NEWS

"Don't you step on my blue suede shoes."
BLUE SUEDE SHOES ELVIS PRESLEY

For new and emerging restaurants, artificial intelligence can be a boon

BY ELSPETH YEH
STAFF REPORTER

A smattering of restaurants in and around New Haven have deployed artificial intelligence to generate online graphics, menus and even interior decorations.

Though the practice is spreading around the country, restaurants that display AI-generated visuals can face significant backlash. Attitudes regarding the technology vary among local business owners — some characterize it as a last resort, while others say that its use is essential.

"The AI is necessary. It cuts down on a lot of time," Richard Hu, the manager of Trio Cuisine — a Korean restaurant on Chapel Street — said in a phone interview. "If we didn't use it, we would be stuck on generating a lot of our posters or whatnot, and the restaurant probably still wouldn't be open today."

The Instagram page of Trio Cuisine, which opened just one month ago, is flagged as an "AI-generated profile." Hu said the restaurant has used artificial intelligence "for quite a few things."

Entering New Haven's competitive restaurant scene, Trio's owner realized advertising would be crucial for the business. Hu said they were unsure where to start, and turned to AI.

Chris Allen is the owner of Gas Burgers in North Haven, a 1920s-themed restaurant that opened in July in a former gas station.

Allen said he uses AI in myriad ways for his restaurant. He conducted historical research using AI to identify common paint colors in the 1920s and to understand the demographics of surrounding businesses. He also uses the technology to generate graphics for Gas Burgers' social media.

"It is giving a more even playing field to businesses like mine," Allen said, "versus the mega corporations that have limitless resources to pay people to do it."

Allen expressed doubt that he would have been able to open Gas Burgers without leveraging AI to his advantage.

Both new businesses are succeeding at drawing customers. Hu said that by putting flyers in parking garages and apartment lobbies, Trio is beginning to establish connections with the local community. Allen says that events at Gas Burgers have been "phenomenal." His restaurant hosts live bands and games including cornhole, Jenga and Uno.

"Instead of looking at the negatives, look at the positives," said Allen. "A small business was opened, brought community together, brought great food to the neighborhood."

Hu said that he has been hearing "a lot of bad rap about AI being used in almost everything, like marketing, businesses, whatever."

Taco's Twist is a family-owned restaurant that opened in early August on Grove Street. Walking in, customers are greeted with a full-wall mural that was designed using artificial intelligence.

Store manager Gopi Thumula said that some users on online forums have criticized Taco's Twist for the way the piece was created. Thumula said that after signing the lease, the contractor had agreed to prepare the space, and that it was the contractor's decision — not the owner's — to use AI for the mural after local artists said they would charge $10,000.

"They're not coming to our store. They didn't even taste our food," Thumula said of those criticizing the restaurant online. "AI's not making food, humans are making food."

Thumula said Taco's Twist would replace the mural if an artist could provide a good quotation.

Hu sympathizes with the general public who are disappointed by AI use by large businesses with money and resources, but feels that it's "slightly more understandable" for smaller businesses.

"It is what you got to do to survive," he said.

Allen echoed those sentiments.

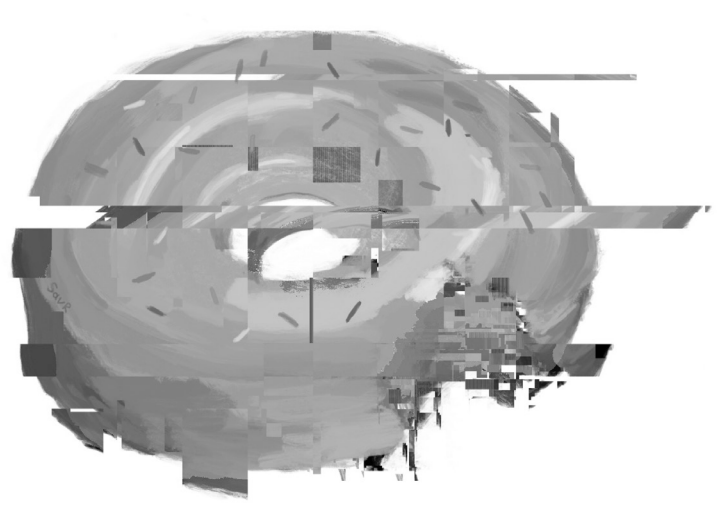

ILLUSTRATION BY SAVANNAH ROBERTS
New restaurants are taking advantage of artificial intelligence tools for outreach, marketing and decoration — despite some backlash from community members regarding the use of the technology.

"There's a metamorphosis that's happening, and you need to be progressive enough, forward-thinking enough to see what's coming and adapt," he said.

Allen said he would consider hiring an employee to manage Gas Burgers' marketing who could improve how the business uses AI — but not eliminate it from Gas Burgers' strategy.

"People like to crap all over it," Allen said, "but the reality is, we have 35–40 employees. We're generating sales tax for the state. We're generating revenue for the town. We're creating a destination for the town. We're bringing families together."

In 2018, the first AI-generated painting sold at auction fetched $432,500.

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Center for Inclusive Growth unveils economic development 'roadmap'

BY QAMAR AL-TAMEEMI
STAFF REPORTER

Two years after its founding, a Yale-backed initiative seeking to foster equitable economic growth in New Haven unveiled the first steps toward a series of sweeping goals for the city.

Local officials and community members gathered at the Omni New Haven Hotel on Tuesday afternoon for the second Annual Inclusive Growth Summit, where the Center for Inclusive Growth's leaders laid out a set of organizational priorities: affordable living, quality employment opportunities, community wealth building and community connections and ownership. The summit also featured talks and workshops led by local leaders about economic mobility and business strategy.

Yale and the City of New Haven announced plans for the center in 2021 alongside a new six-year voluntary contribution agreement. Yale pledged $5 million to fund the center, a nonprofit focused on including underserved residents in the city's economic development. A University press release from the time said the center's projects would be developed "in the coming months." The center held its first Inclusive Growth Summit in 2025.

"Last year, we came together to ask what inclusive growth should mean for engagement, and today we will begin answering a different question: What will we do next?" Dawn Leaks Ragsdale, the center's inaugural executive director, said in a speech at the summit.

Since the last summit, Leaks Ragsdale said, the center has launched new programs and conducted research to develop "The Inclusive Growth Roadmap," which lays out its four priority areas.

Leaks Ragsdale said that a series of working groups will convene to establish an implementation timeline for the roadmap.

In a speech at Tuesday's event, Mayor Justin Elicker highlighted New Haven's recent population and economic growth as well as the city's rising bioscience and life science industries. He also emphasized the importance of ensuring "people that may not have historically benefited from growth" do benefit from the city's current growth.

The roadmap comes after a year-long process in which the center solicited feedback from hundreds of residents through a series of "community conversations," reviewed existing data and studied best practices around the country.

"We're done planning," Leaks Ragsdale said. "We're now into implementation and execution."

Leaks Ragsdale said in a speech that residents don't want programs that "make a splash or generate a headline and then disappear a year later." Community members indicated they were willing to wait longer for progress if the results were systemic and lasting, a message Leaks Ragsdale said has shaped the organization's approach.

The summit also highlighted several of the Center's economic development programs, including Buy New Haven, an initiative that helps large businesses shift their spending to small businesses and ensures small, local businesses are equipped to accept contracts from larger institutions. Another program, the Evergreen Engagement Program, helps entrepreneurs acquire existing businesses.

The center has also developed a partnership with the Yale Center for Business and the Environment and is recruiting a New Haven cohort to participate in Yale's Clean and Equitable Energy Development Certificate Program next year.

Leaks Ragsdale noted that several local nonprofits and community organizations are already working toward the Center's economic development goals. The organization's role, she said, is to convene those groups and fill gaps.

The United States Census Bureau estimated that New Haven's population was 138,774 in 2025.

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QAMAR AL-TAMEEMI / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
At its second annual summit, a Yale-funded non-profit presented a set of focus areas for facilitating economic growth and wealth building in New Haven — though it did not offer up a clear timeline.

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