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Consumer Interest in Mindful Dining Grows

CHICAGO, IL -- (Marketwired) -- 11/11/14 -- Today's consumers not only expect good food, attentive service and value for the dollar when they dine out, but also are more likely to choose restaurants that treat employees well and support the community, according to a recent study by the Culinary Visions™ Panel. Insight was collected from more than 1,200 consumers about their perspective on ethical choices that impact their decisions when they dine out or purchase food away from home.

Mindful dining has become a way of life for a growing number of health- and environmentally-conscious consumers, who are not only scrutinizing the restaurants they visit, but also the menu items offered. Evidence of this can be seen in the prevalence of organic food, natural products and locally-sourced ingredients. Following is detailed insight on the variables that impact consumers' dining decisions, which reflect overall trends in the foodservice industry.

Convenience is King

Diners' expectations for food taste and quality continue to grow. Yet, in today's fast-paced society, the convenience factor has become just as important. Consequently, consumers say they are most likely to seek out quick-service restaurants more often than casual or quick-casual establishments. These time-starved consumers are looking for fast and affordable options when on the go.

Clean Eating

Healthful living has become a lifestyle for a growing number of consumers who are making more of an effort to eat nutritious meals and also minimize their impact on the environment. This is reflected in the menu items they choose when dining out. Diners are more likely to choose dishes designated as fresh, locally-sourced food, items containing whole grain and anything deemed to be all natural. By the same token, a majority of consumers are avoiding GMO foods and those containing high fructose corn syrup, hormones and antibiotics. The appeal of humanely-raised meats and sustainably caught/raised seafood also is evident among today's diners, who tend to order these items when available.

Positive Positioning

In the current competitive foodservice environment, a growing number of restaurants are taking steps to become a bigger part of their community to better connect with residents. By sponsoring area events, donating to charities and supporting local businesses, restaurants and chefs are not only giving back, but also creating a positive profile in their neighborhood. Consumers think more highly of these restaurants and chefs, believing that positive business practices and responsible sourcing of ingredients results in fresher, healthier food that tastes better.

Becoming a fixture in the community also can bring in business, as the majority of diners say friends and family are the main sources they trust regarding a restaurant's reputation. Online reviews and websites also provide consumers with the insight they seek on these establishments.

Cost vs. Service

Even with economic conditions on the upswing, affordability remains a primary factor for consumers when choosing a restaurant. As a result, the perception of value still plays a primary role in the decision-making process, with many saying the biggest challenge when ordering is finding food items that are worth the price. Still, the majority of those eating out are not willing to cut corners when it comes to service. Despite the convenience of today's technology, just 3% of consumers prefer to order food online and take it to go and 4% are likely to order food online for delivery.

Dining Decadence

Today, dining in restaurants is about indulgence, and consumers are more likely to forego their diets and calorie counting when eating out. Palates have become more sophisticated, so while many still stick to ordering their favorite dishes, the opportunity to explore new foods and flavors is difficult for the growing number of adventurous diners to pass up.

Environmentally Sound

As people become more educated about the origin of meat and produce, including how and where it's grown or raised, a growing number of consumers are advocating for responsibly-produced food by seeking out restaurants with their same ideals. The continuing appeal of food produced in the U.S., humanely-raised meat, sustainably-raised or caught seafood and locally-sourced ingredients is evident. Just as diners are more likely to patronize businesses that support the community, they also will seek out those that believe in the same causes.

In the year ahead, the mindful dining movement will continue to grow, as consumers seek out restaurants that mirror their values and adhere to their high standards. Diner decisions will continue to be dictated by value and convenience, along with a menu that includes high-quality, responsibly-produced food items, and topped off with exemplary customer service.

Highlights of the Study

- 83% of consumers like to patronize restaurants known for treating their employees well.
- 73% of respondents choose to patronize restaurants that support their local community or causes they believe in.
- At restaurants that promote positive business practices and responsibly source ingredients, 52% expect fresher food, 48% expect healthier food, 45% expect the food to taste better, and 33% expect the food would cost a bit more but be worth it.
- The top menu claims that influence consumers' menu choices were: Fresh (86%); Local (73%); Whole Grain (68%); All Natural (66%); and No High Fructose Corn Syrup (62%).
- Other menu claims that influence ordering include: Grass Fed/Pasture Raised (59%); Hormone Free (57%); Antibiotic Free Protein (56%); Free Range/Free Roaming (55%); Non GMO (55%); Sustainably Caught/Raised (54%); Fair Trade (54%); Heirloom Fruits and Vegetables (52%); Cage Free (52%); and Organic (50%).

About Culinary Visions™ Panel

The Culinary Visions™ Panel is a research and trend forecasting firm that explores a wide range of culinary topics with food industry professionals and consumers. The Culinary Visions Panel is a division of Olson Communications, a certified Women's Business Enterprise, headquartered in Chicago, Illinois. For more information on Culinary Visions Panel, please contact info@culinaryvisions.org or 312.280.4757. Culinary Visions Panel is a registered trademark of Olson Communications, Inc.

About the Survey

Culinary Visions™ Panel surveyed 1,227 restaurant diners about the factors that motivate them when they dine away from home. The study, titled Dining Ethics, was released in November 2014. Topics included motivating factors in choosing restaurants, the importance of local ingredients, allergen information and attention to dietary needs, the influence of menu claims, ordering challenges, and preferred service styles.

A comprehensive report will be available for purchase in early 2015, for more information, email info@culinaryvisions.org with questions.