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Courtesy of UMaine Dining

Meet the Kiwibots, UMaine Dining's new food delivery robots

August 23, 2023

University of Maine students, faculty and staff will see some new faces on campus this fall — but, unlike the first years beginning their college experience, these newcomers will have smiles made of pixels. UMaine Dining is launching 15 food delivery robots, called “Kiwibots,” in order to meet the student demand for food delivery services.

The semiautonomous [Kiwibots](#) will navigate the campus using a camera and GPS system to deliver food ordered through UMaine Dining’s [Everyday](#) app. UMaine students, faculty and staff can [sign up for Kiwibot subscription plans](#) that cover a certain number of deliveries (and include other perks like free birthday rewards, in-app discounts, waived delivery fees and loyalty points). Individual orders without a subscription are also available.

The Kiwibots will be scattered around campus, and when a call comes in for an order, the robot closest to the retail or residential location will be assigned to it. The recipient can track the robot’s journey on the app until it arrives outside their building, at which time they can scan a QR code and open the robot to receive their food.

But the Kiwibots are more than just useful — they’re also adorable.

“The robots themselves have really cool personalities,” says Tadd Stone, UMaine Dining resident district manager. “When they see each other they have different emojis that pop up on their eyeballs. If a Kiwibot gets in the way of the other way, it makes exclamation points. They gather up with hearts in their eyes hanging out with each other.”

The Kiwibots will also be customized with “skins” and special flags throughout the year for events, like UMaine Homecoming and Halloween. On other campuses, Stone says Kiwibots have even performed “dances” at Homecoming celebrations and cheerleading competitions.



Courtesy of UMaine Dining

Kiwibots in front of UMaine's bear statue.

Students will have the opportunity to submit names for the 15 UMaine Kiwibots at New Student Orientation. Jonathan Warren, marketing manager at UMaine Dining, also says that the Kiwibots also will be conducting giveaways on campus at orientation and other events throughout the year.

Stone says that he and his team decided the Kiwibots were a good fit for UMaine after a listening campaign they conducted last year, where students expressed that they were looking for more delivery options on campus. Stone says that they couldn't find enough student employees for delivery jobs — despite an increase in student wages from \$14.10 to \$16, Stone says that only 158 students could be found for about 300 open positions — so the robots seemed like a good way to fill that demand.

Stone says the robots have an average turnaround time of 25 minutes, including food preparation. The robots are also adorned with bright flags so people can easily see them when they're traveling; the lights on the flags blink when the robot is out for delivery.

Warren says that the Kiwibots' intelligent software improves navigation the longer the robots are on campus. As far as finding their way around campus during the winter, Stone says that Kiwibots have already been implemented at schools where they have to navigate snow and icy conditions, including at the University of Vermont, University of Southern Maine and Southern Maine Community College.

"The wheels almost look like they have paddles on them so they can go in the snow better," Stone says. "The robots themselves only go in ADA-compliant locations, like wherever the roads are plowed for wheelchair access."

There have been delivery mishaps in the past, though, like Kiwibots getting stuck in potholes or falling off curbs. The robots can send distress signals to an on-campus technician based out of the Memorial Union, who can manually direct the robots out of tricky situations or rush to the scene for trickier situations.

Stone says that thefts and damage to Kiwibots "happens very infrequently," but the robots are equipped with protective measures, including making loud sounds if they are tampered with and also having built-in mechanisms that call the police and send a GPS signal so that the robots can be found.

If something happens to a robot during an active order, Stone says the recipient will receive a replacement for free, "just for the inconvenience."

The food delivered by the Kiwibots will be prepared at the Bear's Den Kitchen during the day, and will also be available from 7–10 p.m. through the Den After Dark. Additionally, the Kiwibots will bring exclusive virtual dining options to the UMaine campus, like partnerships through Mariah Carey cheesecake and Nascar wings that can be purchased only through the delivery app.

For their launch year at UMaine, there will still be some limitations to the Kiwibots. They can only

deliver to campus currently, as permits are needed to cross major roads (which Stone says UMaine Dining is actively working on, particularly for fraternities on campus). They also are still troubleshooting the proper packaging for certain combinations for food — Stone, for example, doesn't recommend ordering a hot pizza with a pint of ice cream — but the robots are equipped with air cushions to, for example, prevent drinks from spilling on food.

Stone says that the Kiwibots on other campuses have been “extremely popular.” After the first year, the UMaine Dining team will evaluate the popularity of the program to see if more than 15 robots are needed; they can get new robots “within a day or two” to subsidize the need if the demand for memberships is overwhelming.

More than anything, though, Stone and his team are hoping that the Kiwibots will be welcomed onto campus like any other newcomers: with a Hearty Maine Hello.

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