Original Research

Masterestaurant Dark Kitchen Index 2026: the real *unit economics* of delivery in Latin America

By **Diego F. Parra** · Updated 2026-07-09 · Dark Kitchens & Foodtech

QUICK VERDICT

Verdict: a dark kitchen in Latin America doesn't fail on food cost, it fails on the *delivery cost stack*. With aggregator commissions of 25-30% of the ticket, the only scorecard cell that decides survival is the contribution margin after commission: below 12-15% no unit economics hold. Per Statista (2024), the meal delivery segment in Latin America will exceed USD 39 billion in 2027, but demand growth doesn't fix a broken margin structure. Diego F. Parra and Masterestaurant read the sources this way: delivery is a channel, not a model; whoever treats it as a model burns cash.

Masterestaurant Study / Sector Synthesis · Expert synthesis · cited industry sources · 12 min read · 2026-07-09

This analysis is an expert synthesis of real public data from the foodtech and delivery sector, read with a restaurant operations consultant's judgment, not primary research with its own sample.

Diego F. Parra's track record (+8,400 restaurants supported, 43 countries, 20 years) is the authority context that orders the reading; never the source of the figures, which come from cited external organizations.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

Side-by-side comparison

	DARK KITCHEN / VIRTUAL BRAND (DELIVERY ONLY)	RESTAURANT WITH DINING ROOM + DELIVERY
Aggregator commission on ticket	✕ 25-30% of ticket on leading apps (Business of Apps 2025)	✓ 25-30% only on the delivery channel; the dining room pays none (Business of Apps 2025)
Platform concentration (LatAm/Brazil)	✕ iFood: 87% of e-food bookings in Brazil (Statista 2024)	✓ Same dependence on the delivery channel; the dining room diversifies revenue (Statista 2024)
LatAm meal delivery market size 2027	✕ Will exceed USD 39 billion (Statista 2024)	✓ Shares the same market, but captures additional on-premise ticket (Statista 2024)
Dominant cloud kitchen model	✕ Independent segment: 61.7% of global revenue (Grand View Research 2025)	✓ Not applicable: the kitchen serves dining room and delivery simultaneously (Grand View Research 2025)
Dark kitchen density (CDMX reference)	✕ +1,200 active dark kitchens in Mexico City; +40% since 2023 (CANIRAC 2025)	✓ Competition for the same rider pool and delivery zones (CANIRAC 2025)
Asia-Pacific weight in cloud kitchens (global context)	✕ 48.0% of global cloud kitchen revenue (Grand View Research 2025)	✓ Global reference; LatAm replicates the model with lower maturity (Grand View Research 2025)

Finding 1 — Why does a dark kitchen fail in Latin America?

A dark kitchen in Latin America doesn't fail because of food cost, it fails because of the delivery cost stack.

With aggregator commissions of 25-30% of the ticket (per Business of Apps, Food Delivery App Report 2025), that bite hits 100% of sales, not a residual margin. I've seen it across dozens of operations: the operator celebrates a 28% food cost and keeps burning cash, because they forgot that the only cell on the scorecard that decides survival is the contribution margin after commission. The market pushes hard —the meal delivery segment in the region will exceed USD 39 billion by 2027 (Statista 2024)—, but volume is not profitability. The mistake I see again and again is confusing gross sales with available cash. Every ticket that enters through the app arrives with 30% already committed before touching the first onion. The aggregator commission is the cost that separates a viable model from one that burns cash: between 25% and 30% of the ticket per Business of Apps (Food Delivery App Report 2025).

Finding 2 — How much does the aggregator commission really weigh?

The detail almost no one models correctly is that in a pure dark kitchen that commission hits 100% of sales, because there is no dining room compensating with intermediary-free tickets.

Let's run the concrete cash math: on a dish priced at 100, with a 28 food cost and a 28 commission, 44 of gross margin remains before rent, packaging and courier. Delivery packaging usually adds another 4-6% and transport shrinkage another 2-3%. From there comes the EBITDA, if any. That's why I insist to every operator I coach with the MASTERESTAURANT method: the delivery menu price is not the dining-room price, it must absorb the commission by design, not discover it at month-end close. Platform concentration is territory risk, and in Latin America it's severe: iFood concentrates 87% of e-food bookings in Brazil (Statista 2024), the region's largest market. When a single aggregator dominates like that, commission pricing isn't negotiated, it's accepted.

Finding 3 — Is platform concentration a business risk?

This isn't trivia: it defines your real bargaining power, which is nearly zero. The pattern repeats outside the region —DoorDash closed 2024 with 60.7% of U.S.

delivery (Earnest Analytics 2024) and Grab with 53.9% in Southeast Asia (Momentum Works 2024)—, always with the same effect on the small operator. The lesson for the gastro-group leader is harsh: diversifying channels (own brand, WhatsApp, direct pickup) is not a marketing fad, it's the only lever that gives you back some control over a commission that, if you depend on a single player, is an imposed price. A healthy food cost is a necessary but insufficient condition for a dark kitchen's profitability. The Masterestaurant rule sets food cost at ≤32% per dish as the maximum, and healthy hovers around 28%, but without controlling the delivery stack that 28% doesn't save the margin. The arithmetic is relentless: a 28% food cost plus an aggregator commission of up to 30% (Business of Apps 2025) already consumes 58% of the ticket before touching packaging, kitchen-station rent or payroll.

Finding 4 — Does a healthy food cost guarantee profitability?

And watch where you load each cost: payroll, rent and utilities are NOT charged to the dish, they go to the break-even point.

The classic mistake I see is folding cloud kitchen rent into the dish cost and ending up with pricing that scares the customer without fixing the cash. First control commission and packaging; food cost, though it matters, is the second battle, not the first. The cloud kitchen model's scale is real but doesn't guarantee sustained positive EBITDA. 48.0% of the sector's global revenue is in Asia-Pacific (Grand View Research, Cloud Kitchen Market 2025), proving the model moves enormous volume. But the same study reveals the nuance that matters: the independent segment dominates with 61.7% of revenue (Grand View Research 2025), meaning loose operators, not consolidated chains. That signals a fragmented market, heavy entry and exit, and few who achieve stable margin.

Finding 5 — Does the cloud kitchen model's scale translate into positive EBITDA?

In Mexico the phenomenon is visible: over 1,200 active dark kitchens in Mexico City in 2025, up +40% since 2023 (CANIRAC 2025). They grow in number, not necessarily in profitability.

Scale lowers cost per kitchen, yes, but it doesn't touch the aggregator commission, which remains a fixed percentage of the ticket. Scaling a model with negative contribution margin only multiplies the loss faster. An honest dark kitchen unit economics scorecard is ordered around a single survival metric: contribution margin after commission, not sales nor food cost in isolation. I build it like this with every group I advise: delivery menu price, mi-

nus food cost (≤32%, ideally 28%), minus aggregator commission (25-30% per Business of Apps 2025), minus packaging (4-6%), minus transport shrinkage (2-3%). What remains is the only figure that pays rent, kitchen and profit. In a market that will exceed USD 39 billion in meal delivery in Latin America by 2027 (Statista 2024), the temptation is to chase volume; the disciplined operator chases margin per ticket.

Finding 6 — How do you build an honest unit economics scorecard?

The track record of Diego F. Parra —restaurants supported across 43 countries over 20 years— confirms a pattern: whoever fails to model commission as a variable cost on 100% of sales isn't doing unit economics, they're doing accounting illusion.

The levers to defend a dark kitchen's delivery margin are three, and none is cutting food cost below healthy levels. First: diversify channels to reduce dependence on the dominant aggregator —recall iFood holds 87% in Brazil (Statista 2024) and DoorDash 60.7% in the U.S. (Earnest Analytics 2024)—, pushing orders through own brand and WhatsApp where commission drops to zero. Second: design the delivery menu with prices that absorb commission from the start, not dishes copied from the dining room. Third: attack packaging and transport shrinkage, that invisible 6-9% that eats the margin. In a region with over 1,200 dark kitchens in Mexico City alone (CANIRAC 2025), competition for the same customer is fierce.

Finding 7 — What levers remain to defend delivery margin?

The consultant's verdict is simple: whoever controls the delivery stack survives; whoever only watches food cost closes with an impeccable kitchen and an empty till.

The aggregator commission (25-30% of ticket per Business of Apps 2025) is the cost that separates a viable model from a cash-burning one; in the dark kitchen it hits 100% of sales. Platform concentration is territory risk: with iFood at 87% in Brazil (Statista 2024), commission pricing isn't negotiated, it's accepted. A healthy food cost (≤32% per dish) is necessary but insufficient: without controlling the delivery stack, a 28% food cost doesn't save the margin. Cloud kitchen scale is real —48.0% of global revenue sits in Asia-Pacific (Grand View Research 2025)— but the independent segment dominates with 61.7% (Grand View Research 2025): few operators achieve sustained positive EBITDA.

POINT BY POINT

A/B analysis: dark kitchen vs. restaurant with dining room in 2026

COMMISSION STRUCTURE

A · DARK KITCHEN / VIRTUAL BRAND (DELIVERY ONLY)

The dark kitchen pays 25-30% of ticket (Business of Apps 2025) on 100% of its sales.

B · MASTERESTAURANT The restaurant with a dining room pays that commission only on the delivery channel, not on the on-premise ticket.

Verdict: The dining-room model wins on margin protection; the dark kitchen wins on fixed operating cost.

TERRITORY / PLATFORM RISK

A · DARK KITCHEN / VIRTUAL BRAND (DELIVERY ONLY)

High concentration: iFood at 87% of e-food in Brazil (Statista 2024) leaves pricing in the app's hands.

B · MASTERESTAURANT The dining room diversifies revenue and reduces dependence on a single platform.

Verdict: The dining-room model wins on resilience; the dark kitchen must diversify owned channels to match.

SCALABILITY

A · DARK KITCHEN / VIRTUAL BRAND (DELIVERY ONLY)

Virtual brands over one kitchen; the independent segment is already 61.7% of global revenue (Grand View Research 2025).

B · MASTERESTAURANT Scale limited by dining-room square meters and floor payroll.

Verdict: The dark kitchen wins on theoretical scale, with contribution margin as the real ceiling.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

Dark kitchen / virtual brand DELIVERY ONLY

- ✕ Zero dining-room and waiter cost: prime cost concentrates on food cost + aggregator commission.
- ✕ Commissions of 25-30% of ticket (Business of Apps 2025) that erode the contribution margin.
- ✕ Critical dependence on 1-2 platforms: iFood holds 87% of e-food in Brazil (Statista 2024).
- ✕ Scalable in virtual brands over one kitchen, but with risk of ticket cannibalization.

Restaurant with dining room + delivery MASTERESTAURANT

- ✓ The dining room contributes on-premise ticket with no commission and protects total contribution margin.
- ✓ Delivery as an incremental channel, not a model: commission hits only a fraction of sales.
- ✓ Higher prime cost from floor payroll, but lower platform-risk concentration.
- ✓ Differentiated menu engineering: travel-ready dishes vs. dine-in experience.

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THE NUMBERS THAT MATTER

The 2026 scorecard in cited figures

39
BN USD
Meal delivery in Latin America in 2027 (projection)

87%
Brazil e-food bookings concentrated in iFood (2024)

1200
+ UNITS
Active dark kitchens in Mexico City; +40% since 2023

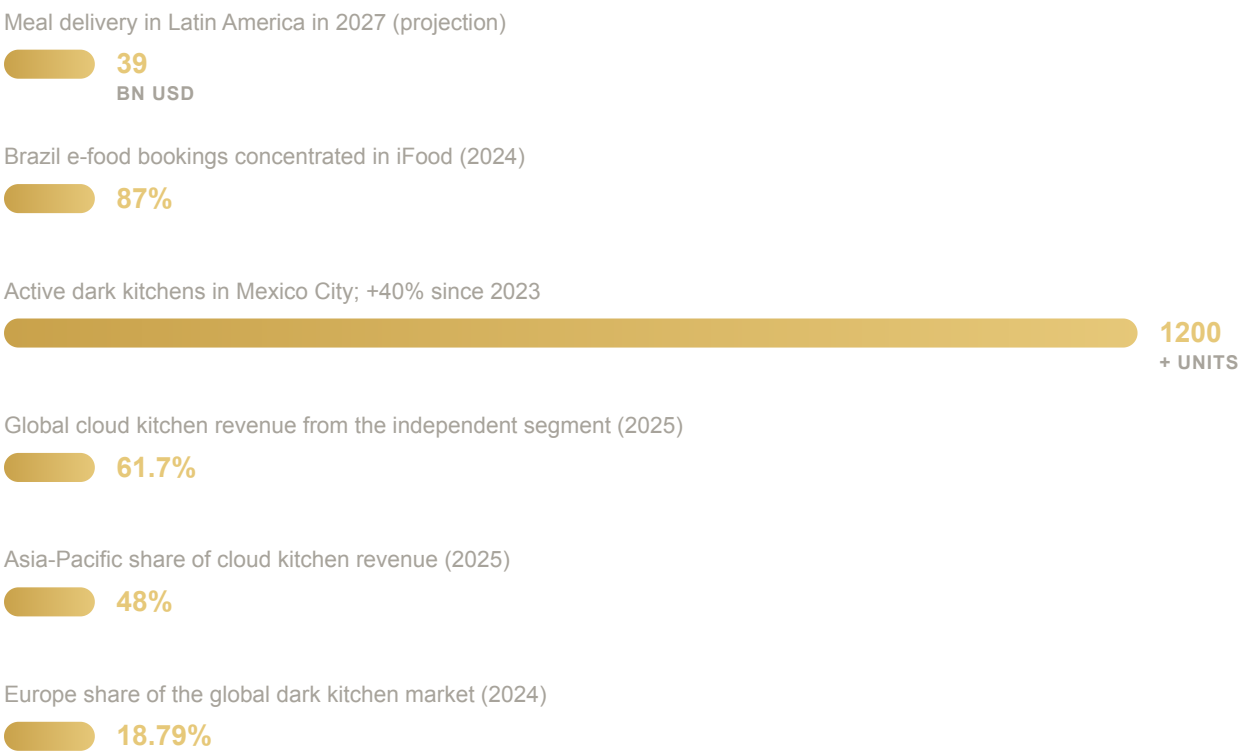
61.7%
Global cloud kitchen revenue from the independent segment (2025)

48%
Asia-Pacific share of cloud kitchen revenue (2025)

18.79%
Europe share of the global dark kitchen market (2024)

VISUALIZATION

The numbers, visualized



Sources: Statista 2024 · CANIRAC 2025 · Grand View Research 2025 · Global Growth Insights 2024

Chart by masterestaurant.com

REAL CASE

“The mistake I see over and over in LatAm dark kitchens: they celebrate record sales in the app and at month-end there's no cash. They had a 29% food cost, but never subtracted the 27% commission or the packaging. Their contribution margin after commission came out to 9%, and that doesn't pay the kitchen rent. The figure that matters isn't gross sales on the aggregator; it's what's left after the platform takes its cut.”

— Diego F. Parra, restaurant operations consultant · Masterestaurant

HOW TO APPLY IT IN YOUR RESTAURANT

How to position your dark kitchen against the 2026 scorecard

1. **1. Calculate your contribution margin after commission, not food cost alone**
Take the gross average ticket on the app, subtract food cost, packaging and the aggregator commission (25-30% per Business of Apps 2025). What remains is your true contribution margin per order. If it drops below 12-15%, the model has no healthy unit economics no matter how much volume you add.

2. **2. Measure your territory risk from platform concentration**
If a single app gives you more than 70% of your orders —realistic in LatAm, where iFood holds 87% of e-food in Brazil (Statista 2024)— your pricing depends on the commission they set. Diversify owned channels (WhatsApp, web) to cut dependence and protect EBITDA.

3. **3. Apply menu engineering built for travel**
Not every dining-room dish survives 25 minutes on a motorbike. Redesign the menu prioritizing high rotation, food cost ≤32% and dishes that arrive well. AI recommendation shortlists on the apps reward consistency: fewer SKUs, better executed, raise your ranking and cut cost per failed order.

4. **4. Define break-even with the full delivery stack**
Load kitchen rent, software, packaging and the weighted average commission onto break-even. With 61.7% of global cloud kitchen revenue held by the independent segment (Grand View Research 2025), those who survive know their real break-even, not those chasing the aggregator's GMV.

FAQ

Frequently asked questions about dark kitchen unit economics in 2026

How much do delivery aggregators charge in Latin America in 2026?

Leading apps charge between 25% and 30% of the ticket per Business of Apps (2025). That commission hits 100% of a dark kitchen's sales, making it the cost that most decides whether the model has healthy unit economics or burns cash.

What margin does a dark kitchen need to be viable?

After subtracting food cost (≤32%), packaging and the aggregator commission (25-30% per Business of Apps 2025), the contribution margin per order must exceed 12-15%. Below that threshold, not even LatAm's larger meal delivery market —USD 39 billion in 2027 per Statista (2024)— saves the operation.

Why is depending on a single delivery platform risky?

Because commission pricing stops being negotiable. In Brazil, iFood concentrates 87% of e-food bookings per Statista (2024): that concentration is pure territory risk, and forces diversifying owned channels to protect EBITDA.

How many dark kitchens are operating in Latin America?

Density is growing fast: Mexico City alone exceeds 1,200 active dark kitchens, +40% since 2023 per CANIRAC (2025). The independent segment dominates the model with 61.7% of global cloud kitchen revenue per Grand View Research (2025).

DATA & SOURCES

Sector data 2026 (official sources)

Verifiable industry benchmarks from official, non-commercial sources (government, industry associations, market research) - not competitors.

Metric	Benchmark 2026	Source
Inversión agrifoodtech en América Latina 2024	**USD 249 millones en 2024, una caída de 24% frente al año previo**	AgFunder 2025
Concentración de la inversión agrifoodtech en Brasil	**Brasil representó cerca del 55% de toda la inversión agrifoodtech de LatAm y el Caribe en 2024**	AgFunder 2025
Mercado de cloud kitchens en México 2024	**USD 1.100 millones en 2024, con CAGR 10,74% hacia 2033**	IMARC Group 2024
Clientes activos de iFood 2024	**55 millones de clientes activos al cierre de 2024**	iFood 2024

Metric	Benchmark 2026	Source
Establecimientos aliados de iFood	**Más de 380.000 establecimientos aliados en más de 1.500 ciudades de Brasil (2024)**	iFood 2024
Usuarios activos de Rappi 2024	**35 millones de usuarios activos y 150 millones de descargas a agosto de 2024**	Rappi (balance operativo) 2024