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FOODSERVICE TRENDS FOR 2016

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FOODSERVICE TRENDS FOR 2016

Keep an eye on the ever-changing foodservice trends landscape.

What will drive food trends in 2016? As the year gets underway, here are more than a dozen hot spots to watch in the foodservice industry, from technology's role in food delivery to the newest contenders as "superfoods." Personal choice, the environment, health and convenience will play key roles in food culture and diner decisions in the year ahead.

Food delivery goes high tech

From Postmates to UberEATS to Doordash, the food-delivery business is booming. “Proliferating order-and-pay apps and third-party online ordering and delivery services make dining in easier than ever,” notes Technomic. “Uber and Amazon are muscling into the market. App-only services like Munchery deliver food from commissaries, bypassing the brick-and-mortar restaurant altogether.”

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Once discarded, now delicious

Look for an increasing push to reduce waste in foodservice kitchens. “With higher food and labor costs, there’s a growing need to figure out how to save money,” notes hospitality consulting firm Andrew Freeman & Co. in its 2016 predictions. Cutting-edge chefs are getting creative with scraps. For instance, Dan Barber, chef at Blue Hill in New York City, created the wastED salad for the Sweetgreen salad chain, including vegetable scraps that many restaurant staffs would simply discard (such as kale stems and broccoli stalks). Barber also developed a burger made entirely from food scraps for a pop-up Shake Shack in New York City.

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Simple is key

Simplicity, classic and back-to-basics are words to live by in the year ahead, according to many professional chefs surveyed by the National Restaurant Association. At the same time that molecular gastronomy goes more mainstream with its scientific exploration of culinary possibilities, a counter-movement is brewing that focuses on stripping down recipes to fewer ingredients to let them shine in all their simple glory. Venerable preparation methods like pickling, fermenting and smoking are back, with traditional recipes refreshed for today's palates.

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Go veg or go home

Vegetables ramped up to their fullest creative potential are pushing animal protein to the side of the plate—or entirely off it. More restaurants and culinary professionals are championing fresh produce as the star of the plate, serving up vegetable-centric meals, which are often vegetarian without being advertised as such. Even when animal proteins are included in the dish, the vegetable is the main attraction.

“Vegetable Forward” restaurants are using meat as a condiment, not the main course. Contributing factors include: relentlessly rising beef prices, a scramble for more antioxidants, health and diet concerns, growth of farmers markets and increasing numbers of flexitarians.

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Real, clean and fresh

Both at home and when dining out, consumers will focus on foods that they consider “real” or “clean” in 2016, looking for attributes such as natural, fresh and preservative-free, predicts The NPD Group. The influence of “clean” eaters on the restaurant industry began to appear last year and will become even more pronounced in 2016. A number of large restaurant chains took on the challenge of removing artificial ingredients from their food in 2015, including Panera Bread, Papa John’s, Subway, Noodles & Co., Taco Bell and Pizza Hut. Growers and food manufacturers are striving for a “clean label,” removing preservatives, artificial flavors, antibiotics and potential allergens in response to consumer demands for transparency.

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Diets become super personalized

As diners increasingly customize the way they choose to eat, new terms, labels and definitions are entering the food vocabulary. This trend has moved beyond flexitarian, beyond pegan (paleo + vegan), and into true personalization of what works for each diner. That may include figuring out how to eat at a fast-food restaurant on a vegan diet. Restaurants have been scrambling to accommodate and are essentially making their own rules.

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Restaurants take on “multiple personalities”

Foodservice establishments will gear up to satisfy many audiences by taking on multiple personalities and offering multi-faceted dining experiences, according to trend-tracker Andrew Freeman. “It wouldn’t be unlikely for a guest to want a vegetable-centric meal on a Monday and then want to have an over-the-top decadent brunch on Sunday,” he says. Restaurants and hotels are reinventing meal periods, adding new offerings and developing several personalities, Freeman notes.

One high-profile example comes from Chef René Redzepi, owner of Noma restaurant in Copenhagen, considered one of the most influential restaurants in the world. Redzepi plans to reinvent the restaurant each season to focus on wild game and foraged foods in fall, seafood in winter and vegetables in spring and summer.

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Superfood contenders

We may be approaching the end of the trend lines for kale salads and gluten-free cuisine, predicts the National Restaurant Association. Both of these formerly hot trends have been losing steam over the past couple of years, but don't expect either to go away altogether. They are more likely to evolve into perennial favorites over time. For example, kale salads are being adapted to salads that traditionally feature other greens, such as Caesars and Cobbs, and gluten-free items are becoming menu staples at many foodservice locations.

Potential contenders for the new “superfood” include: Seaweed (or “sea-greens”), lingonberries and elderberries (instead of blueberries), kohlrabi or collard greens (instead of kale), avocado oil (instead of coconut oil), as well as banana peel, BroccoLeaf (a leafy green with the nutrients of broccoli), baobab (an African fruit), pitaya (a cactus fruit) and chlorella (a type of algae).

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Pulses get their day

Beans, lentils and chickpeas are being rebranded as “pulses,” their botanical name. India expects its pulse exports to double this year, and the United Nations has named 2016 the International Year of the Pulses (with the tagline: “nutritious seeds for a sustainable future”). Food manufacturers are adding pulses to chips and pastas to make them more nutrient-rich, as well as providing myriad flavor profiles to bean-based dips made from black beans, white beans, chickpeas or lentils. Take note of these flavor profiles if you’re looking for inspiration for new twists on your own spreads, dips, lentil soups or bean burritos.

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Consumers pack on the protein

A growing number of consumers are pursuing and maintaining more active lifestyles and becoming more aware of sports nutrition's emphasis on energy, hydration and protein, according to researcher Mintel. In foodservice, the trend shows up as protein-packed menu items, including Noodles & Company's line of Buff Bowls, packing 17 to 31 grams of protein, and Panera Bread's Breakfast Power Sandwiches, offering 16 to 21 grams of protein.

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Not all fats are bad

After years of seeing fats as evil, consumers are seeing that not all fats are created equally and that some have nutritional value, Mintel reports. This means that fat is not always a downside when consumers look for healthier foods. Diners are returning to foods that were once derided for having too much fat, such as eggs and oils. High-fat avocados have gained widespread acceptance as a healthy food.

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Niche products go mainstream

Vegetarian burgers and non-dairy milks are no longer niche products, but now appeal to “the everyday consumer,” Mintel reports. Starbucks customers now can add coconut milk to their drinks, and Dunkin’ Donuts has introduced almond milk. Meanwhile, chains have added non-meat proteins to the mix, including Chipotle Mexican Grill’s Sofritas (shredded and braised tofu), and the Beyond Meat alternative at Which Wich Superior Sandwiches.

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Snacking rules

Diners seem to be moving from three meals a day to none, as snacks are obliterating traditional dayparts, note trend trackers Baum+Whiteman. Snacking is not just for Millennials or dashboard diners. Growing numbers of Americans snack four or five times daily, and snacking increased 47 percent from 2010 to 2014. Meanwhile, snack flavor profiles are changing from sweet to savory and from high-carb to nutrient-dense, high-protein and indulgent. When sweeteners are involved, they are often combined with heat or spice, such as chile-spiked honey. Flavors to watch: Spicy-salty-savory ethnic snacks, hummus variations, flavored popcorns (such as seaweed-sesame), chile-citrus potato chips, and mango-chile-lime chips.



Acai bowls rival smoothies

Essentially a big-bowl smoothie made from frozen acai pulp and soy or other milk plus bananas, bits of other fruit and lots of ice, acai bowls often feature toppings such as granola, chia seeds, chocolate chips and coconut flakes.

Acai berries, a grapelike fruit from South America, contain antioxidants, fiber and heart-healthy fats. Acai bowls are an easy way for consumers to make a customizable meal loaded with healthy and tasty ingredients. Acai blends work on yogurt stations or as a mid-afternoon snack. Dietitians can help choose an acai blend that is lower in sugar.

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Dining out on a whim

For almost four in 10 consumers, the decision to eat out is spontaneous. Millennials tend to eat out more frequently than other generations—an average of 9.7 times per month, compared to 8.4 for Generation X and 8.2 for Baby Boomers.

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Fried chicken takes off

Fried chicken continues to grow in popularity. It can be authentic and Southern-inspired—for example, the buttermilk fried chicken with two sides and cornbread at Addendum, Thomas Keller's seasonal Napa lunch spot. Or it can come with ethnic-influenced twists, such as the spicy fried-chicken sandwich with Korean-inspired spice that is the centerpiece dish at David Chang's newest concept, Fuku in New York City.

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