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Real-life 'Jetsons'? Watch robots cheerfully serve food at this Dallas restaurant

They do jobs at Dallas restaurant La Duni that 'nobody wants to do.'





Staff Photographer)

By [Sarah Blaskovich](#)

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La Duni's newest staff members in Dallas are quick on their feet and quite polite. One even said, "I love you, you are so pretty," after a delivery.

Meet Alexcita, Panchita and Coqueta, La Duni's restaurant robots.

"Customers treat them like pets. They hug them, they talk to them," says Taco Borgia, co-owner of the restaurant. The robots are programmed to flirt with customers, and Panchita will even sing "Happy Birthday," when prompted. Borgia was born in Spain and his robots speak Spanish, but they can be programmed to speak up to 12 languages.

While the robots are partly a stunt — a way to energize the McKinney Avenue restaurant that has been selling Latin American food and custom cakes for 20 years — Borgia says they offer serious cost savings. Each robot costs Borgia \$8 to \$10 a day. They replace at least two full-time food or drink runners and one hostess, which Borgia would pay at least \$10 an hour, each.

That's hundreds of dollars per day in savings, and thousands per month.



All of La Duni's robots have personalities. Customers "don't really see them as machines. It's really a tablet on wheels," says La Duni co-owner Taco Borgia. "Somehow, with the personality and the service they provide, they embrace them like a living thing." (Elias Valverde II / Staff Photographer)



in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

Watch talking robots deliver food at Dallas res...



How the robots work

The robots are trained to do jobs “nobody wants to do,” Borga says.

Panchita and Alexcita deliver food and drinks by quietly shuttling down the aisles of the restaurant while customers sit nearby, eating. A server still accompanies the robot and hands off the food or drink from the robot’s shelves. But now, that server can take on three times as many tables, Borga says — and make more money in tips.

Servers “spend less time doing repetitive tasks,” he says.

While two of his robots are trained to deliver food and drink, other robots can be programmed to sweep or collect dishes. Borga’s third robot, Coqueta, is a hostess that rolls through the restaurant, escorting guests to their tables. That leaves a human hostess at the front of the restaurant doing jobs Coqueta can’t: reassuring



The robots are programmed by Plano-based company American Robotech. Co-founders Jackie and Celine Chen have delivered 30 robots to North Texas businesses since early 2021 — and their focus is on restaurant robots, specifically.

It's catching on: Bushi Bushi, a dim sum restaurant in Addison, is using American Robotech robots. So are Haidilao Hot Pot in Frisco, Taqueria Los Angeles in Richardson and Layered in McKinney. Even Plano-based Pizza Hut has **tested a different company's home-delivery robot**.

The Chens' robots can be purchased for \$10,800 to \$16,800, depending on their size and capabilities. Monthly leasing starts at \$499 a month. The robots are made in China by a company named Pudu.

Borga was most impressed by how quickly he could get a robot, program it and start using it. The team at American Robotech set it up in an hour: That's 40 to 80 times quicker than it would take him to fully train a new food runner or hostess.

But: Will robots replace humans?

La Duni is among hundreds of restaurants in North Texas experiencing a **labor crisis that has exposed** the difficulties within the industry. Restaurant owners have had to increase hourly wages to entice the shrinking workforce.

Borga avoids some of that by using robots instead: They always show up, he says. And they're way cheaper.

"It had gotten so bad, we had to close sections because I didn't have a server to work them," Borga says. "My patio is closed right now [for that reason]," he says.





service restaurant like his, one that sells empanadas, cochinita pibil and carne asada, will always need compassionate people to serve guests.

today.” He smiles: “I said ‘Miss, let me explain to you one thing: The whole thing about a robot is they work 24/7.’ ... As long as we have power, the robots will be working.” (Elias Valverde II / Staff Photographer)

Waley Shen, chief operations officer for American Robotech, agrees: “Robots can only help people, not replace us,” he says.

But, someday, customers might also order food online while they sit at a table inside La Duni. Then, a human server would make sure they’re happy while a human chef made the food. Robots would do the in-between tasks.

In late 2021, Borga plans to use Kiwibot robots to deliver food to homes and businesses up to 1.5 miles from the McKinney Avenue restaurant. The robots would roll down the sidewalks, La Duni’s food secured in an insulated compartment so that it stays warm until it reaches the customer.

That would be a sight, wouldn’t it? Robots zooming down the sidewalks of Knox-Henderson in Dallas.

His next big idea is to invest in a drone that will deliver coffee and food from the air — but he hasn’t spent money on that one yet.

Borga says robots are an essential next step to keep La Duni relevant in a delivery-crazy world.

“I want to bring the product to where the people are,” Borga says. “The common thread is convenience.”

Why ‘revolutionary’ technology matters

Borga said he believes we’re in the middle of “the biggest technology revolution of my lifetime.”



some 40 years ago.

He remembers a simple revelation in 1980, when computers were used to print customers' food orders in the kitchen. It saved servers from writing copies of the same table's check, and it saved cooks and bartenders from the inevitable errors they might make by misreading a server's handwriting.

"It was revolutionary," he says.

He's been intrigued by restaurant technology ever since.

Borga bought several fridges in 2018 that can be unlocked with a customer's credit card. He planned to use them in his shop at NorthPark Center so customers could buy ice cream, cookie dough and other La Duni treats quickly — and so he wouldn't have to pay a human to staff the dessert station. His innovative idea was dead on arrival:

"They never warmed up to the idea of having automated or robotic equipment," he says of his colleagues at NorthPark.

Then, La Duni closed at NorthPark Center permanently at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. He never got to use the fridges there, and they're now parked in the foyer of the only remaining La Duni.

"When this perfect storm happens, you have to open your mind to whatever is going to help you survive," he says.

For more food news, follow Sarah Blaskovich on Twitter at [@sblaskovich](#).



A server removes food from the food delivery robot Panchita at La Duni in Dallas. The young customers hardly even notice. (Elias Valverde II / Staff Photographer)



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