

A glass of pink smoothie with fresh fruit garnishes on a wooden surface. The smoothie is a vibrant pink color, and the garnishes include strawberries, cherries, and fresh basil leaves. The background is a rustic wooden surface with a blue-green patina.

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**SUMMER
MENU IDEAS**

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SUMMER MENU IDEAS

Ah, summer—the season to showcase nature’s bounty. As temperatures rise and diners look for lighter dishes, Mother Nature steps in, contributing her freshest, most luscious fruits and vegetables to chefs’ repertoires. Seasonal produce fits into every course on the menu in summer, and grilling and barbecue take center stage.

Welcome summer with these memorable menu ideas.

Globally Inspired Barbecue and Grilling

Whether it is slow, low-heat barbecue or fast, high-heat grilling, barbecue and grilling are perennial favorites of the summer menu with staying power. Consumers are willing to try new flavors, especially with an ethnic twist.

Barbecue is a good cooking platform for experimentation.

- Add flair with easy Asian-inspired rib kebabs (deboned pork short ribs basted with barbecue sauce, sesame oil and chili sauce).
- Experiment with spicy/sweet sauces for pulled pork with fiery sriracha sauce mellowed with honey or agave nectar as sweeteners.
- Add barbecue sauces to handheld menu items, such as a barbecued-chicken lettuce wrap.

What goes on the grill? Everything! Grilling is a classic way to add flavor and menu variety without fat.

- Go with a traditional spit-roasted Middle Eastern chicken shawarma by marinating chicken in lemon juice, olive oil and spices, including cumin, paprika, turmeric and cinnamon.
- Wrap the grilled chicken in a pita paired with tahini, tabbouleh, cucumber and tomatoes.
- Throw pizza dough on the grill. Top the dough with sauce, fresh mozzarella and your choice of grilled veggies for a signature pie.
- For dessert, grill nectarines or peaches and serve with crème fraîche.



Seafood in Season

Like fruits and veggies, some seafood is best in season. Skip fresh oysters, Dungeness crab and Nantucket Bay scallops in summer, opting instead for razor clams, soft-shell blue crabs and coho salmon, which are all at their peak in warmer months.

- When coveted soft-shell crabs come into season (May through July), change up the traditional breading by substituting lighter Japanese-style panko laced with Old Bay Seasoning.
- Serve soft-shell crab on a bun or go with New Orleans tradition: top the breaded crabs with a dollop of lump crab meat.
- Lift a page from McCormick & Schmick's restaurant and serve fresh coho salmon sizzling at tableside.
- Seafood toppers such as a signature pico de gallo made with sweet tomatoes can be an add-on for seafood at its peak time.

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Make Waves with Watermelon

Few foods say “summer” like watermelon. When the freshest, juiciest watermelons appear, they can star in every menu course.

- Pair chopped watermelon with feta cheese and fresh mint in a salad.
- Purée watermelon with tomatoes into gazpacho.
- Substitute watermelon for tomatoes in salsa.
- Skewer the fruit with cubed pork, pineapple, zucchini and peppers for grilled kebabs.
- For a fruit salad with a street-food twist (to serve with tacos, wraps and other grab-and-go items), dust chopped watermelon, mango and cucumber with chile powder and finish with lime juice.

Don't forget the hydrating power of this summer standby, which is 92% water.

- Watermelon makes a colorful base for iced teas (such as watermelon green tea), smoothies and other drinks.
- Brighten up your beverage menu with an *agua fresca*, a mix of chopped watermelon, watermelon juice, lime juice and sugar or a sugar substitute.



Avocados Anytime

Avocados are available all year, but these buttery, nutty fruits are hot enough to feature prominently on summer menus. Avocados have become an “it” food for their flavor, versatility and health benefits. Research company Technomic predicts that the fresh avocado category in the foodservice market will grow 8.1% annually in poundage between 2014 and 2019.

- Add the versatile fruit to green salads, potato salads and pasta salads.
- Mash it and slather on toast, or slice it for burgers, wraps and tacos.
- Try an avocado-chicken pita pocket with quinoa salad and yogurt-mint dressing.
- Add avocados to chopped mangos, tomatoes, red onion, cilantro, serrano chile and lime juice for a sweet and spicy salsa to serve with tortilla chips or atop grilled fish.

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Top Tomatoes

Go local to explore the types of tomatoes in your area—from the standard big, red beefsteak to heirloom varieties of every color from Black Cherry to Green Zebra.

- Feature tomatoes in yellow or red gazpacho.
- Create a signature salad mixing tomatoes with greens and berries.
- Try a Latin profile of tomatoes with corn, black beans and cilantro.
- Bake an heirloom tomato tart.
- Showcase sliced tomatoes, Buffalo mozzarella and basil in a Caprese salad.
- Try stuffing tomatoes with quinoa, olives and feta cheese for a Mediterranean take.
- Cook them with oil, garlic and basil for a light, summery pasta sauce.
- Team tomatoes with eggplant and cheese for a gratin.
- Work them into your dessert menu by pairing candied cherry tomatoes with ice cream.
- Freeze them into a savory granita.



Berries Across Dayparts

When fresh berries burst on the scene, go all out with limited-time offers and branch out across dayparts.

- Top pancakes or steel-cut oatmeal with raspberries, strawberries, blackberries and blueberries.
- Blend berries with Greek yogurt for breakfast smoothies.
- Layer berries with chocolate mousse or cheesecake for dessert shooters.
- Add balsamic-glazed strawberries to chicken, crispy noodles and leaf lettuce wrapped in a tortilla.
- Create a seasonal salad featuring fresh strawberries, chicken, pecans and blue cheese.
- Cook berries into a savory sauce for pork.
- Add a handful of blueberries to salads and grain-based bowls.

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Corn On and Off the Cob

With a vegetable pedigree that dates back to America's first settlers, corn is another hallmark of the summer season. Experiment with fun flavor profiles for corn on the cob.

- Feature corn in a summer salad with greens, avocado, black beans, jicama and bell peppers with a lime-cilantro vinaigrette.
- Try this modern twist on creamed corn: Shave fresh corn from the cob, steam with salted water, dress with Greek yogurt and grated Parmesan cheese and mix with cooked quinoa.

Reimagine the Mexican cob corn classic by batch-cooking corn three times a day, keep warm until an order comes in, then roll, wrap or drizzle with toppings like:

- Cotija cheese, lime and chile powder
- Bacon-wrapped with jalapeño-honey drizzle and blue cheese
- Mango with barbecue sauce and pineapple salsa.

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The Freshest Herbs

Summer is the season to accentuate dishes with fresh herbs. Herbs add color and flavor depth without fat and help chefs use a lighter hand with oil and salt.

- Punch up grilled pork loin with rosemary and tarragon.
- Garnish grilled chicken or fish with a gremolata of minced parsley, lemon peel and garlic.
- Add herbs to panko to encrust tilapia and other fish before baking.
- Brighten salads with cilantro, tarragon, chervil and lemon thyme.
- Slather deli sandwiches with a fresh basil pesto spread or work chopped herbs into mayonnaise or mustard for sandwich spreads.
- Sprinkle french fries with chopped herbs as a way to boost flavor and use less salt.
- For a twist on standard lemonade, blend blueberries, water and basil with lemon juice and sweeten with agave syrup.

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Succulent Squash

Uses for summer squash, including yellow squash and zucchini, extend across dayparts.

- Sauté these veggies and mix with eggs for a frittata.
- Grill squash and zucchini and layer them on sandwiches.
- Cut them into rounds, bread with panko and lightly fry for appetizers served with dipping sauces.
- Build a summer salad with greens, grilled zucchini, goat cheese, basil, toasted almonds and balsamic vinaigrette.
- Top flatbread with grilled yellow squash and zucchini, mushrooms and eggplant.

Trend tracker Andrew Freeman & Co. notes that savory pancakes are showing up on dinner menus.

- Create a shredded-zucchini pancake and serve with soy-chili dipping sauce for a Korean-influenced take on the trend, or go Greek with a cool yogurt/cucumber tatziki sauce on the side instead.



Versatile Veggies

Specialty vegetables can add value and interest to your menu. Haricots verts, English cucumbers and rainbow chard are just a few items in season in summer. Think salads and bowls for lighter summer fare. Technomic found that 66% of consumers say they would be attracted to a salad that features seasonal items.

- Try a salad with mixed heirloom tomatoes and blanched haricots verts with arugula, toasted hazelnuts and balsamic vinaigrette.
- Let crisp, delicate English cucumbers add crunch to a flavorful Greek-inspired salad with quinoa, cucumbers, grape tomatoes, kalamata olives, red onion, feta and garlic-lemon vinaigrette.
- Sauté rainbow chard with olive oil as a colorful partner for grilled fish or chicken. (The vegetable is as healthy as it is delicious: Ranked by its nutrient content, chard is the No. 3 powerhouse vegetable.)

Flavor & The Menu magazine names edamame, available year round, as a great frozen staple to have on hand and a “veggie in vogue.” Try adding shelled edamame to:

- Summer salads or noodle dishes.
- Seasonal succotash with corn, red pepper and basil to use as a base for grilled fish or seared salmon.

Consider ramen as a base for summer bowls. Technomic’s MenuMonitor ranks ramen as the fastest-growing noodle over the last two years.

- To counter summer’s heat, try a bowl of chilled ramen tossed with chili sauce, grilled shrimp, scallions, cucumbers and toasted sesame seeds.

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