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## 9 Fast Food Trends for 2016

These customer trends are sure to shake up the limited-service industry in the coming year.

1. Real food
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Vegetables are expected to grow in popularity as the stars of limited-service menus.

“All these things we see are not just a trend, they’re a way of life,” says Rachel Lake, managing director of Chicago-based Olson Communications, which operates the Culinary Visions Panel, a food-focused and trend-forecasting practice.

Taste and price, along with quality, are still the most important matters when consumers dine out, Lake says, but mindful dining makes up the “second level of characteristics that allow consumers to feel good about themselves” while eating out.

“A lot of this depends on what mindset you are in,” Olson Communications’ Lake says. “Would you like the order right by talking to a person, or are you comfortable with a screen? The growth of digital ordering just shows that speed is as important as it’s always been.”

# 1. Real food

One trend made its way onto more forecasts than any other: clean eating, or food made with ingredients that are free of additives, antibiotics, and other artificial components.

“It’s been evolving, and the more we’ve talked about it, it’s just increased awareness,” says Bonnie Riggs, restaurant analyst for market research firm The NPD Group. “The trend is toward food and beverages that are considered wholesome and real.”

This links directly with food that is “fresh,” which Riggs says is becoming “the mantra” for healthier food choices that will grow in popularity in 2016.

“Just this past fall, a few large chains made announcements about their ingredients,” says Annika Stensson, director of research communications at the National Restaurant Association (NRA), referencing the move from many companies—including Taco Bell, Papa John’s, and Panera Bread—to take out certain additives. “And we expect to see more.”

But the “real food” concept goes beyond removing certain ingredients; it also includes adding authentic foods, such as ethnic, regional, and local ingredients. Chefs and operators are also making more foods in-house to improve transparency and bring more control over flavor.

Quick serves and fast casuuls have been among those adding their own products made in-house, from fresh guacamole at many Mexican-style restaurants to Good Times Burgers and Frozen Custard’s pickles prepared in each restaurant, and from the apricot chutney at Fresh To Order to Wow Bao’s ginger ale.

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## 2. Chef-driven fast casuuls

The inspiration of talented, well-trained, and often fine-dining chefs has always been part of the fast-casual restaurant movement. After all, Chipotle founder Steve Ells is a Culinary Institute of America grad and one-time fine-dining sous chef.

Many have followed Ells into fast casual. There’s Rick Bayless with Xoco, Tortas Frontera, and Frontera Fresco, and Danny Meyer with Shake Shack. Add in Richard Blais, Spike Mendelsohn, Bobby Flay, Bradley Ogden, and dozens of other high-profile chefs, and you get the picture of how attractive fast casual and Fast Casual 2.0 have become.

Among the chefs affiliated with fast-casual operations that opened in 2015 were José Andrés and Joshua Skenes. And those are just the well-known names; dozens of other chefs across the country opened fast casuuls or announced their intentions to do so in the coming years.

The chef-driven fast-casual movement has grown so strong that it came in at No. 2 on the NRA’s “What’s Hot” culinary forecast for the coming year, a report done in conjunction with the American Culinary Federation.

“These restaurants are looking at the menu and ingredients as a chef would, rather than a research and development [professional],” Stensson says. “It’s a slightly different way of looking at the menu and the ingredients that go into it.”

Although the multi-concept world has plenty of big quick-service restaurant operators, fast casual is one way for creative chefs to “move beyond one or two great restaurants to expand” their empires, says Andrew Freeman, president of San Francisco restaurant consulting firm Andrew Freeman & Co. “They can find a whole new customer base.”

### 3. Micro cuisines

For a long time, quick service focused on national trends like burgers and chicken. Then there was the focus on regional flavors and even some ethnic foods, including Mexican and Chinese. But in 2016, expect to see more hyper regional items on the menu.

Part of that is driven by food ingredients that come from particular local areas—an offshoot of the locovore movement that has been trending in recent years—as well as popular local menu items, like green chile in New Mexico or giardiniera in Chicago.

“Local flavors can really tell a story for consumers,” says Mike Kostyo, publications manager at Chicago market research firm Datassential. “Ingredients can be very different, even in a small geographic area, and that can make a difference in what diners want.”

Even big operators can take advantage of this. “If you’re a large brand, you can look take local cuisines and flavors as a way to look small to consumers,” Kostyo says. Some companies, like Shake Shack and Smashburger, are already doing that to a degree.

At the same time, operators can try these regional items at their units elsewhere in the country as a way to extend their menus, either for a full or limited time.

Several forecasters project Hawaiian food as a trend. “A number of fine-dining chefs have given us their versions of spruced up Hawaiian fare, and we’re starting to see it in quick service,” says Kara Nielsen, culinary director of Denver branding firm Sterling-Rice Group.

This is especially the case with poke, a raw fish salad that often is served in a bowl. “The poke bowl is a kind of deconstructed sushi, with fresh seafood and a really healthy halo,” she says. Quick-service poke is big in California and has started to move east.

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### 4. Mindful dining

There are a wide range of trends—sustainability, reducing food waste, and humane treatment of animals, among them—that all can be summed up by a macro trend sweeping through the limited-service restaurant space: mindful dining.

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Taste and price, along with quality, are still the most important matters when consumers dine out, Lake says, but mindful dining makes up the “second level of characteristics that allow consumers to feel good about themselves” while eating out.

The Millennial generation is far more apt to gravitate to these attributes than their elders, Culinary Visions reports, and a number of operators have taken notice. For instance, even big chains are moving to source eggs from chickens that are not kept in restrictive cages.

Giving back—to charity and communities—is also considered important to that generation, Freeman says. “It’s not just about showing that you care; it’s about tapping into guests’ passions and being a part of the story,” he says.

## 5. Vegetables as the star

Nearly every one of the 2016 forecasts mention vegetables in some form, either as part of a dish or as the logical beneficiary of the evolving move toward healthier eating and cleaner ingredients. Vegetables also help fight off the higher cost of many meats.

This is especially happening at quick-service and fast-casual restaurants across the country, where there are far more vegetable-only options and plant-based meatless proteins—as well as creative uses of potatoes, mushroom, broccoli, cabbage, kale, and other vegetables—than ever before.

Freeman calls vegetables the “hero” of ingredients this year, because they’re not only being moved to the center of the plate, but are also playing important roles in all of the dayparts and across menu segments, as well as in snacking and beverages.

Vegetables also dovetail into a wave of other trends, including local sourcing, sustainability, and natural ingredients.

“There’s the idea of getting back to basics in cooking, and letting ingredients shine,” the NRA’s Stensson says. “And there’s also the consumer interest in health and nutrition.”

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## 6. Nontraditional destinations

The entire sense of place for quick-service restaurants is changing. Single-use stores and drive-thru lanes are still the most important, but the industry has become much more.

Food courts, for instance, have long been part of the limited-service restaurant landscape, but there’s a growing interest in creating new food halls that combine counter-service eateries along with retailers that sell fresh produce, meats, kitchen gear, and more. Some restaurants are using flexible dining concepts—quick service for lunch and full service for dinner. And dining out can now occur at your home, the office, or elsewhere due to expanded catering and delivery services.

Food halls are far from a new concept, and traditional halls, like Pike’s Place Market in Seattle and West Side Market in Cleveland, have been around for years in many cities. The modern versions, often opened by celebrity chefs and featuring a single culinary focus, began with Eataly in 2010 and now includes Latinicity in Chicago, with others on the way.

“This is kind of the next iteration,” Datassential’s Kostyo says. “Developers are partnering with great local chefs for these food-driven locations.”

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## 7. Stronger flavor profiles

How will the industry follow the bold flavor profiles like ghost peppers, sriracha, and Louisiana Hot Sauce, which all made their mark in 2015? That will be the question operators and chefs will be seeking this year. Another blistering chile concoction may grab the public’s fascination, or it might be something that provides not only heat but also a spicy taste, like gochujang. Either way, feeding the consumers’ need to try out exciting new tastes remains key.

“Hot, spicy sauces and strong flavor profiles can encourage customers to try new items,” says NPD’s Riggs. This, along with healthy and indulgent menu innovations, allowed the limited-service industry to be the best-performing restaurant segment last year.

“Those chains that focused on menu innovation, even with the overall industry just poking along, generally had very successful years,” she says. “I expect 2016 will bring even more menu creativity, expanding into more unique and spicy ingredients.”

## 8. Digital advances

The digital advances continue to arrive fast and furious, and consumers, especially the Millennials and their younger brethren, Generation Z, increasingly expect all of their contacts, including restaurants, to be more technology friendly.

Whether it's ordering via kiosks or through proliferating order-and-pay applications on your smartphone, the idea is to provide speedy service without hassles. That extends even to the drive-thru lane.

As San Francisco fast-casual Eatsa puts it: "No lines. No cashier. No nonsense." That concept allows customers to order via touch-screen kiosks; the orders appear in a cubbyhole on a wall with the customer's name on it.

"A lot of this depends on what mindset you are in," Olson Communications' Lake says. "Would you like the order right by talking to a person, or are you comfortable with a screen? The growth of digital ordering just shows that speed is as important as it's always been."

And then there's the "delivery revolution," as Freeman calls it, which ties the same order-and-pay apps with restaurant or third-party delivery services. Not only are there services that include Postmates and Door Dash, but also "transformational companies like Uber and Amazon are muscling into the market," he says.

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## 9. Savory takes over

For the longest time, sweetness was added to savory items to take them to the next level. This year, though, expect the trend to turn this idea upside down.

"Now nearly anything can be made into a savory version," Kostyo says. That transformation is going on from the breakfast menu, where oatmeal can swap out maple syrup and brown sugar for sriracha and a poached egg, to dessert, with frozen yogurts, ice creams, and cakes replacing sweet ingredients with savory ones.

"We're seeing some creative people taking that to the extreme by taking out all of the sweet," he says. "So, in a savory yogurt, instead of vanilla or fruit, you're seeing tomato or pumpkin."

Savory yogurt is tied to the Middle Eastern culinary trend and healthy vegetable-centric dining, Sterling-Rice's Nielsen says. "Entrepreneurs and artists are looking at new ways of presenting Greek yogurt, and it's just not sweet. You're seeing all kinds of savory ingredients."

The savory additions to yogurt—and to its sibling, Labneh cheese with ingredients like beets, carrots, savory spices, and olive oil—falls in line "with our love for dipping and looking for snacks that have proteins, are customizable, and take different shapes and sizes," she adds.