

# The New York Times

## For Larger Customers, Eating Out Is Still a Daunting Experience

Restaurants have been slow to recognize, much less meet, the needs of plus-size Americans. But there are signs of a new activism and awareness.



Rebecca Alexander at Besaw's Restaurant in Portland, Ore., which gets mostly high marks from AllGo, the crowdsourced mobile app she founded to help larger people find comfortable options. But here, she shows how balancing on the bar chairs is hard because they are narrow, not deep enough, and have backs.

Leah Nash for The New York Times



By Kim Severson

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Rebecca Alexander's worst experience dining while large happened just after she nailed a promotion at a nonprofit organization.

She took her staff, and her new boss, to lunch at a promising downtown restaurant in Portland, Ore., where she lives. As the hostess led the group to a booth, Ms. Alexander, a 31-year-old who wears a size 30, knew in an instant there was no way she was going to squeeze into it.

"I remember having this out-of-body experience," she said. "I watched myself sit down and try to get in even though I knew the space was too small, because I so needed it to fit." Defeated, she asked for a table. The hostess told her there would be a half-hour wait.

"The cherry on top was that I got to be the reason we had to stand around for 30 minutes," she said.

For people who identify as large, plus-size or fat, dining out can be a social and physical minefield. Chairs with arms or impossibly small seats leave marks and bruises. Meals are spent in pain, or filled with worry that a flimsy chair might collapse.

Deciding where to eat is a challenge. Diners often comb through endless photographs of restaurant food online, hoping someone has posted an image of the chairs or the space between tables.

Even with the best preparation, there is no way to account for a clueless employee who doesn't notice that the bar stool with the curvy back just isn't going to work, or the well-meaning manager who doesn't want to call attention to a diner's size by asking which seat might be most comfortable.

"It's this weird thing where people are really nice when they realize what's going on, but in my experience very few hostesses are aware ahead of time," Ms. Alexander said. "Restaurants want to be able to serve large-bodied people, but I think they don't know they have inadvertently created environments that are difficult for us."



Ms. Alexander lunching with her friend Marceau Michel at Besaw's, which she likes for both its food and its ability to accommodate her size. Leah Nash for The New York Times



Eating in public when you live in a larger body can be challenging enough because of the judgment you may feel from others about your food choices, said Jes Baker, an [author](#), speaker and [body image coach](#) who lives in Tucson, Ariz. And people who are fat realize that accommodating them is not always easy or practical, especially in small urban restaurants where space is at a premium and even small-framed diners feel cramped.

But restaurants don't have to make it harder by ignoring a customer's physical reality, she said.

"It puts the onus on the fat person," said Ms. Baker, 32, who fluctuates between size 22 and 24. "We are the paying customers. We are paying you. We want to be comfortable and treated like humans."

Bruce Sturgell, 39, who founded the culture and clothing website [Chubstr](#) in 2011, said he walks into every restaurant expecting to be uncomfortable. He wears a size XXL or XXXL shirt — the smaller side of big, he says.

"We're in the early stages of this movement about fat acceptance and body positivity, and you're seeing it in fashion and on television but not so much in restaurants," he said.

Some restaurants are gracefully adept at accommodating extremely large customers. "The trick is to not let them know a thing while we scramble like fools to figure it out," said Ti Adelaide Martin, whose family owns Commander's Palace in New Orleans.

But that kind of awareness appears to be rare, even though the national girth has been growing for decades. About 40 percent of Americans over age 20 were classified as obese [in a 2017 report](#) by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

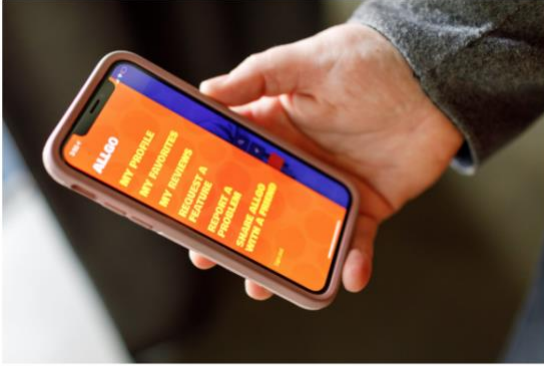
“We are in a great cultural moment where people are talking about equity and inclusion, and size falls into that,” said Cheryl Durst, 57, chief executive of the [International Interior Design Association](#).

Design that considers the physical attributes of the people who use a space, as well as how they use it, is fast becoming popular, she and others said. Size, though, is not always considered.

“The good news is that people are thinking about it sooner, as opposed to retrofitting after the fact,” she said. “But is it top of mind? No.”

Melany Robinson, 45, the founder of [Polished Pig Media](#), a national public relations firm specializing in food, travel and hospitality, said she had never heard a restaurateur or designer discuss how to best accommodate obese customers.

“I think it’s a scary topic for most,” she said.



AllGo, a mobile app being tested in Portland, allows users to rate businesses based on how accessible they are to larger people. Backers include the author Roxane Gay and plus-size model Tess Holliday.

Leah Nash for The New York Times



Palomar is another Portland restaurant Ms. Alexander likes for its atmosphere and accommodations.

Amanda Lucier for The New York Times

To help fill the gap, Ms. Alexander introduced a crowdsourced mobile app last year called [AllGo](#), which is a bit like Yelp for plus-size people. “Our reviews are straight from the source,” its website explains. “Fat people who’ve been there before and want to share what it was like.”

The app, which is being tested in Portland, allows people to review places like restaurants, theaters and gyms based on aisle width, seating, bathroom size and other issues important to large-bodied people.

The company raised more than \$55,000 through a Kickstarter campaign, and has plans to expand to other cities. Eventually, it will ask reviewers to add their jean size to help users better assess each rating. What works for someone who weighs 250 pounds may not for someone who weighs 400.

AllGo has several high-profile backers, including Mr. Sturgell, the American plus-size model Tess Holliday and Roxane Gay, the writer whose recent book, [“Hunger,”](#) explores in intimate detail what it feels like to walk through the world as a 6-foot-3-inch woman who at one time weighed more than 500 pounds.

“I want to enjoy the cocktails and the gorgeous food being put before us,” Ms. Gay, 44, writes about a dinner date with friends, “but all I can think about is the pain in my thighs and the arms of the chair pinching my sides and how much longer I will have to pretend everything is fine.”

Supporting Ms. Alexander’s new app was an easy call, Ms. Gay said. “It opens the world up to have an app that will tell fat people how accommodating or not various spaces are,” she said. “I don’t think that restaurateurs even know this is something they need to think about.”

Discussing strategies to help bigger customers is something many restaurants are loath to do, either because they don’t have one or because they don’t want to link their food with obesity.

Waffle House, a 2,100-unit restaurant chain based in Georgia that [has been criticized](#) for its calorie-heavy menu, offers mostly booths and fixed counter seating. But it also provides larger diners free-standing chairs at counters and tables.

The company would not discuss those decisions. “We are a private company and keep to ourselves when it comes to our strategies,” said Pat Warner, its director of public relations.

Many chains have added movable furniture, wider booths and chairs that meet [industry standards](#) for people who weigh as much as 400 pounds. Some accommodations are made to satisfy requirements laid out in the Americans with Disabilities Act, but not specifically for larger customers. Courts have held that [obesity constitutes a disability](#) under some circumstances, but it remains an emerging area of law.

Other changes are a nod to design trends and consumer preferences. The Golden Corral buffet chain last year adopted [a roomier](#) look that will eventually be adopted in all 491 of its restaurants. There is more space between tables, and sturdy, armless wooden chairs that the company said will lend a homier feel.

Taco Bell has stopped bolting tables to the floor, and has added movable seating in some stores to better serve groups of diners, said Matt Prince, the company's senior manager for public relations and brand experience.

Over the years, large diners have tried to draw attention to their needs through protests and legal action. The efforts, though, have been sporadic.

In 1994, under pressure from the [National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance](#), Denny's agreed to provide seating specifically designed for large people. In 2011, a 290-pound stockbroker [sued White Castle](#), which he said had violated his rights under the disabilities act because he couldn't fit into its booths. The company added free-standing chairs, and the suit was dropped.



“We haven’t really had much success in doing anything on a big scale to get restaurateurs or designers to listen and start accommodating people of size,” said Peggy Howell, the public relations director for the fat-acceptance organization, which has 11,000 members.

Ms. Howell, 71, is 5-foot-8 and weighs about 300 pounds. When she and friends find a restaurant they like in Las Vegas, where the organization is based, they sometimes bring their own comfortable folding chairs.

The group used to review doctors’ offices and restaurants in Las Vegas. It stopped the practice, but sent its research to [Ample](#), a new review website to help a variety of what its founders call nonconforming bodies — including people who are transgender or use wheelchairs.

When it started last year, the app focused on medical offices, but restaurant reviews quickly became popular, said Alissa Sobo, 32, a founder.



The New York restaurateur Drew Nieporent, here on the patio of Tribeca Grill, says he would never allow a chair in his restaurants that he couldn't sit in comfortably.

Cole Wilson for The New York Times

For Drew Nieporent, the [New York restaurateur](#) who has been in the business for 30 years, satisfying big customers is simply a matter of making them comfortable.

“I’m sensitive to it because I’ve been there,” said Mr. Nieporent, 63, who once weighed about 320 pounds. Now he’s closer to 220. “I’m proud of the fact that my chairs support me,” he said, “so they should support other people who are overweight.”

Danny Meyer, 60, whose restaurants include the [Shake Shack](#) chain and [high-end destinations](#) like Union Square Cafe, said customers’ size is a new consideration. “I don’t believe we have ever designed a restaurant saying, ‘Let’s make sure there are two tables that can accommodate someone who is larger,’” he said.

He did take the backs off the bar stools at [Maialino](#), his restaurant in the Gramercy Park Hotel, after a regular who is very big said they weren’t welcoming. Still, Mr. Meyer expects hosts to respond quickly when a plus-size diner walks through the door.

“There are always tables in a restaurant that are more commodious for large people,” he said. “So within three seconds you calculate in your mind, ‘Of the four tables we have left, which one would they be more comfortable?’”

It doesn’t always work out that way. Traci Armstrong, 46, who runs Specialty Catering in Bluffton, S.C., travels to eat at the nation’s best restaurants as a hobby. She is 5-foot-4 and about 335 pounds. She always books two airline seats.

She flew to Washington, D.C., over a holiday weekend to eat at Pineapple and Pearls, which has two Michelin stars. When she got there, her reserved seat was at a stationary bar stool at the chef's counter. She didn't fit. The staff offered to seat her outside or accommodate her at a sister restaurant, but she declined and left.

"I was mortified," she said.

To counter such problems, she will often book a table for two on OpenTable or let the restaurant know about her size in advance.

"I don't want to be a fuss," she said. "There's no positivity about my weight. We don't need to be polite about it. But there are ways they can help."



Tommy Tomlinson, who recently published a memoir about his struggles with weight, and his wife, Alix Felsing, at home in Charlotte, N.C. They met when they worked at The Charlotte Observer. Logan R. Cyrus for The New York Times

Tommy Tomlinson, a former columnist for The Charlotte Observer, addresses the issue in his new book, [“The Elephant in the Room: One Fat Man’s Quest to Get Smaller in a Growing America.”](#) He examines why he ended up topping 400 pounds, and outlines his plan to get smaller.

Mr. Tomlinson recounts how he scoured the internet for the floor plan of a [Brooklyn Diner](#) when he was in Manhattan to meet a friend, and arrived early to make sure he could secure a table where he would fit.

He has learned to be more assertive when he walks into a restaurant, immediately asking for a table instead of a booth. Sometimes, he walks out.

“I’ll just take a look around in there, and I can tell pretty quickly if it’s just not a place that’s going to fit me,” Mr. Tomlinson said. “All I’m going to be thinking about is the miserable experience of being jammed in, and the food is not going to be as good.”

Even when a place looks accommodating, he is often seated in Siberia. “It happens more than what I think would be coincidence,” he said. “I have often wondered if there is an unspoken thing to put the fat guys in the back where they can’t be seen.”

A good restaurant for people of his size has less to do with chairs or design than with attitude, Mr. Tomlinson said. “It has everything to do with how emotionally perceptive the person taking you to the table is,” he said. “It comes down to whether the people who are serving you can see you as a human being.”



Ms. Sobo, who helped create the Ample app, advises restaurant owners to encourage the staff to gently suggest a more comfortable table or offer to find an armless chair for bigger customers. “Everyone I know would find that a kindness, not an insult,” she said.



Tracy Cox, an opera singer who lives in New York, says places like the Smith, near Lincoln Center, get high marks for providing comfortable seating for people of size.  
Nicole Craine for The New York Times

People who dine out with bigger friends also can help, she and others said. Do a little legwork before selecting a place to meet for a drink after work, avoiding spots that are difficult to maneuver or have small cafe chairs.

When a host asks if you want a booth or table, defer to the larger person.

“If you see a hostess leading you through a death maze where you are going to knock every vase off of every table, be an advocate for your friend and ask if there is a table closer to the front,” said [Tracy Cox](#), who along with her fellow opera singer [Matthew Anchel](#) created a web video series called [Angry Fat People](#).

Still, she said, the issue is much deeper than armless chairs. “Part of the reason we aren’t accommodated is because there is this inherent social agreement that there is something wrong with us and we did it to ourselves,” she said.

Most diners, she said, simply want their size acknowledged without judgment.

“I’m fat,” she said. “And I deserve to eat in a restaurant and feel like I’m allowed to enjoy my life.”