

A close-up photograph of a tall glass filled with a vibrant red smoothie. The smoothie is garnished with fresh green mint leaves on top. A clear plastic straw is inserted into the drink. The background is softly blurred, showing a green wall and a purple and white patterned surface.

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**WAYS TO BETTER
BEVERAGE SALES**

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WAYS TO BETTER BEVERAGE SALES

As diners rally around freshness, variety and customization in food, they expect more from their drinks, too. Technomic research found that in 2014, 44% of consumers (up from 39% in 2012) want healthier beverages at restaurants.

Make the most of this high-margin menu category with fresh flavors and new signature drinks. Here are 10 ideas to get profits flowing.

Tap the Trends

Beverage trends are heading toward non-carbonated alternatives to soda. The following categories are seeing tremendous increases in menu incidence, according to Technomic's research:

- Specialty teas
- Lemonade-and-iced-tea blends
- Restaurant originals such as house-made soft drinks
- Smoothies beyond fruit, featuring surprising ingredients ranging from kale to peanut butter.

Chefs surveyed for the National Restaurant Association's 2015 "What's Hot" Culinary Forecast chose many of the drinks listed above as well as organic coffee and coconut water as top trends among non-alcoholic beverages for 2015.

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Focus on Variety and Health

Give customers plenty of choices, including customized options, and put a healthy spin on your beverage selections. The “feel-good” food trend is showing up for beverages as well.

“Operators must focus on increased consumer demand for variety and health when they are developing or revamping their beverage menus,” advises Darren Tristano, Executive Vice President of Technomic.

Promote the antioxidant qualities of tea or add trendy, low-calorie coconut water to your beverage menu.

What’s on the hot flavor list? The fastest-growing beverage flavors from 2012 to 2014 are almond (up 91%) and watermelon (up 60%), according to Technomic.

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Balance Health and Indulgence

Consumers are moving away from traditional sugary carbonated drinks and sweet flavor profiles toward beverages that are lighter, healthier and more refreshing. They are opting for more complex and refined flavor profiles, according to Elizabeth Friend, Senior Research Analyst for Euromonitor, an international marketing research and strategy firm.

Consumers are still willing to indulge if the splurge is worth it terms of the calories and the experience, says Friend. Craft sodas—such as Starbucks Fizzio, which features three different soda formulations, each delivered to the customer’s preferred level of carbonation—are an example. While sales of traditional soft drinks are slipping, craft sodas are catching on.

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Brew Up Specialty Coffees

Specialty coffee, a natural offshoot of the craft movement, is becoming more diverse and sophisticated. Organic and local coffees help satisfy consumers' desire to know more about where their food and drinks come from. Fanciful concoctions, such as latte art, are trending.

To put your own stamp on specialty coffees, experiment with:

- Flavored coffees with sophisticated extracts, such as red velvet, honey-cinnamon or lavender lattes
- Iced coffees made with artisanal roasts and mix-ins like mint and heavy cream
- Flat whites (steamed milk poured over espresso)
- Alternative milks, including nut milks and coconut milk
- Latte art (45% of respondents in Zagat's 2015 National Coffee Survey said they "love it," up from 38% in 2014.)

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Make Tea Special

About 85% of tea consumption in the United States is iced, reports the Tea Association of the U.S.A. Innovation encompasses many flavor trends—from tropical fruit-flavored tea and Southern sweet tea to more exotic Thai-style concoctions with star anise and sweet condensed milk or coconut milk. Tea can be healthy or indulgent, and flavors can vary with the season.

A minor flavor upgrade can turn tea into something special:

- Infuse iced tea with fruit flavors from mango to raspberry.
- Promote the health benefits of green tea in jasmine and other types of tea.
- Brew up Thai iced tea lattes.

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Create Signature Beverages

Technomic named signature beverages as one of its top 10 menu trends for 2015.

Evaluate your customer base and create signature drinks just for your customers. To appeal to younger consumers, consider specialty teas such as chai, herbal teas, tea lattes and ready-to-drink teas. Signature drinks can range from iced tea with pomegranate juice to hibiscus tea with apple cider.

- Experiment with signature creations featuring trendy ginger—either freshly grated for a spicy kick or with non-alcoholic ginger beer.
- Blend a “garden-to-glass” cooler with fresh fruit purée and herbs, such as mango-basil.
- Mix a splash of blood-orange syrup with fresh basil and a spritz of soda.

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Cash In on Grab-and-Go Sales

With the right product placement and sales mix, canned and bottled beverages can boost grab-and-go sales. Analyze your point-of-sale data to change up your beverage offerings and hone in on “must have” core products and “may have” options.

- Merchandise beverages in several areas around your facility—including near the cash register and the deli.
- Include multiple flavors of tea, water and juice to boost sales. This variety is called the “rainbow effect”—giving customers enough choice to get to know the product.
- Think beyond meal-accompaniment beverages to include meal-replacement beverages such as smoothies or protein drinks.

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Belly Up to the Smoothie Bar

Mintel found that an estimated 41% of adults turn to the juice and smoothie category for added nutrition. They are also seeking freshness and zeroing in on sugar and calories in juices. Use alternative sweeteners, such as Stevia and agave syrup. Show consumers that your products have value by offering fresh ingredients and produce that consumers may find hard to source themselves.

To set up a smoothie bar:

- Offer a base product, such as non-fat yogurt; fresh and frozen fruit and veggies for mix-ins; and nutritional add-ins such as protein power.
- Start with 8-, 10- and 16-ounce servings.
- Staff your smoothie station to ensure portion control.
- If labor permits, smoothie bar hours of 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. will help drive both smoothie and snack sales.

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Go Gourmet with Lemonade

Chefs surveyed for the NRA's 2015 "What's Hot" Culinary Forecast chose Gourmet Lemonade as the No. 1 trend in the non-alcoholic beverages category. Lemonade is refreshing, and with its retro appeal, it is popular once again.

Consider experimenting with your own lemonade and ramp up freshness with herbs or slices of other citrus, like orange or grapefruit. Lemonade, a California-based fast-casual chain, sells multiple flavors, including guava limeade, pineapple coriander, blood orange and cucumber mint.

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Flavor Your Waters

Infuse water with flavor to create lower-calorie drinks with a fresh profile. For example, LYFE Kitchen, a restaurant chain based in Memphis, Tenn., sells LYFE Waters in seasonal flavors, including:

- Cucumber Mint (with fresh cucumber juice, mint, lime and agave)
- Ginger Mint Chia (filtered water infused with ginger, lime, mint and chia seeds)

Or take the bottled-water route—still or sparkling. Flavor possibilities run the gamut from mango to strawberry kiwi.

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