



Mindful Consumers Choosing Ethical Restaurants, Menu Options

While convenience, affordability, and opportunities to indulge are always top of mind when choosing a restaurant, a new study reveals diners are putting more emphasis on making healthful and ethical choices when dining out.

Today's diners are increasingly looking to restaurants that share their values on ethical issues such as humanely produced foods, environmental impact, and positive community involvement, according to a recent study conducted by the Culinary Visions Panel.

The study, titled "Dining Ethics," surveyed more than 1,200 consumers on factors that motivate them when they dine away from home, such as the importance of local ingredients, allergen information, attention to dietary needs, and the influence of menu claims.

Mindful dining has become a way of life for a growing number of health- and environmentally conscious consumers, explains Rachel Tracy, managing director of the Culinary Visions Panel, a division of Chicago-based Olson Communications. "We have noticed a steady shift in the way consumers define value beyond price," she says.

There's a growing awareness of the impact of the people and places involved in producing food, she adds, and the study's findings show that concern around these issues impact consumers' decisions when they are choosing one restaurant over another and deciding on menu items.

Here are just a few of the study's highlights about consumers' newfound mindful dining, which reflect overall trends in the foodservice industry.

CLEAN EATING

"Chefs have credibility with consumers," says Tracy. "Consumers look to chefs as the thought leaders who have the passion and education to seek out and verify information on the sources of ingredients they use."

According to the survey, diners are more likely to choose dishes designated as fresh (86 percent) or locally sourced (73 percent), as well as items containing whole grains (68 percent) or promoted as all-natural (66



percent). Minimalist ingredient listings that signal homemade, all-natural dishes have become a priority for a growing number of consumers. This is especially true for Baby Boomers, who responded highest (92 percent) to the statement that the fresh designation was a top influencer in choosing menu items at a restaurant.

Whether the motivation is perceived nutrition or social ethics, there's an appeal to menu items that promote overall healthful living. "We consumers equate the word fresh with healthful and high-quality food," Tracy says. "Fresh is simple and desirable."

POSITIVE POSITIONING

Consumers think more highly of restaurants and chefs that create a positive profile in their community, according to the study. A majority of respondents like to patronize restaurants known for treating their employees well (83 percent) and support their local community or causes they believe in (73 percent).

Tracy suggests that a greater share of restaurants are taking steps to connect with mindful consumers who evaluate brands based on their corporate conscious and positive business practices because consumers perceive these establishments to offer fresher, healthier, better-tasting food. Some restaurant chains are challenging their unit operators to offer local craft beers unique to their respective region, for example. Others are partnering with local bakeries or coffee roasters to demonstrate their support for small businesses and entrepreneurs within the community. "Consumers love that 'only here' kind of experience," she says, adding it's a win-win for restaurants who want their customers to think more highly of their brand.

ENVIRONMENTALLY SOUND

Just as diners seek brands that support causes they believe in, they also look for restaurants that are committed to serving responsibly produced food such—whether it be a product made in the U.S. or locally sourced ingredients. More than half of respondents said the following menu claims influence ordering: grass-fed/pasture-raised (59 percent), hormone-free (57 percent), sustainably caught/raised (54 percent), and cage-free (52 percent).

"Communicating claims on the menu is a lot like storytelling," explains Tracy. "It's not uncommon to find fish and chips on a menu where the diner is told the origin of the fish, how it was caught and maybe even the name of the fisherman and his boat."

In addition to these mindful-dining insights, the panel determined that traditional drivers such as convenience, cost, and decadence will continue to trend in foodservice through 2015. Offerings that deliver on a combination of these factors with high ethical and sustainability standards will be poised for success.

Top Menu Claims Influencing Orders

