

Consumers Will Buy Invisibly Healthy Food

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A new Culinary Visions Panel™ survey finds more evidence that casual restaurant diners are enticed by invisibly healthy menu items that sound delicious and indulgent. Chicago-based Olson Communications created 16 invisibly healthy menu concepts and asked consumers to rate how likely they would be to order each item. Although every item was healthy by design, consumers rated those they perceived as the most indulgent as their favored choices.

All concepts were based on real recipes for healthier preparation of menu items that could be easily prepared by casual dining establishments with pantry ingredients. When developing each menu concept, sacrificing taste was not an option and there was a commitment to use real food and not artificial ingredients.

“We discovered an interesting disconnect between items that consumers perceived to be healthy and those perceived to be indulgent,” says Sharon Olson, president. “Items that were ‘invisibly healthy’ were considered more desirable than those considered obviously healthy.”

Olson expects that another part of the disconnect might relate to what diners want when they dine at casual restaurants. The casual dining experience is perceived as a treat and therefore diners allow themselves to choose less healthy fare because they think it will be more satisfying. It may be too that invisibly healthy menu items still struggle against the old consumer perception that healthy and good-tasting don't go together.

For breakfast, 37 percent of survey respondents said they would most likely order the Canadian bacon and egg sandwich, which barely beat out the stuffed French toast with 36 percent. More than half of respondents would order the chicken fingers with ranch dressing as an appetizer over the skewered chicken satay, crispy calamari, or Asian tea smoked shrimp. For sandwiches, slow-roasted, wood-smoked BBQ brisket came in slightly ahead of the Italian meatball sub, and more than 15 percent ahead of the Greek lamb burger and the grilled fish tacos.

In the entrée category, steak with salsa verde and roasted squash was by far more likely to be ordered than braised baby lamb shank with olives, figs, and fennel or seafood with bean stew. The steak dish was the only dish to be perceived as healthy and also desirable to order.

The idea that you can dangle inconspicuously healthier food in front of people and they will bite is sometimes called stealth health, or “invisibly healthy.” Olson asked registered dietitians with culinary expertise to weigh in on the value of the concept. Some said they didn't think trying to cloak healthy food was the way to go because education was not considered. While others thought it was a useful tactic to demonstrate that taste appeal and healthfulness are not mutually exclusive.

The survey also took an in-depth look at foodie consumers who described themselves as always or usually liking to try new dishes and flavors when contemplating a menu change since these are the consumers who will try something outside of their standard order. Foodies noted that they don't feel the need to compromise on healthfulness when they want delicious indulgent fare.

The study suggested that it is important for restaurateurs to understand their customers' comfort zone when offering healthful and imaginative preparations of popular menu items.