

At Ikea, Many Customers Just Want To Insert "Fork A" Into "Meatball B"

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I write about food & drink as a pleasurable activity and as a business. Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own.



IKEA store in Burbank, Calif. Photo: Troy Harvey/Bloomberg

Ikea, founded in Sweden 75 ago, with its corporate headquarters today located in the Netherlands, is the world's largest furniture retailer; it operates nearly 400 stores in 48 countries and takes in about \$40 billion a year.

Its furniture is sold flat and boxed; customers can assemble it themselves or hire an Ikea installer to build it.

But the big draw at Ikea for a third of the people who pass through its doors isn't furniture at all but food. Every store features a restaurant (the "Ikea Swedish Food Market") that serves traditional meatballs, potatoes, gravy, lingonberry sauces, even \$2 hot dogs.

There are probably as many jokes about Ikea's food as there are about its furniture assembly. But food service is an important part of Ikea's business, and the popularity of its meatballs and salmon has now prompted Ikea to start thinking about standalone restaurants. Earlier forays in London, Paris and Oslo were successful, so executives are planning to expand the concept.

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It would make sense, says [The Hartman Group](#), a retail consultancy based in Bellevue, Wash. Originally, Swedish food made Ikea seem more exotic. Today, "IKEA's food and beverage vision spans far and wide." In addition to its hugely popular cafés, it offers a growing array of its own packaged, frozen and refrigerated food & beverage items in a dozen categories, ranging from meat, fish and seafood to bread, dairy, beverages, snacks and candy. The genius, says Hartman, is that "It then ties everything neatly back to "the home," notably Ikea kitchens, cookware and kitchenware."

Ikea isn't alone in its "food everywhere" push. Traditional packaged goods companies like Amazon, Walmart and Target have ramped up their food offerings.

"We can't ignore that Nordstrom, Cabella's, Ralph Lauren and Tommy Bahama have their restaurants and cafés, while American Eagle Outfitters has its trend-setting DRINK bar," reads the Hartman study (in its blog, called Hartbeat). Increasingly, for many "non-food" retailers, food and beverage is the battleground they've chosen to sway shoppers. Hartman refers to the phenomenon as the "[roadside pantry](#)."

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