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What's For Dinner? Supermarkets, Stores Serving Up High Tech

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Amazon, in late September, began quietly transforming shopping in a move that had nothing (or little) to do with Whole Foods -- opening its first cashierless store beyond its Seattle base, in Chicago. The store is significant for what it doesn't have – cashiers and lines. [Amazon Go](#) stores blend tech and brick and mortar, using cameras, sensors and the Amazon Go app to charge your Amazon account as you exit.

As tech companies like Amazon rediscover retail, retail is discovering tech in a wedding made for the supermarket and store aisle. A technology revolution is embedding itself in the food and beverage industry, from smart shelf technology to facial recognition to cashierless stores to drone deliveries. It's too early to tell which trends will become new norms, but it's a perfect time to look at the tech landscape in the far-from-sleepy supermarket sector and what drives change.

While cellphones, cameras and software revolutionize the sale of soft and hard goods, consumer preferences for convenience and transparency drive technology. Still, taste may determine which technology sticks. We know that consumers today want to read labels, know pricing and ingredients – and touch and feel certain products. Tech at once serves customers and retailers in a data revolution where privacy and proficiency balance. But tech in this case is about improving and changing the in-store experience, rather than simply shifting it to online orders.

Amazon only last week continued to transform shopping, opening a smart store, its eighth Amazon Go unit, in Seattle in an office building, according to [Reuters](#), which also reported Amazon contacted airports about possible locations. British publication [The Sunday Telegraph](#) reported this week that Amazon plans to go global with a unit in London.

"We asked ourselves: what if we could create a shopping experience with no lines and no checkout?" Amazon says on its website of this new retail model. "Could we push the boundaries of computer vision and machine learning to create a store where customers could simply take what they want and go?"

In addition to cashierless stores, facial recognition is turning supermarkets into super stores rather than sometimes stodgy boxes for food and beverage. Chinese retailer J.D..com opened a store in Indonesia, according to [Tech in Asia](#), that tracks RFID tags to identify purchases matched with facial recognition at terminals. It also can map customer movements, getting a sense of how people navigate the store, where traffic is strongest and weakest. Chinese firm Alibaba tested a system that would let customers pay with facial scans. Through facial recognition, cameras can identify consumers, leading to easier transactions, but also to privacy issues.

With or without cameras, companies can collect electronic data about customers and send coupons and promotions based on prior purchasing preferences. They can do this while people are in stores, ideally making you offers that you want – exactly when you want them. What better time to send a coupon than the moment when someone is shopping?

While many services are designed to appeal to consumers, technology is also saving money and allowing stores to be more nimble, even as online shopping threatens traditional retail. Stocking shelves and ordering product are arduous tasks for retailers. Smart shelves are changing that. New stickers had to be put on products after price changes. With smart technology, information is stored, so you know what is out of stock and needs to be ordered. And you can change pricing in an automated fashion.

Everyone is selling food these days and the competition is fierce at the retail level. Savings and service are key along with selection, and both are fueling tech in the food and beverage sector. Drug stores and convenience stores sell food and delivery services offer a menu of options. So it's imperative that retailers invest in technology, to operate more efficiently and effectively, as well as to understand consumer preferences. If a retailer does not invest in technology, it may find itself left behind.

All of this in-store technology comes as consumers migrate toward having everything delivered to their homes. Will brick and mortar be replaced by drones? Consumers still visit the store to feel and touch fresh items such as meat, poultry and dairy. And the experience of shopping itself is very different in-store than online, while supermarkets roll out open-air restaurants and other services. In the end, the human factor, the sights and smells as well as the experience of walking the aisles, may keep people going to supermarkets. Still, you can bet that technology will become a bigger part of the experience not just online but at retail as well.