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UCT student launches Bites app to make eating out cheaper

Dylan Steiner Photo: Supplied

A meal that costs R130 at one restaurant and just R79 across the street gave a 20-year-old University of Cape Town (UCT) student, Dylan Steiner, an idea: what if people could compare restaurant prices before deciding where to eat?

The first-year business science student turned that experience into Bites, a free food discovery app designed to help diners compare menu prices, read reviews, view food pictures and find meals that offer better value for money.

Steiner said the price difference between the two meals came as a surprise and made him realise how difficult it could be for consumers to know whether they were paying a fair price when eating out.

"I was like, there's no way I didn't know that this is nearly half the price across the road," he said.

"That's when it clicked in my head that I should be able to create an app where people can upload prices and then more easily compare, so they never have to go to an expensive restaurant again."

For Steiner, the idea goes beyond finding the lowest price. It is about helping consumers make informed decisions in a city where eating out can be expensive, particularly for students and young people on tight budgets.

"The core question Bites is trying to answer is: if you order this, are you getting scammed? Is it worth it or not?" he said.

Visiting restaurants

Building the app has required considerable legwork. Steiner has personally visited about 700 restaurants in Cape Town to photograph menus and record prices, creating a database that users can consult when deciding where to eat.

He also developed software to help him upload and categorise the menus, turning what could have been a tedious manual process into a more organised system.

The experience allowed him to explore more of Cape Town while introducing restaurant owners and staff to the project. He said the response had generally been encouraging, with restaurant listings also offering businesses an opportunity to reach new customers.

Keeping the information accurate will be crucial to the app's success. Steiner said restaurants would be able to update their menus and prices, while users could submit photographs when they encounter prices that differ from those listed.

The app also uses a system designed to identify unusual prices. According to Steiner, prices reported by multiple users can be compared, while extreme outliers may be excluded or flagged for further review to reduce the risk of misleading information.

Users can also assess value for money through ratings, photographs and reviews. This is intended to help distinguish a genuinely good deal from an inexpensive meal that offers poor quality or small portions.

Building with the help of AI

Steiner did not have a software development background. Instead, he used artificial intelligence (AI) tools to help write much of the app's underlying code, while focusing on the design, features and overall experience he wanted to create.

He said the biggest challenge was not getting the basic technology to work, but rather translating his vision into a finished product.

"The hardest part was more my vision and how I wanted the app to look and feel," he said. "Enacting that vision was the most difficult part, and it took many months of refining to get it done."

Steiner spends about five hours a day working on Bites alongside his university studies.

"I think it's worth it if I can get South Africans and students more affordable restaurants and make eating out cheaper and more accessible for everyone," he said.

His experience as a UCT student helped him identify the problem. He said he had seen fellow students struggle to afford restaurant meals and find good places to eat within their budgets.

A free app with national and international ambitions

Bites is currently free to use, and Steiner said he intends to keep it that way. His longer-term business model may involve charging restaurants a subscription fee for verified profiles, which could allow them to promote deals, monitor reviews and access information on how customers interact with their offerings.

The app has already recorded more than 2 000 downloads since its Cape Town launch. Steiner said his immediate priority was to build a strong user community and demonstrate that the model works before expanding into other cities.

Johannesburg, Durban and Pretoria are among the potential next destinations, with international food centres such as New York, London and Barcelona representing longer-term possibilities if the concept proves successful.

His vision is for Bites to be the first place people turn to when deciding where to eat, whether they are looking for an affordable meal, discovering a new restaurant or comparing deals in their neighbourhood.

He also has a message for other students who have ideas but believe they lack the technical skills, experience or resources to pursue them.

With AI tools making aspects of software development more accessible, Steiner believes students should test their ideas rather than dismissing them before they begin.

"I think the technology in 2026 is so advanced that if you really think you have an idea that can succeed, just try your best to get it done," he said.

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