

FOOD TECH

This Restaurant Is Run Entirely By Robots

Mezli is basically a big refrigerated box with a bunch of machines inside. No humans required.

by [Lauren Saria](#) | Aug 17, 2022, 10:15am PDT

Photography by [Albert Law](#)



Mezli installed its first fully robotic restaurant at Spark Social in San Francisco's Mission Bay neighborhood.

Mezli isn't the first automated restaurant to roll out in San Francisco, but, at least according to its three co-founders, it's the first to remove humans entirely from the on-site operation equation. The fully robot-run restaurant begins taking orders and sliding out Mediterranean grain bowls by the end of this week with plans to celebrate a grand

opening on August 28 at Spark Social.

It's a startup tale as old as time, so perfect the Netflix mini-series almost writes itself. A trio of Stanford graduate students are going around just living their lives when a problem lands in their laps: a complete lack of convenient and good-for-you dining options that don't break the bank — especially when you're living in one of the country's most expensive metro areas on a graduate student stipend. There's no time to prep a healthy meal for yourself, and no money to pay someone else to do it for you.

But unlike what many other people might do (as in, you know, whine and complain and then fork over \$15 for a Sweetgreen salad) these entrepreneurial minds decide to do something about it. Combining their conveniently aligned skill sets as a **software and artificial intelligence expert**, a **robotics wunderkind**, and an **aerospace engineer**, they come up with a solution that not only alleviates their personal dilemma but also stands to open up new possibilities for an established industry.

About two years and a **few million dollars** later, **Mezli** co-founders Alex Kolchinski, Alex Gruebele, and Max Perham are days away from firing up the touch screens at what they believe to be the world's first fully robotic restaurant.



To be clear, Mezli isn't a restaurant in the traditional sense. As in, you won't be able to pull up a seat and have a friendly server — human, robot, or otherwise — take your order and deliver your food. Instead, Mezli works more like if a vending machine and a restaurant had a robot baby, Kolchinski describes. It's a way to get fresh food to a lot of people, really fast (the box can pump out about 75 meals an hour), and, importantly, at a lower price; the cheapest Mezli bowl starts at \$6.99.

On its face, the concept actually sounds pretty simple. The co-founders built what's essentially a big, refrigerated shipping container and stuffed it with machines capable of portioning out ingredients, putting those ingredients into bowls, heating the food up, and then moving it to a place where diners can get to it. But in a technical sense, the co-founders say it was quite difficult to work out. Most automated restaurants

still require humans in some capacity; maybe **people take orders** while robots make the food or, vice versa, with **automated ordering** and humans prepping food behind the scenes. But Mezli can run on its own, serving hundreds of meals without any human staff.



The food does get prepped and pre-cooked off-site by good old-fashioned carbon-based beings. Mezli founding chef Eric Minnich, who previously worked at Traci Des Jardins's the Commissary and at Michelin-starred Madera at Rosewood Sand Hill hotel, says he and a lean team of just two other people can handle all the chopping, mixing, cooking, and portioning at a commissary kitchen. Then, once a day, they load all the menu components into the big blue-and-white Mezli box. Inside the box, there's an oven that either brings the ingredients up to temp or finishes up the last of the cooking. Cutting down on labor marks a key cost-saving measure in the Mezli business model; with just a fraction of the staff, as in less than a half dozen workers, Mezli can serve hundreds of meals.

Minnich developed the menu of Mediterranean-inspired bowls alongside the technology, which was key to ensuring everything meshed, he explains. Diners can choose from a set list of bowls — options include a lemon za'atar chicken bowl on a bed of turmeric rice, a roasted cauliflower and sweet potato bowl on a bed of red rice, a shredded lamb and tzatziki bowl garnished with roasted mushrooms and tomatoes, or a falafel bowl paired with Israeli salad. There's also the choice to build your own bowl combining any ingredients into a meal resulting in some 64,800 possible options. Sides include a tahini chocolate chunk cookie, pita chips, and a selection of drinks.

The fully customizable nature of the Mezli menu also marks a departure from other automated restaurants, the co-founders say. Because of the company's proprietary machinery and software, they're able to allow diners to mix and match any ingredients they want — and a full menu change, for example to Thai or Indian food, requires (at least, hypothetically) nothing more than a software update.

Kolchinski recognizes Mezli might not be the future of dining; there are limitations to a model that's devoid

of human interaction, part of what draws many people to gather over food and drink at traditional restaurants. But he and the co-founders say their technology meets the requirements of being fast, convenient, affordable, and healthy in a way that traditional restaurants simply can't. Mezli boxes, which run on electricity and don't require gas hook-ups or a hood or even a water line, can be placed just about anywhere. Plus they can be built far cheaper than traditional restaurant build-outs cost, Kolchinski says, though he declined to share an exact cost for the production of the first box.

"You have to be careful as an engineer, to not be a hammer looking for a nail," Kolchinski says. Now it's up to hungry San Franciscans to judge if the company hit the nail on the head or missed the mark.









Mezli, located at Spark Social (601 Mission Bay Boulevard North in San Francisco) will celebrate its grand opening at 11 a.m. on Sunday, August 28.



Mezli

601 Mission Bay Boulevard North, San Francisco, CA 94158

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