

FLAVOR & THE MENU

ABOUT THE BUSINESS

The FLAVOR PAYOFF

Focusing on the New Frugality

Our latest bump on the road to prosperity has spurred changes in consumer behavior, with Americans getting creative about having their cake and eating at least some of it. A recent survey from the Culinary Visions Panel program, led by Chicago-based Olson Communications, shows consumers are continuing to enjoy eating out but ordering differently to satisfy pocketbooks and palates. The online survey polled 210 consumers who identified themselves as frequent patrons of casual-dining restaurants, and their responses reflect a "new frugality" mindset. More than half of participants reported changing their dining choices in the past 12 months as a result of the economy; another 81 percent are paying closer attention to menu prices. Here are some of their spending strategies:

Deal Hunting: 72 percent of respondents noted researching the best dining values and using coupons. Operators report specialty priced dinners – \$23 three-course lunches or daily "meal deals" – are increasingly popular.

Share Alike: 40 percent of those surveyed said they have split an entrée with a dining partner more often than a year ago; a third reported patronizing restaurants with larger portions that can be shared or taken as leftovers. Respondents also noted sharing appetizers and desserts.

Swap & Save: Instead of ordering a slew of appetizers, cocktails, main dishes and desserts, many consumers take the "either/or" route, choosing either appetizers or desserts or cocktails to keep a lid on expenses.

Consumers may be looking to cut costs, but many say they don't want operators to cut back on quality and service in their own effort to rein in expenses, such moves are perceived as leading to a decline in value. That perception is not lost on operators. Culinary Visions panelist Nancy Brussat, of Convito Café and Market in Chicago, explains, "We would not consider cutting the quality of our ingredients or skimping on service staff because those relate directly to our customer's experience."

Notes Sharon Olson, president of Olson Communications, "People still enjoy going out to eat and are finding creative ways to stay within their budgets. Whether or not we see a pullback in consumer concerns later this year or next year, it seems that some of these emerging and evolving behaviors are here to stay."

SOURCE: CULINARY VISIONS/OLSON COMMUNICATIONS

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