

Redefining Weeknight Dinner



**Culinary Visions Panel's new research
takes deep dive into consumer habits**

BY SHARON OLSON

Sometimes the greatest opportunities to enhance customer value are in providing desirable and affordable options to make everyday experiences exceptional. Weeknight dinner is the classic experience ready for reinvention. This year's consumer study explored what's on the weeknight menu at home and away from home for modern deli consumers.

Culinary Visions Panel surveyed more than 2,000 consumers to explore their evolving definition of cooking and the factors that influence their choices for dinner during the week. The focus of the study was to measure consumer reaction to innovative offerings from the deli that could potentially reinvigorate dinner at home.

Consumer resources for weeknight dinner have typically been cooking, heating up prepared food, eating out or ordering in from a restaurant. The typical consumer's hectic lifestyle often leads him or her to work from a limited number of habitual choices for weeknight dinner to feed themselves and their families. When searching for weeknight dinner ideas, recipes from a variety of sources fill the initial pages of an Internet search. Most recipes provide dinners that are quick, easy, delicious and healthful. This study set out to explore consumer habits, challenges and expectations for weeknight dinner that could point toward opportunities for delis to capture a larger share of this meal occasion.

What's Cooking?

Consumers who participated in this study were representative of the population and distributed across the country, 54 percent were female, 46 percent male. The majority (52 percent) of those surveyed said they were cooking at home about the same amount as the previous year; 40 percent said they were cooking at home more often. Younger consumers under age 39 were more likely to say they were cooking more often at home than older consumers.

The definition of "cooking" has been a moving target over the years as more speed-scratch or chef-ready types of ingredients have given consumers with limited time or cooking skills the satisfaction of cooking a meal. In this study, consumers were presented with a number of phrases

and asked to check all they believed to be accurate definitions of cooking. "Cooking from a recipe with raw ingredients" was noted by 77 percent of those surveyed. Other definitions of cooking also gained sizable responses including:

- 61 percent—Assembling ingredients that include a convenient item like a fully prepared sauce or seasoning mix
- 45 percent—Using leftovers to create a new meal
- 37 percent—Warming up or plating prepared food

With these broad definitions of cooking, it was not surprising that 65 percent of the consumers surveyed said they enjoyed cooking, and less than 5 percent said they hated to cook. Among those who enjoy cooking, 10 percent expressed emotional satisfaction describing cooking as therapy. There was little difference between men and women on their enjoyment of cooking.

Weeknight Dining Habits

Weeknight dinner is dominated by meals prepared and enjoyed at home. Whether it is prepared in haste or made with leftovers, it is rarely skipped. Eighty-five percent of consumers said they almost never skipped dinner on weeknights. Consumers under 39 years old were more likely than the overall survey audience to skip dinner, and consumers age 52 or older were least likely to skip dinner.

Eating dinner at home four to five times per week was the choice for 41 percent of the consumers surveyed. When dining at home, 37 percent said they ordered delivery at least once during the week, and 42 percent said they warmed up leftovers or threw something together from ingredients on hand once a week. Younger consumers, ages 22-39, were more likely than the total audience in the survey to go out for dinner or to order delivery. Frozen meals are not a favorite for dinner during the week either. Seventy-three percent of consumers said they almost never heat up a frozen meal for dinner.

Weeknights are not often a night for dining experiences away from home. Seventy-six percent of consumers said they almost never go out for dinner on weeknights, and 85 percent said they almost never eat at a friend or family member's home. When they do dine out, their favorite places are chain restaurants and those offering specialty ethnic foods like Mexican, Chinese and Italian. Most consumers offered up specific names of restaurants they enjoyed for dinner during the week; bar and grill concepts and quick service restaurants were mentioned most often.

When cooking at home, 37 percent of consumers said they sometimes like to try new dishes, but most of the time they like to stick with their favorites. Yet 48 percent



expressed a sense of culinary adventure by noting they always or usually like to try new dishes and flavors. Although consumers generally express interest in healthy options, only 3 percent say that what they eat is determined primarily by their concern for health and wellness.

Favorite dishes to cook at home for dinner include chicken more often than any other protein. A wide variety of favorite chicken preparations were shared. Variations included healthy, flavorful and fried. Pasta was favored as an entrée or a side dish, with macaroni and cheese and spaghetti and meatballs as the most popular variations. Among ethnic foods, Mexican and Italian dishes received the most mentions. For one-item meals, pizza was favored much more than casserole dishes.

Weeknight Dining Challenges

The study also delved into some of the obstacles that prevented consumers from cooking at home. Time was much more of a concern than money for consumers; 38 percent said their primary challenge was the length of preparation time, while only 17 percent said it was the expense. Even though relatively few consumers said they ate out at a restaurant regularly during the week, 36 percent felt it was easier to eat out.

This was a question that created much discussion with more than 500 consumers who were eager to share their challenges. Among the obstacles to cooking at home is deciding what to cook. Even those who knew what they wanted to make complained that forgetting an ingredient threw a wrench in their dinner plans. Some committed home cooks expressed frustration at having to go to several stores to get all of the ingredients they needed for a recipe.

Cooking for special dietary needs, either for themselves or family members, tested the imagination and motivation of many home cooks who wanted easy and delicious meals at home. The continual need to find interesting dinner choices without all of the ingredients on hand, dampened the motivation of many otherwise enthusiastic home cooks.

Weeknight Dining Solutions

When consumers were asked for ideas on what supermarkets could do to encourage them to cook more often at home, there was a wide range of answers, most of which related to making the shopping experience more convenient, including online ordering for pick up and home delivery.

Only 37 percent of consumers said they were likely to stop by their local grocery store to get something from the prepared food section. For the majority of those surveyed, this is not part of their consideration set when looking for a convenient solution for dinner.

Consumer expectations for prepared foods from the deli include traditional favorites like rotisserie chicken as well as items one might more often associate with a restaurant dining experience, like pizza. Consumers expect fresh food from the deli and consider the deli a destination for healthy choices. Variety and the ability to customize the components of a complete meal are also important aspects of prepared food offerings.

Although many consumers look to the deli prepared foods section for a wide variety of side dishes, many others expressed an interest in having all of the components of a complete meal available, to allow the consumer to customize a meal of their choice with a fully cooked entrée, side, salad and dessert option.

When purchasing prepared foods in the deli, clear descriptions of ingredients and cooking or heating instructions are a must. Fresh ingredients and cleanliness added to the appeal of prepared foods.

Forty percent of consumers said meal kits that included a collection of fresh ingredients — in exactly the right proportions to make a meal at home with step-by-step instructions — would encourage them to cook more during the week. When asked how interested they would be in purchasing a meal kit of this type at their local supermarket, 77 percent said they would be interested. Less than one percent of those surveyed had already tried making dinner with a meal kit, yet the idea was captivating.

What appealed most about the meal kit was that it would be a hassle-free way to save time in preparing a satisfying weeknight dinner. The notion that it would help the consumer cook like a chef appealed to 35 percent of those surveyed, and 29 percent liked the idea of getting restaurant quality at home. Without being given a price, 32 percent said a meal kit would be a great value to them.

The meal kit appealed to both seasoned cooks and those who liked it as a learning opportunity. Some described the concept as “a problem solver.” Since the meal creation would be a hands-on experience it was felt the food would be healthier, more delicious and easy to customize for the tastes of their family.

When presented with various options for meal kits available from their local grocery store, the following were among the top scoring non-price attributes: customization, single person or family size options and healthy choices. Easy pick up at the store would make more than half of those surveyed more likely to purchase the meal kit; 39 percent said home delivery would make them more likely to make the purchase.

Positioning The Deli For Dinner

The deli is the perfect place to serve up dinner solutions for modern consumers who like to eat at home during the week and enjoy a fresh, restaurant quality experience. Convenience and quality drive the dinner occasion, yet consumers are more than willing to be hands-on when preparing their meal.

The competition for weeknights is less from restaurants than it is from innovative start up ventures like meals kits that enable consumers to create their own dining experience at home. Delis that give their customers variety and flexible solutions will win a place in the weeknight dining decision process.

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