

New Culinary Visions Research Featured in

8 Fast-Food Trends to Watch After the Pandemic



Off-premises as a priority

Spoiler alert: Off-premises strategies are here to stay. Of course, that's no surprise to anyone in the restaurant industry. But the sheer amount of business being conducted through off-premises channels today by necessity is recalibrating guests' ongoing habits—and shifting operator priorities, as well.

"Look at how many quick-service restaurants right now, given the opportunity to reopen dining rooms, are choosing not to because they've already made a pivot to optimize that off-premises experience," says David Portalatin, food industry advisor for The NPD Group.

This immense demand for everything served off-premises and contactless will inevitably lead to those channels adapting and improving, which will in turn shift consumer expectations for convenience. Michael Whiteman, president of consultancy Baum+Whiteman, points to the drive thru as an example: In the not-too-distant future, voice recognition, facial recognition, and license-plate readers will know everything about the customer when they pull in the lane.

"They'll upsell you before you can say no," he says. "They'll automatically bill your credit card and recognize you next time you're there. Soon they'll alert you to a

special item tailored to your taste while you're driving by a specific location."

Data shows that consumers' comfort level is indeed trending more toward off-premises occasions and away from anything that might be considered unsafe. ***Sharon Olson, president of Olson Communications and Culinary Visions Panel,*** says 91 percent of consumers her firm surveyed said they would be more hygiene-conscious moving forward, and 65 percent said they would be reluctant to return to large food halls or marketplace environments. Meanwhile, 54 percent of respondents in three-plus-person households "said the drive-thru window at my favorite restaurants feels like home to me," she says.

Gary Stibel, CEO of New England Consulting Group, has coined the term "DeLocation" to describe the foodservice experience of the future where the only real estate that matters is where the customer is.

"In the old days, the industry was location, location, and location," he says. "Even a bad restaurant in a good location would thrive. Well, it doesn't matter anymore, because the only location that's important is where I am. And I don't care if the restaurant is across town or non-existent ... I want what I want here in 30 minutes, whether it's a burger or a pizza."

This notion has already given rise to the ghost-kitchen trend, and Stibel sees that trend progressing to a point where a business could build out an empty space—say, a closed department store—with a kitchen prepared to make any food, thereby creating a one-stop shop for pickup customers and delivery drivers alike.



Meal kits

Even though the vast majority of restaurant sales in the last six months have been consumed outside the four walls, it hasn't stopped operators from creating a fun experience with their menu.

"From beautifully curated experiential boxes to ... Zoom-guided wine tastings and chef-catered family meals, restaurateurs are finding ways to share the love of food with consumers outside the confines of their restaurant," says Liz Moskow, principal of consultancy Bread & Circus.

For limited-service restaurants, meal kits have become one of the most successful ways to create that experience. Not only do they satisfy the demand for something fun, but they also give guests something to do with their family at a time when most people are staying home—and many of them are learning to cook together.

Olson says the pandemic has given many families an opportunity to reconnect with each other over meals, and that's likely something they'll fight to keep; 80 percent of consumers report that family meal times were a source of pleasure during quarantine, and 76 percent say they were inspired to learn new cooking techniques.

And Amanda Topper, associate director of foodservice research at Mintel, says 62 percent of customers want restaurants to continue selling meal kits after the pandemic is over, according to Mintel's data. She adds that keeping those kinds of packaged goods on the menu is not only a way to offer convenience to guests, but also a way to compete with retail brands like grocery stores.

Restaurants as a comfort, indulgence, or reward

Even though health is still a priority for consumers, restaurants will primarily be a destination for indulgent items, the experts say, particularly in an anxious season and one in which they're doing more cooking at home.

"We have doubled down on the comfort aspects of the away-from-home meal occasion," Portalatin says. "That's not to say that consumers aren't thinking about their health; we're thinking a lot about health right now. ... It's just that when it comes to an eating occasion and we're thinking about health, we're more likely to turn to the refrigerator or the pantry."

Olson says that while 83 percent of consumers are looking forward to healthier eating habits, 72 percent say a little bit of indulgence will likely be a part of their daily routine. That could be as simple as a daily cup of coffee at the local coffee shop, Brandau says, particularly now that many people are working from home for the foreseeable future.



"The coffee occasion is worth the trip for a lot of people who just need to get out of the house, need to have an affordable indulgence, like the \$4 or \$5 cup of coffee that used to be thought of as some self-indulgent thing for yuppies and high-income households," he says. "But now, for a lot of people, that's their chance to be in the car."

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