

PARLA

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR HOSPITALITY

Stop Missing Bookings

A practical AI guide for Australian cafes and restaurants

Joel Cox

Founder, Meradove

Contents

- 1 Why I Wrote This

- 2 The Quiet Revenue Leak: Why Missed Calls Matter More Than You Think

- 3 The Real Cost of Staff Answering the Phone

- 4 What an AI Phone Assistant Actually Is (and What It Isn't)

- 5 FAQs, Bookings and Decisions: Three Very Different Jobs

- 6 Privacy and Call Recording: The Basics for Australian Venues

- 7 How to Test an AI Phone Assistant Before You Trust It

- 8 Questions to Ask Before Choosing a Provider

- 9 Your Readiness Checklist, and a Short Word to Finish

Chapter 1: Why I Wrote This

I want to start with a moment I keep seeing, over and over, in cafes and restaurants around Australia.

It is a Saturday, around midday. The floor is full. The coffee machine has not stopped since eight. Someone has called in sick, so the owner is running food, making coffees, and clearing tables all at once. And somewhere behind the counter, under a docket printer or next to the till, the phone is ringing.

Nobody answers it. Not because nobody cares, but because nobody can. Everyone in the room is doing the most important thing in hospitality, which is looking after the people who are actually there.

The phone rings out. The caller does not leave a message, because almost nobody leaves messages any more. They just call the next place on their list. And that might have been a table of six for dinner, or a corporate catering order, or a regular trying to book a birthday lunch.

Nobody on the team did anything wrong. The venue was busy, which is exactly what you want. But a booking still walked out the door, quietly, without anyone even knowing it existed.

I run a small Australian company called Meradove, and we build software that handles the unglamorous back-office work for small businesses. One of the things we build is an AI phone assistant for hospitality venues, called Parla. So yes, I have an interest in this topic, and I am not going to pretend otherwise.

But this guide is not a sales pitch. I wrote it because when I talk to cafe and restaurant owners about AI answering their phone, the same things come up every time. What is it actually? Does it sound like a robot? What happens when it gets something wrong? Is it legal to record calls? How do I know if a provider is any good? Am I even the kind of venue that needs this?

Those are exactly the right questions, and most of the material out there does a poor job of answering them. It is either breathless marketing that promises the world, or technical jargon that assumes you have time to become an expert. You do not have time. You have a venue to run.

So here is my attempt at the guide I wish existed. Plain language. Honest about the limits. Written for someone who is busy, a bit sceptical, and just wants to stop losing bookings to a phone nobody can get to.

You can read this whole thing without ever talking to me or my company, take the checklists, and go evaluate any provider you like. If you get to the end and want to hear what we have built, there is one invitation at the very end. That is the only ask in the entire guide.

Let us get into it.

Chapter 2: The Quiet Revenue Leak: Why Missed Calls Matter More Than You Think

The problem you cannot see

Most problems in a venue announce themselves. A broken fridge, a no-show chef, a bad review. You see them, you feel them, you fix them.

Missed calls are different. A missed call leaves almost no evidence. The phone rang, nobody got to it, and then it stopped. If you were busy at the time (and you were, because that is exactly when calls come in), you may not have even registered it happening. There is no angry customer standing in front of you. There is no line item on your profit and loss called "bookings we never knew about". The whole thing is invisible.

That invisibility is what makes it dangerous. You cannot manage what you cannot see, and most venues have genuinely no idea how many calls they miss in a week. If you have never checked, I would gently suggest you might be surprised.

What a missed call actually is

Here is the mental shift I want to offer you. A missed call is not a missed phone call. It is a customer, standing at your front door, being ignored.

Think about how that caller got to you. They decided they wanted to eat out. They thought of your venue, or found you on Google, or got your name from a friend. They looked up your number. They pressed call. Every one of those steps is a small act of intent. By the time your phone rings, this person has already chosen you. All they need is for someone to say hello.

If nobody does, what happens next is very predictable. They do not leave a voicemail. Most people under fifty treat voicemail like a fax machine. They do not call back in an hour, because they are organising a dinner right now and they want it sorted right now. They go back to their search results, and they call the place down the road.

The place down the road answered. The place down the road got the booking. And the frustrating part is that the place down the road might not even have better food than you. They just picked up the phone.

When calls come in

There is a cruel pattern to when people ring restaurants. They call when they are thinking about food. That means the run-up to lunch, the late afternoon when they are planning dinner, and the middle of service when they are running late for a booking or want to squeeze in.

In other words, they call precisely when your team is least able to answer. The quiet Tuesday at 3 pm when someone could easily pick up is exactly when the phone stays silent. The Friday at 6:45 pm when every staff member has their hands full is when it rings off the hook.

Calls also come in when you are closed. A lot of people plan their weekend on Sunday night or Monday morning. They ring, they get no answer or a voicemail greeting, and they move on. That booking was never even possible for you to win under the traditional model, because winning it required a human to be standing next to the phone at 9 pm on a Sunday.

The compounding effect

One missed booking is annoying. But bookings are not one-off events. A first-time guest who has a good night might come back a dozen times over the next few years, bring friends, book a birthday, and recommend you to people you will never meet. When you miss the call, you do not just miss one table. You miss the whole relationship that table might have started.

I am deliberately not going to quote you statistics about missed call rates or average booking values, because I promised not to dress this guide up with numbers you cannot verify. You do not need industry statistics anyway. You need your numbers, from your venue. And in the next chapter I will show you how to get a rough version of them in about ten minutes.

For now, the point is simply this. The phone is one of the last places where a customer with money in their hand can try to give it to you and fail. It is worth taking seriously.

Chapter 3: The Real Cost of Staff Answering the Phone

The cost nobody puts on a spreadsheet

So far I have talked about the calls nobody answers. But there is a second cost, hiding inside the calls somebody does answer, and I think it is just as important.

Picture your best floor person mid-service. They are at table twelve, halfway through taking an order from a group of four. The phone rings. Now they have a choice, and both options are bad.

Option one, they excuse themselves, walk to the phone, and answer it. The table of four sits there mid-order, slightly annoyed. The caller wants to know if you do gluten free pasta, whether there is parking nearby, and eventually, maybe, whether you have a table Thursday. Four minutes later your staff member walks back to table twelve and tries to remember where they were up to.

Option two, they let it ring. Now you are back in chapter two, and the caller is dialling the place down the road.

Neither of those costs shows up anywhere in your accounts. But you feel them. Interrupted orders get made wrong. Guests who feel ignored tip less and return less. Staff who spend their shift being yanked between the floor and the phone end their shift more tired and more frazzled. Over months, that friction is part of why good people burn out and leave, and you know better than I do what it costs to replace a good hospitality worker right now.

The phone is a job, and you gave it to nobody

Here is a slightly uncomfortable way to look at it. Answering the phone properly is a real job. It requires knowing the menu, knowing the booking system, knowing the specials, being polite under pressure, and being available at exactly the moments the venue is busiest.

Most venues have given this job to nobody in particular, which means they have given it to everybody, which means it is done in the gaps between other jobs, badly, by whoever is closest to the handset. Nobody would run a kitchen that way. Nobody would say "there is no dishwasher, whoever walks past the sink does a few plates". But that is exactly how most venues run their phone.

Big restaurant groups solved this years ago by hiring reservations staff or central booking teams. A single cafe or a family-run restaurant cannot justify a person whose job is to sit by the phone. That is the gap this whole guide is really about.

Do the maths for your own venue

I promised no invented statistics, so let us build your number instead. Grab a piece of paper, or the back of an order pad. This will take ten minutes and it is worth doing properly.

Step one: count your calls. Most phone providers let you see a call log in your account portal, including calls that went unanswered. If you can get that, pull a normal week and count two things: total incoming calls, and calls that rang out or went to voicemail. If you cannot get a log, do it manually. Put a tally sheet next to the phone for one week and ask staff to mark every call they answer and every call they notice ringing out. It will undercount the misses (nobody notices the phone during a rush, which is the point), but it gives you a floor.

Step two: estimate what a call is worth. Not every call is a booking. Some are suppliers, some are wrong numbers, some are "are you open on the public holiday". Be conservative. Suppose only three in ten calls are someone trying to book or order. Now think about your average booking. A table of three at your average spend per head. You know these numbers better than anyone.

Step three: multiply, conservatively. Say your tally shows fifteen missed calls in a week. Conservatively, maybe four or five of those were bookings you never got the chance to take. Multiply by your average table value. Then multiply by fifty two weeks. Even with cautious assumptions, most owners who do this exercise arrive at an annual figure that makes them sit down.

Step four: add the interruption cost. This one is fuzzier, but try it. Estimate how many calls your staff answer during service in a week, and multiply by roughly three to four minutes each. That is hours per week of your floor team's attention going to the phone during your busiest, highest-value hours. Ask yourself what you are paying per hour for that time, and what else it could be doing.

I am not going to tell you what your number is. It might be small, in which case, wonderful, this problem is not urgent for you and you can read the rest of this guide out of curiosity. But for most venues I speak with, the number is not small, and it has been leaking silently for years.

The old fixes, and why they only half work

Before we get to AI, it is worth being fair to the traditional options.

Voicemail is honest but mostly useless, because callers rarely use it. A voicemail greeting is a polite way of telling a customer to go elsewhere.

Online booking widgets are genuinely good and you should have one. But a meaningful share of your customers, especially older guests, larger groups, and anyone with a question ("can you do a cake?", "is the courtyard dog friendly?"), still want to talk to someone. A booking widget also cannot take a message, answer a question, or handle the person calling to say they are running twenty minutes late.

Answering services with real humans exist and can work, but they get expensive quickly, the operators do not know your menu, and they generally take a message rather than completing a booking, which puts a call-back task on your plate.

Just answering it ourselves is the default, and you have now done the maths on what it actually costs.

None of these are wrong. But there is now another option on the list, and the rest of this guide is about understanding it clearly. This is the exact gap we built our AI phone assistant, Parla, to fill, but everything from here applies whether you ever talk to us or not.

Chapter 4: What an AI Phone Assistant Actually Is (and What It Isn't)

The plain-language version

Strip away all the jargon and an AI phone assistant is this: software that answers your phone, talks to the caller in a natural voice, and gets useful things done, like taking a booking or a message, using information you have given it about your venue.

When a call comes in, instead of ringing out or going to voicemail, the software picks up. It greets the caller, tells them they are speaking with an AI assistant (more on why that matters in chapter six), and asks how it can help. The caller talks normally, the way they would to a person. The software understands what they are asking, in ordinary language, including "um, so, we were thinking maybe Thursday, actually no, Friday, for like six of us, one of them is coeliac".

If the caller wants a booking, the assistant checks availability against your booking setup, takes the details, confirms the time back to them, and the booking lands in your system like any other. If they have a question, it answers from the information you provided, your hours, your menu, whether you take large groups, where to park. If they need something it cannot handle, it takes a clear message, and you get notified.

That is it. That is the whole idea. It is a phone-answering employee made of software, with a narrow but genuinely useful set of skills.

Where the "AI" part actually comes in

You have probably used tools like ChatGPT, or at least heard plenty about them. The same underlying technology, language models that can understand and produce natural speech, is what makes these phone assistants possible. Five years ago, automated phone systems meant "press one for bookings", and they were awful. The change is that software can now hold a genuinely natural conversation, cope with interruptions and rambling, and keep track of what has been said.

A good assistant is that conversational ability, wrapped in guardrails, and connected to your actual systems. The guardrails matter as much as the intelligence. An assistant that has been properly set up only talks about your venue, only offers times that are actually available, and hands off gracefully when it is out of its depth. An assistant without guardrails is a liability, which is why chapter seven, on testing, exists.

What it can genuinely do well

Being honest about strengths first:

Answer every call, instantly, at any hour. It does not get busy, does not go home, and does not put a caller on hold because table twelve needs attention. The Sunday night planner and the mid-rush caller get the same prompt answer.

Take straightforward bookings from start to finish. Date, time, party size, name, contact number, special requests noted. For the large majority of booking calls, which are simple, this works well.

Answer the questions you get fifty times a week. Opening hours, whether you take walk-ins, dietary options, parking, whether kids are welcome, whether you are open on the public holiday. These make up a surprising share of your call volume, and they are exactly what your staff should not be leaving the floor to answer.

Take an accurate message when it cannot help. A good assistant does not pretend. It says, honestly, that it will pass the request on, captures the details, and sends them to you in a form you will actually see.

Stay patient and polite, every single time. It is never having a bad shift. Whatever tone it was set up with is the tone every caller gets, at 7 am and at 9 pm on a chaotic Saturday.

A note on other languages

Some modern assistants can also hold a conversation in languages other than English. In a multicultural suburb, or for a venue whose regulars are more comfortable in another language, that can genuinely widen who feels welcome ringing you. I would treat it as a promising extra rather than a guarantee, though. Accents, dialects and background noise all make this harder than a polished demo suggests. So if it matters to your venue, do not take a provider's word for it. Test it with real callers, in the actual languages, before you rely on it. Chapter seven shows you how.

What it cannot do, and what nobody should tell you it can

Now the other side, which matters more.

It is not a human, and callers can usually tell. Modern voices are impressively natural, but the assistant should never pretend to be a person, both for legal reasons we will get to and because pretending erodes trust the moment someone works it out. A good assistant is upfront that it is an AI, and most callers, in practice, just get on with booking their table.

It will not handle every edge case. A caller with a heavy accent on a bad line in a noisy car. Someone who wants to negotiate something unusual, a special menu, a venue buyout, a complicated group arrangement. Someone who is upset about last night's meal and wants to be heard by a person. An AI assistant should recognise these situations and route them to you or take a message, not improvise. Any provider who claims their assistant handles "everything" is telling you they have not thought hard about failure.

It is not magic, and setup is real work. The assistant only knows what you teach it. If your menu information is out of date, it will confidently give out the old menu. If your booking rules are vague ("we sort of squeeze big groups in if the chef's in a good mood"), it cannot apply judgement it was never given. Expect to spend some genuine time at the start writing down how your venue actually works, and expect to update it when things change. Venues that treat setup as a five-minute task get five-minute results.

It will occasionally get things wrong. So do humans, but the mistakes are different. A human might forget to write a booking down. An AI might mishear a date on a bad line, or answer a question too literally. The right response is not to expect perfection from either. It is to have the assistant confirm details back to callers, keep recordings you can review, and make it easy to catch and fix errors. Chapter seven covers how to check all of this yourself.

It does not replace your people. I want to be really clear here, because "AI" makes people picture job losses. In a cafe or restaurant, the phone was never anyone's actual job. It was a distraction bolted onto everyone's actual job. Taking it off their plate does not replace a person. It gives your existing people back to the room, which is where they earn you money and where no software will ever compete with them.

A fair one-sentence summary

If you remember one thing from this chapter, make it this: an AI phone assistant is a reliable, tireless taker of bookings, messages, and common questions, and an honest one knows exactly where its job ends and a human's begins.

Chapter 5: FAQs, Bookings and Decisions: Three Very Different Jobs

When you evaluate any phone assistant, it helps enormously to realise that "answering the phone" is actually three different jobs stacked on top of each other, and they are not equally hard. Providers love to blur these together. You should keep them separate in your head.

Job one: answering questions

This is the easiest job, and the one AI does best. "What time do you close?" "Do you have vegan options?" "Is there parking?" "Are you doing anything for Mother's Day?"

These questions have fixed answers that you can write down in advance. The assistant's job is to understand the question, find the right answer in what you have given it, and say it clearly. Modern AI is genuinely good at this, including when the question is phrased in a roundabout way.

Two things to watch. First, the answers are only as good as what you provide, and venues change constantly. New menu, new hours, a closed courtyard, a Christmas break. Whoever manages the assistant needs a simple way to update its knowledge, and a habit of doing it. Second, a well-behaved assistant must know what it does not know. If someone asks something outside its knowledge, the right answer is "I'm not sure about that one, but I can take your details and have the team get back to you", not a confident guess. When you test providers, this is one of the first things to probe.

Job two: taking bookings

This is a harder job, because it is not just conversation, it is a transaction. The assistant has to gather several pieces of information (date, time, party size, name, phone number, any requests), check them against real availability, apply your rules, and then actually create the booking somewhere your team will see it.

That last part deserves emphasis. An assistant that has a lovely chat about Friday at 7 pm but does not reliably land the booking in your system is worse than useless, because the guest believes they have a table and you have no record of it. The connection between the assistant and your booking setup, whether that is a booking platform, a shared diary, or something simpler, is the single most important technical question to ask a provider, and the single most important thing to test yourself.

Your rules matter here too. Most venues have them: no tables of ten on Saturday nights, last bookings at 8:30, the window seats are not bookable, big groups need a deposit. A capable assistant can follow rules like these, but only if you spell them out. Part of getting ready for any assistant (there is a checklist in chapter nine) is writing your unwritten rules down, possibly for the

first time ever. Owners often tell me this exercise was valuable on its own, because it turned out half the staff had a different understanding of the rules anyway.

Job three: making decisions

This is the hardest job, and here is my honest position: for anything that involves real judgement, a human should stay in the loop.

What do I mean by decisions? Things like: a regular wants a favour that bends the rules. A caller wants to book the whole venue for a function and negotiate a price. Someone is unhappy about their experience last night and deserves an apology from a person who can actually make it right. A supplier is calling about a delivery problem. A journalist wants a comment.

Could an AI attempt some of these? Technically, parts of them. Should it? No. Not because the technology will never improve, but because these moments are exactly where your judgement, your relationships, and your reputation live. The right behaviour for an assistant in these situations is to recognise the situation, be warm about it, take an excellent message, flag it as important, and get it in front of you fast.

The way I think about it is a simple triage:

- **Questions with fixed answers:** the assistant answers them. No human needed.
- **Standard bookings within your rules:** the assistant completes them. No human needed.
- **Anything involving judgement, money beyond a normal booking, complaints, or exceptions:** the assistant catches it, captures it, and hands it to a human.

If a provider draws that line in roughly the same place, they are being honest with you. If they draw it much further out ("our AI can handle complaints and negotiate functions!"), be sceptical. If they cannot articulate where the line is at all, walk away.

The human warmth question

One more thing owners raise, and it deserves a straight answer. Hospitality is a warmth business. Is handing your phone to software off-brand?

My view, having watched a lot of these calls happen: warmth on the phone was always more aspiration than reality. The real-world alternative to an AI assistant is not a charming maître d' with all the time in the world. It is a flustered waiter shouting over the coffee machine, or a phone that rings out entirely. Callers do not experience a calm, capable assistant that answers instantly and gets their booking right as cold. They experience it as being looked after. The warmth of your venue lives in the room, when they arrive. The phone's job is simply to get them there.

Chapter 6: Privacy and Call Recording: The Basics for Australian Venues

Before anything else in this chapter: **this is general information, not legal advice.** I am a founder, not a lawyer, and every venue's situation is a bit different. Please get your own advice before making decisions here. What follows is the lay of the land as I understand it, so you can have an informed conversation with an adviser and ask providers the right questions.

Why recording comes up at all

Most AI phone assistants record calls, and for good reason. Recordings are how you check the assistant is doing its job, how you resolve "but I booked for eight, not six" disputes, and how the system improves over time. In chapter seven, listening back to recordings is a key part of how you will test any assistant before trusting it.

But recording a phone call in Australia is regulated, and the rules are not uniform. This is the part every venue owner should understand at least at a basic level.

How recording law fits in

Recording laws vary across Australian states and territories. Broadly, some require that everyone on the call is aware of the recording and agrees to it, while in others it can be enough that one participant, in this case your venue, is aware. The precise rules, and how they apply to any particular call, are genuinely a question for a lawyer, not for a guide like this one.

Here is the practical catch that makes the fine print almost beside the point: your caller could be ringing from any state. Trying to work out which rule governs each individual call, in real time, is a headache no venue should take on. Fortunately, there is a simple approach that reduces the practical risk.

The simple, defensible approach

Because of that uncertainty, there is a straightforward approach that I recommend regardless of which state you are in. It is the more cautious path, and it takes only a few seconds on each call.

Tell every caller, at the start of every call, two things: that they are speaking with an AI assistant, and that the call may be recorded. Then make sure anyone who is not comfortable has a clear way out, for example, they can simply hang up and contact the venue another way, and the assistant can say so.

Something in the spirit of: "Hi, you've reached [venue]. I'm an AI assistant and this call may be recorded. How can I help? If you'd rather not continue, you're welcome to hang up and reach the venue directly."

This does two jobs at once. It supports informed consent, because a caller who is told about the recording and chooses to continue is, in practical terms, aware and participating. And it handles the honesty question from chapter four, because nobody is being tricked into thinking they are talking to a person.

Some owners worry the disclosure will scare callers off. In practice, people are thoroughly used to "this call may be recorded" from every bank and utility they have ever rung, and most callers just get on with what they called for. The disclosure costs you a few seconds. Skipping it can cost you a great deal more.

When you evaluate providers, ask directly: does the assistant disclose that it is an AI, and that calls may be recorded, at the start of every call, without you having to ask for it? If a provider treats this as optional or an afterthought, that tells you something about how they think about compliance generally.

The Privacy Act and personal information

Recording is only half the picture. The other half is what happens to the personal information you collect, names, phone numbers, dietary requirements, the recordings themselves.

In Australia, the **Privacy Act 1988** and the Australian Privacy Principles set the ground rules for handling personal information. Many small businesses currently sit outside the Act (broadly, those with an annual turnover of three million dollars or less), though some are covered regardless of size, and the Act has been under government review that may change where those lines sit. My honest advice is not to get lost in whether it technically binds you today. Handling your customers' information carefully is good practice, it is what they expect, and it is far easier to do well from the start than to retrofit after something has gone wrong.

In practical terms, good practice looks like:

- **Collect only what you need.** A booking needs a name, a contact number, a time, a party size, and any relevant requests. It does not need anything else.
- **Know where it is stored.** Ask your provider where call recordings and customer details physically live, and whether that is in Australia. (More on this in chapter eight.)
- **Know who can access it, and for how long.** Recordings should not sit around forever, and not everyone needs access to them.
- **Be able to answer a customer who asks.** If a guest asks "what do you have on me, and can you delete it?", you or your provider should be able to deal with that without panic.

None of this is onerous. Most of it is just tidiness. But it is much easier to set up well at the start than to retrofit after something has gone wrong.

And to repeat, because it matters: this chapter is general information only. The law in this area has real teeth and real nuance, and each venue should get its own advice from someone qualified to give it.

Chapter 7: How to Test an AI Phone Assistant Before You Trust It

Here is the good news about this whole category of technology: you do not have to take anyone's word for anything. Unlike a lot of business software, a phone assistant can be tested exactly the way your customers will experience it. You pick up your phone and you call it.

Any provider worth considering will let you trial the assistant, set up with your venue's real details, before it ever answers a genuine customer. Insist on this. Then test it properly. Here is how I would do it, and it is genuinely how I suggest people test ours.

Round one: be a normal customer

Call the assistant and do the most ordinary things a caller does.

- Book a table for two, tomorrow night, 7 pm.
- Ask what time you open on Sunday.
- Ask whether there are gluten free options.
- Ask if you can bring a dog.

You are listening for a few things. Does it answer promptly? Does it disclose that it is an AI and that the call may be recorded, without being asked? Does it understand you the first time? Does it confirm the booking details back to you before finishing? Does the whole call feel efficient rather than laborious?

This round should be boring. If the assistant stumbles on the basics, you are done, and you have saved yourself a lot of grief.

Round two: be an awkward customer

Now make it harder, because real callers are not tidy.

- Ramble. "Yeah hi, so we were thinking, well, my sister's down from Brisbane, anyway, is Thursday any good? Actually could be Friday. There'd be, hmm, six of us? Maybe seven."
- Change your mind mid-call. Book for four, then make it six, then move it an hour later.
- Talk over it. Interrupt while it is speaking and see whether it copes.
- Call from a noisy spot, the car, a footpath, with the range hood on.
- Ask something it should not know. "What's the chef's name?" "Can you do a deal on a function for forty people?" The right answer is a graceful "I'll take your details and have the team get back to you", not a fabricated one.
- Ask something outside its lane entirely. "What's the weather Saturday?" It should politely steer back to the venue, not play trivia.

- Be a bit short with it. Not abusive, just impatient. See if it stays calm and useful.

You are not trying to prove the assistant is perfect. You are trying to find where its edges are, and, crucially, how it behaves at those edges. An assistant that fails gracefully ("let me take a message for the team") is fine. An assistant that fails confidently, inventing answers or booking things it should not, is not safe to put in front of customers, no matter how nice its voice is.

Round three: check the paper trail

This is the round people skip, and it is the most important one.

- **Check the booking actually landed.** That table for two you booked in round one: is it in your booking system, on the right date, at the right time, with the right name and number and the note about the window seat? Do this for every test booking. A conversation that sounds perfect but writes down the wrong thing is the worst failure mode there is, because you will not catch it until a guest is standing in front of you.
- **Check the messages arrived.** For the requests the assistant said it would pass on, did you get them? Where? Email, text, a dashboard? Would you actually notice them on a busy day?
- **Listen back to the recordings.** Every decent provider gives you access to call recordings or transcripts. Listen to your own test calls. It is a slightly odd experience hearing yourself as a customer, but it tells you exactly what your guests will hear, and it lets you verify the assistant said what the summary claims it said.

Round four: recruit fresh ears

You know too much. You know it is an AI, you know what it can do, and you unconsciously speak to it in ways it will understand. So get other people to call it cold.

Ask a few friends or family members, ideally including someone older who is sceptical of this sort of thing and someone who talks fast, to ring up and book a table, without briefing them on what to expect. Then ask them two questions: did you get what you called for, and how did it feel? Their answers will tell you more than any product demo.

If you have staff, involve them too. They know the weird requests that actually come in, the caller who asks for "the usual table", the one who wants to pay a deposit over the phone, the one who is really asking whether the venue is quiet enough for a first date. Have them try to trip it up. They will enjoy it, and they will surface things you never would have thought of.

Round five: run it in parallel before you rely on it

When you do go live, you do not have to jump off a cliff. A sensible pattern is to start with overflow and after-hours only: the assistant answers when your team cannot get to the phone within a few

rings, and when you are closed. Your staff still answer when they are free. You review the recordings and bookings weekly.

After a few weeks of that, you will have real evidence from real callers, and you can decide with confidence whether to hand over more, or not. Any provider that pressures you to go all-in on day one is optimising for their onboarding numbers, not your risk.

What "good enough" looks like

A last word of calibration. Do not hold the assistant to a standard of perfection that your current setup does not meet either. The honest comparison is not "AI versus a flawless human receptionist". It is "AI versus the phone ringing out, or a hurried answer mid-rush". The bar the assistant needs to clear is: answers reliably, books accurately, discloses honestly, fails gracefully, and leaves a trail you can check. Test against that bar, and be ruthless about it.

Chapter 8: Questions to Ask Before Choosing a Provider

Once you have tested the product itself, you need to evaluate the company behind it, because you are not buying software so much as starting a relationship. Here are the questions I would put to any provider, including us. An honest company will have crisp answers to all of them, and will not be offended that you asked.

About support and locality

"Who do I call when something goes wrong, and where are they?" Your phone is critical infrastructure. If the assistant misbehaves on a Friday night, you need a human who understands Australian hospitality hours, not a ticket queue in another timezone that responds on Tuesday. Ask specifically: is support based in Australia, what hours is it available, and what is the process when something is urgent?

"Who sets it up, and how much of the work is mine?" Some providers hand you a dashboard and wish you luck. Others do the setup with you. Neither is wrong, but you should know which you are buying, and how much of your time the setup will honestly take.

"Do you understand hospitality?" A generic phone-answering product tuned for plumbers and law firms will miss the texture of restaurant calls: the difference between a booking and a walk-in enquiry, dietaries, high chairs, split bills, "are you doing Christmas lunch". Ask them to talk you through how their assistant handles venue-specific situations. You will be able to tell quickly whether they actually know the industry.

About data and privacy

"Where is my data stored?" Call recordings, customer names and numbers, booking details. Ask whether it is stored in Australia, and if not, where, and under what protections. There can be legitimate reasons for data to be processed overseas, but you deserve a straight answer, not a shrug.

"Does the assistant disclose that it is an AI and that calls may be recorded?" After chapter six, you know why this matters. It should be built in, on every call, by default. If the provider treats disclosure as an optional setting, that is a red flag about their whole attitude to compliance.

"How long are recordings kept, who can access them, and can they be deleted?" You want retention to be a deliberate policy, not "forever, on a server somewhere". And if a customer asks you to delete their information, you want to know that is actually possible.

"Is my venue's data used to train anything, or shared with anyone?" Your call recordings contain your customers' personal details and your business's patterns. You are entitled to know exactly what is done with them beyond serving you.

About honesty at the edges

"What happens when the assistant doesn't know something?" You want to hear a specific, confident answer: it says so, takes a message, and notifies you through a channel you have chosen. If the answer is vague, or worse, "that basically never happens", you have learnt what you needed to.

"What are your assistant's known weaknesses?" This is my favourite question to hear asked, and the most revealing one. Every AI product has weaknesses. A provider who can name theirs, heavy accents on bad lines, very complicated group bookings, whatever it is, is a provider who has watched their product carefully and will tell you the truth later, too. A provider who claims there are none is either not paying attention or not being straight with you.

"Can I listen to my own venue's calls whenever I want?" The answer must be yes. Transparency about what the assistant actually says to your customers is non-negotiable. It is your venue's voice on the line.

About money and lock-in

"What is the pricing, all-in, and what makes it go up?" Per month, per call, per booking, setup fees, whatever the model is, get it in plain figures, and ask what a busy December looks like versus a quiet February. Surprises in pricing structures tend to arrive at exactly the moments you are busiest.

"What is the contract term, and how do I leave?" Be wary of long lock-ins on a product category this young. A confident provider keeps you by being good, not by making leaving painful. Month-to-month, or a short initial term, is a reasonable ask. Also ask the exit questions nobody asks until it is too late: if I leave, do I keep my phone number? Do I get my data, my recordings, my booking history? How quickly can I switch off?

"Who owns the phone number?" If the assistant sits on a new number the provider controls, and your customers learn that number, leaving becomes expensive in a hidden way. Ideally your existing number stays yours and the assistant sits behind it.

One more filter: how they sell

Finally, pay attention to the sales conversation itself, because it predicts the support conversation later. Did they answer your questions directly or slide past them? Did they let you test properly, on your details, with your awkward questions? Did they talk about limits without being cornered into it? Were they comfortable with "start small and prove it"?

A company that is honest with you before you have paid them anything is likely to stay honest afterwards. It is far from a perfect signal, but in a young market full of big claims, it is one of the better ones you have.

Chapter 9: Your Readiness Checklist, and a Short Word to Finish

Are you the kind of venue this actually helps?

Not every venue needs an AI phone assistant, and I would rather tell you that plainly than have you buy something you do not need. As a rough guide, this is worth serious attention if a few of these are true for you:

- Your phone rings during service, and answering it means pulling someone off the floor.
- You suspect (or your call log confirms) that calls ring out during your busy periods.
- People try to call outside your opening hours, when planning their weekend or their week.
- Bookings are a meaningful part of your revenue, not an occasional extra.
- Your team answers the same handful of questions over and over, every day.
- You have thought about hiring someone partly to cover the phone but cannot justify it.

If almost none of those apply, say you are a tiny walk-in-only espresso bar with no bookings, then honestly, put this guide down and spend your energy elsewhere. The maths from chapter three is the tiebreaker: if your missed-call number was small, this is not your most urgent problem.

The readiness checklist

If you do want to move forward, with any provider, this is the homework that makes it go well. Little of it is technical. Most of it is writing down things that currently live in your head.

1. Get your facts on paper. Opening hours (including public holiday quirks), address and parking, menu highlights and dietary options, whether you take walk-ins, group size limits, kids and dogs policy, anything seasonal. This becomes the assistant's knowledge, and it is only as good as what you give it.

2. Write down your booking rules. Maximum party size by day, last seating times, tables or areas that cannot be booked, deposit requirements for groups, cancellation expectations, how long you hold a late table. If the rules only exist as instinct, get them out of your head. Your human staff will benefit from this document too.

3. Decide your escalation list. What must always reach a human, and fast? Complaints, function enquiries, media calls, anything involving refunds. Decide who gets notified and how (text, email, both), and make sure that channel is one you actually check during service.

4. Sort out your booking destination. Where should bookings land? A booking platform, a shared calendar, a daily sheet? Whatever it is, it needs to be something your floor staff genuinely look at. The best assistant in the world is useless if bookings land somewhere nobody checks.

5. Check the chapter six basics. Confirm the assistant will disclose it is an AI and that calls may be recorded, on every call. Ask where recordings and customer data are stored and for how long. And book twenty minutes with your own adviser if anything in chapter six raised questions for your situation.

6. Do the maths from chapter three. One week of tallying calls, ten minutes of arithmetic. Go in knowing your own number, so you can judge any provider's pricing against your actual leak, not against their brochure.

7. Plan your test, and your rollout. Commit to the full testing routine from chapter seven: normal calls, awkward calls, checking the bookings landed, fresh ears, listening to recordings. Then start small, overflow and after-hours first, review weekly, and expand only when the evidence says so.

8. Tell your team. Bring your staff in early. Explain that the assistant takes the phone off their plate so they can stay with the guests in front of them, and that they are the quality control, encouraged to flag anything odd a guest mentions. Staff who feel part of it will make it better. Staff who discover it by surprise will resent it, and fair enough.

Work through that list and you will be better prepared than the vast majority of venues adopting this technology, and importantly, you will be equipped to hold any provider, including us, to a high standard.

What to do next

If you take nothing else from this guide, take these five steps. None of them commits you to anything, and together they turn this from a read into a decision.

- 1. Check your missed calls for one week.** Pull your phone provider's call log, or keep a tally sheet by the handset.
- 2. Estimate the value of the bookings you lost.** Use the ten-minute exercise from chapter three, and be conservative.
- 3. Write down the ten questions your phone gets asked most.** This becomes an assistant's starting knowledge, and it is useful for training your staff either way.
- 4. Call our demo line on 0481 615 280** and put it through its paces, the way chapter seven describes. Ask it awkward questions. Try to trip it up.
- 5. Decide whether covering overflow and after-hours calls is worth testing at your venue.** If your missed-call number was small, it may not be. If it was not small, it very likely is.

A short word to finish

If you have read this far, thank you. I know how scarce your time is, and I have tried to repay it with the guide I genuinely wish every venue owner had before their first conversation with an AI vendor.

Here is the heart of it, one more time. Your phone is where customers who have already chosen you try to hand you their booking. Every year, at busy venues all over Australia, some of those customers ring, get no answer, and quietly book the place down the road. It is nobody's fault, and it is fixable. The technology to fix it is real, it is here now, and it is good at a specific, narrow, valuable job: answering every call, taking clean bookings, catching messages, and knowing when to hand a human the phone. It is not magic, it needs honest setup and honest testing, and you should hold anyone selling it, me included, to the standards in chapters seven and eight.

If, after all that, you would like to hear what we have built, our AI phone assistant, Parla, was made for exactly the venues this guide describes, Australian cafes and restaurants that are too busy looking after the room to also be a call centre. The easiest way to judge it is the way this guide taught you: call it, ask it awkward questions, and see whether the booking lands.

Here is the simplest next step. Call our demo line on 0481 615 280 and hear Parla answer, exactly the way one of your customers would. If it does what you need, book a short setup conversation for your own venue at parla.au. That is all it takes to find out whether this is right for you.

No pressure and no lock-in. If it turns out we are not right for you, I hope the checklists in here help you find whoever is. Either way, I hope your phone never rings out on a table of six again.

Thanks for reading, and good luck out there.

Joel Cox Founder, Meradove

This guide is general information only and does not constitute legal, financial or professional advice. Laws relating to call recording and privacy vary between Australian states and territories and change over time. Please seek advice specific to your own venue and circumstances.