before opening week
- ☐ Cleaning schedule and chemical storage set up; pest control contract started
- ☐ Repair contacts saved: refrigeration, plumber, electrician, equipment tech - the people you call at 6 p.m. on a Friday

Chef's note: Buy the best you can afford for the three things you touch all day - refrigeration, your main cooking equipment, and knives. Save money on almost anything else before you save it there.

5 Menu and suppliers

A menu is a money document, not just a list of dishes. Every item gets cooked, timed, costed, and priced before it goes on the wall.

- ☐ Menu written to the concept and to what the kitchen can execute well at volume - tight beats long
- ☐ Every dish cooked and tasted; photos taken of the standard plate for training
- ☐ Recipe cards written for every item: ingredients, weights, method, plating, allergens
- ☐ Every item costed with the Food Cost Sheet (Resource 02) and priced to hit your target food cost
- ☐ Cross-use ingredients across dishes so stock turns fast and waste stays low
- ☐ Main supplier accounts open; delivery days, minimums, and payment terms confirmed in writing
- ☐ A backup source named for your five most important ingredients
- ☐ Opening inventory ordered by par level - enough for opening week, not opening month
- ☐ Storage labelled and dated; first-in, first-out (FIFO) set up from day one
- ☐ Allergen and dietary information written down for the team, including vegan and gluten-free options
- ☐ Menu printed / posted with final prices; the same prices loaded in the point-of-sale system

6 Money systems and back office

The systems that count the money must work before the first guest pays. Test them with real test sales, not assumptions.

- ☐ Point-of-sale (POS) set up: menu, prices, taxes, discounts, and staff logins tested end to end
- ☐ Card payments tested, including tips, refunds, and an offline / outage plan
- ☐ Online ordering and pickup flow tested if you offer it - order, pay, ticket, hand-off
- ☐ Payroll set up before the first hire works a shift: pay dates, tax withholdings, tip handling
- ☐ Daily cash routine written: who counts, who checks, where it is recorded, where it is kept
- ☐ Bookkeeping started from day one; receipts and invoices filed weekly, not at tax time
- ☐ Weekly cost control routine set: track food, labour, and sales with the Cost Control Sheet (Resource 03)
- ☐ Safe, office supplies, and a simple filing system for invoices, schedules, and incident notes
- ☐ Emergency plan written: power cut, equipment failure, water issue - who calls whom, in what order

7 Team and training

Hire for the opening you have planned, train to written standards, and rehearse a full service before a paying guest sits down.

- ☐ Staffing plan by daypart: how many cooks, servers, cashiers, and dish staff each shift really needs
- ☐ Job descriptions and pay rates written before interviews start
- ☐ Hire your leads first - kitchen lead and front-of-house lead - and let them help train the rest
- ☐ Paperwork complete for every hire before the first shift: forms, tax documents, food handler cards where required
- ☐ House rules written down: phones, meals, breaks, uniforms, call-out procedure, tip policy
- ☐ Training plan for each station, with the recipe cards and plate photos from Phase 5
- ☐ Food safety training done: temperatures, cross-contamination, handwashing, cooling and reheating
- ☐ Service standards rehearsed: greeting, order accuracy, ticket times, handling a complaint, the goodbye
- ☐ Friends-and-family rehearsal service run at full menu; time it, note every failure, fix it the next day
- ☐ First two weeks of schedules posted before opening day

8 Marketing and opening week

Fill the room with people who will come back. Neighbours, nearby offices, and your own list matter more than one big announcement.

- ☐ Google Business Profile claimed and complete: address, hours, phone, menu link, good photos
- ☐ Website and social pages live with the same name, hours, address, and menu everywhere - check every listing matches
- ☐ Opening announcement sent to your email list and posted on social, with the real opening date only once it is certain
- ☐ Walk the neighbourhood: introduce yourself to nearby businesses, offices, hotels, and churches with menus
- ☐ Soft opening planned: limited hours or limited menu, invited guests, honest feedback collected
- ☐ Grand opening set a few days after the soft opening - once the kitchen has proved it can hold
- ☐ Review plan ready: how you will ask happy guests for reviews, and who replies to every review
- ☐ A simple week-two offer ready so opening-week guests have a reason to return
- ☐ Camera-ready plates: take your own food photos during rehearsal services for social and listings

Chef's note: Do not grand-open cold. A soft opening with a forgiving room will teach you more in one night than a month of planning - ticket times, station bottlenecks, the dish that does not travel to the table well. Fix those, then invite the crowd.

FINAL COUNTDOWN

The last 7 days

DAY	FINISH THESE
Day -7	All permits in hand or confirmed in writing. Final equipment test day. Opening inventory list locked.
Day -6	POS final test with real menu and prices. Schedules posted. Supplier delivery calendar confirmed.
Day -5	Opening inventory arrives. Storage labelled. Deep clean of kitchen and dining room.
Day -4	Full team training day: stations, service standards, food safety, emergency plan.
Day -3	Friends-and-family rehearsal service. Collect feedback in writing the same night.
Day -2	Fix everything the rehearsal exposed. Soft opening for invited guests.
Day -1	Restock to par. Cash float counted. Final walk-through with both leads. Early night.
Day 0	Open on time, on menu, fully staffed. Owner on the floor, not in the office.

Go / no-go check - the morning you open

- ☐ Permits and licenses posted or on file, including health and occupancy approvals
- ☐ Hot water, refrigeration at temperature, cooking line and POS all tested today
- ☐ Enough stock for the full menu, plus the backup plan for the first item that runs out
- ☐ Full team on shift, in uniform, briefed on today's specials, allergens, and 86 list
- ☐ Cash float counted and signed; card payments tested with a live test sale

If any box above is unchecked, fix it before you unlock the door - or open smaller: shorter hours, shorter menu. A smaller good opening beats a big broken one.

Notes

Opening a restaurant and want a second set of eyes?

Chef Wic consults one-on-one with people opening restaurants of their own - concept, menu, costs, and the opening itself. Book a consult at **chefwic.com**. Companion downloads on the Resources page: Food Cost Sheet, Cost Control Sheet, and Restaurant Templates.