

Veg-centric Sandwiches

By John Unrein

Vegetables are taking over the American sandwich as a dominant ingredient rather than a side note. “Veg-centric” – not vegetarian – is a macro trend influencing menus across all segments of the retail foodservice industry, according to new research by Culinary Visions Panel. Vegetables are moving from side dish to center of the plate with new and interesting techniques. Most of these new menu items use protein sparingly to provide layers of craveable flavor. The next great sandwich concept could incorporate a unique mix of vegetables, with a protein garnish.

Veg-centric sandwich concepts especially take center stage with younger consumers, according to Culinary Visions Panel, which developed 10 next generation sandwich concepts exclusively for this study to find out how adventurous consumers are when it comes to trying new sandwich ingredient combinations. Four of the top five sandwich concepts preferred by millennials were veg-centric in nature.

Sharon Olson, executive director of Culinary Visions Panel, says her group’s study reveals there is real potential to delight a wide range of customers because some concepts may be vegetarian and yet many include meat as well. “I think consumers are telling us they are ready for delicious, flavorful and craveable vegcentric sandwiches,” she says.

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Millennials may be a good target, as more than one-third of these consumers would try the vegetable sandwich, while only a quarter of those ages 35-54 would choose the meat-free option. The vegetable sandwich, which ranked second overall with millennial consumers, included ingredients like arugula, tomato, avocado, caramelized onion and melted cheese between crispy plantains.

The veg-centric theme continues, with a third of respondents interested in the omelet sandwich, which was rated third

among the 10 concepts tested. This combines spinach, pepper jack cheese, roasted red peppers, and a sprinkling of bacon in an egg wrap.

Also highly rated with millennials was the “salad cone,” a salad-as-a-sandwich concept that combines grilled chicken, romaine lettuce, onion, tomato and ranch dressing in cone-shaped brioche. And rounding out the top 5 was the Paleo sandwich with avocado spread, romaine lettuce, peppers, fresh herbs and accents of garlic marinated shrimp, enrobed in an almond flour wrap.

A More Prominent Role

Sandwiches continue to be featured more prominently on retail foodservice menus than similar handheld fare, such as burgers, hot dogs and pizza, according to Packaged Facts, a Rockville, Maryland-based research firm. Many operators reinvent the lunchtime staple with gourmet and healthy twists, as well as global flavors.

“Leveraging progressive food sourcing and food preparation practices, restaurants and food manufacturers are increasingly focused on providing sandwiches that are fresh, naturally produced, locally sourced, and either culturally authentic or genuinely creative in culinary concept,” says David Sprinkle, research director of Packaged Facts. Packaged Facts identified eight sandwich types trending in retail outlets, driven by international or regional influences and demand for bold flavors and healthy options.

Garden tartines

Fresh produce piles high on a single slice of bread to create an enticing and vegetarian-friendly “still life of a sandwich,” Packaged Facts said.

Tortas and cemitas

A growing interest in international sandwiches and street foods has given rise to two Mexican mainstays. Typically served on a long crusty roll, tortas may be eaten cold, hot, grilled or toasted with such fillings as avocado, poblano, jalapeño, ham or adobo meat. Cemitas commonly are served on an egg roll topped with a sprinkling of sesame seeds.

Croque monsieur and madame

The rise of global cuisine gives way to the resurgence of two familiar French favorites with modern-day tweaks. Conventional croque monsieurs are grilled ham and cheese sandwiches with béchamel sauce. The croque madame comes topped with a poached or fried egg.

Brisket sandwich

Rooted in the comfort food trend, brisket is hot even on non-barbecue menus, Packaged Facts says. This versatile meat may be served in a number of different ways, from classic to distinctly contemporary.

Cuban sandwich

Featuring layers of ham, roast pork, Swiss cheese and pickles, the paninistyle Cuban sandwich is in the midst of a revival, as chefs experiment with new ingredients and upgrades.

Sweet and savory sandwiches

Sweet and savory combine to create a sophisticated twist on traditional sandwiches. Usage of jam in sandwiches served in restaurants rose to 11% in 2014, with use in hot sandwiches nearly doubling during that time, Packaged Facts says.

Protein-based salad sandwiches

Classic tuna, chicken and salad sandwiches have gone gourmet in recent years with fancier fillings, condiments, breads and sides, Packaged Facts says.

Breakfast sandwiches

Handhelds are a hit in the morning, when many consumers are grabbing breakfast on the go. Operators may appeal to more consumers by leveraging such descriptors as “natural,” “local,” “seasonal” or “sustainable,” which are four times more likely to appear on non-breakfast items, according to Packaged Facts.

Keeping in touch with consumer preferences continues to pay for all dayparts.

Vegetable Sandwich

