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Wireless Finds a Welcome in Hospitality

Keith McNally's Emenu technology is his latest bid to speed service, and gain efficiencies, in the restaurant and hotel industries

It's not quite *Star Trek*, where food can be made to materialize just by talking into a machine. But restaurant guests at a new Holiday Inn in Duluth, Ga., can now place their meal orders electronically. The so-called Emenu -- really a tablet PC connected wirelessly to a computer in the hotel -- provides photos and nutritional info on menu items. Customers can tally the calories, carbs, and price of their meals before they order, then zap the request to the kitchen. The Emenu also translates that data into Spanish and into euros.

The fun doesn't stop there. While waiting for the food, diners can log onto the Web using the Emenu, play games, get the latest on hotel events, or order a taxi. Guests traveling with laptops can do all of the above with their own machines via the hotel's free Wi-Fi network, at the restaurant or from anywhere else in the hotel, including their rooms.

It's all part, says Keith McNally, founder and CEO of Ameranth Wireless, which created the Emenu, of a coming explosion in technology use in the hospitality industry. "This is kind of the classic American dream," McNally says. "I quit my safe job, mortgaged the house. I've put my whole life into this."

GRUNTS AND WAITERS. McNally, 49, has taken an unusual route to high-tech entrepreneurship. A West Point grad, he served as an artillery officer for five years. After leaving the Army, he spent 17 years at Litton Industries, now a part of Northrop Grumman (NOC), helping develop the handheld wireless devices the military now uses to guide artillery batteries and smart bombs.

"Before that, artillery units still performed the way they did in Napoleon's day, with grease pencils and pins on maps," McNally says. He saw an unlikely similarity between restaurant work and the military. Both, he notes, involve a lot of young people, working in high-stress environments that include a lot of movement.

Ameranth's first product helped automate the hostess station, which McNally calls the "command post of most restaurants." Now, assistant hostesses at Red Lobster, a unit of

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Darden Restaurants ([DRI](#)), and Outback Steakhouse ([OSI](#)) wander the restaurants looking for customers that are leaving their tables. The employees type the table location into a wireless device that sends the info to the hostess station. There, additional software finds the next customers in line and automatically pages them to let them know a table is ready.

"WIRELESS WENCHES." Another Ameranth product allows food servers to send orders wirelessly to the kitchen, sometimes allowing the drinks to arrive before the guests have finished ordering. That technology is being used now at six basketball arenas, the Opryland theme park, the new Queen Elizabeth II cruise ship, and a couple of Medieval Times restaurants, where the servers have been nicknamed "Wireless Wenches."

McNally's sales pitch comes down to money. Some 75% of a restaurant's business is done in just 15% of its operating hours. So turning tables quickly during the high-traffic period is critical. Ameranth also offers something to food servers, who through faster ordering can work six tables at a time instead of four. "Her income just went up 50%," he says.

San Diego-based Ameranth is privately held, and McNally declines to release revenues. He says he has raised more than \$10 million in venture capital, including investments by Micosoft ([MSFT](#)) and Symbol Technologies ([SBL](#)), the leader in bar-code scanners. His biggest competition is Columbia (Md.)-based Micros Systems ([MCRS](#)), at \$400 million a year, a comparative giant in software for the hospitality industry.

A FIRST STEP. To make sure he doesn't end up getting his lunch eaten, McNally has sought to partner with other leaders in hospitality technology. Radiant Systems ([RADS](#)), a big player in point-of-sale tracking systems, sells McNally's hostess software. InfoGenesis, which sells its technology to cruise ships and sports stadiums, is a partner in the systems for food servers.

Mark Snyder, who runs Holiday Inns in North America for the chain's parent company InterContinental Hotels Group ([IHG](#)), also sees the Emenu as the start of something big. "This is the first time technology like this is being used to increase a hotel's productivity," he says. "Eventually, we'll be able to integrate operations systems wirelessly -- from reservations to supply-chain management." That bucket of ice could be just a mouse click away

By [Christopher Palmeri](#) in Los Angeles

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