

Feeding Foodies And Fuelers



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Inspiring foodies and feeding fuelers can make the difference between success and indifference for deli operators. Yet being a foodie is such a mainstream trend, it's hard to know who's a real foodie and who aspires to be a foodie but has little taste for culinary adventure.

In a recent Culinary Visions Panel survey of 220 consumers by Olson Communications, Inc., less than 1 percent of the participants described themselves as "food fuelers," defined as those who consider food as fuel, nothing else. Forty percent sometimes try new dishes and flavors but they are more likely to stick with their favorite foods. Fifty-one percent, the majority, described themselves as foodies who usually or always like to try new dishes.

Consumers in this study were asked to react to some classic American foods with an ethnic-inspired variation based on the top three ethnic flavor categories — Mediterranean, Latin and Asian. The categories included burgers, pizza, chopped salad, and side dishes. Their reactions to some specific food concepts separated the real foodies from the fuelers. The study provided insight into which favorite foods are ripe for experimentation, which flavor profiles are most intriguing in each category, and foods where the classic preparation is sacred.

Of the burger concepts presented, the Nuevo Latino Burger was the most popular, preferred by 44 percent of respondents. It might point to the opportunity to offer more cheeses offering a range of adventure from flavorful American varieties such as Pepper Jack to authentic ethnic cheeses such as Panela or Chihuahua along with Cheddar, Swiss and American favorites. Consider featuring a wider variety of buns, rolls and condiments so customers can pick everything they need.

Pizza is a category where tried-and-true favorites such as sausage and pepperoni cannot be beat. Yet pizza is so popular the category has grown to lots of different ethnic variations. All variations scored well, but the most popular pizza concept in the Culinary Visions study was Pan Asian with diced chicken breast (marinated in garlic, lime juice and cilantro), grilled Japanese eggplant, caramelized onions, and Fontina and Mozzarella cheeses, preferred by 40 percent of respondents. Offering a special take-and-bake variety as a limited-time offer could keep up interest in the category and be more competitive with local restaurants.

Sicilian Chickpeas and Spinach, a Mediterranean side dish, was favored by 44 percent of respondents. It's often easier for consumers to experiment with side dishes than main courses, so a more daring product might be appropriate with an incentive to order a sampler with a few varieties

to encourage customers to try something beyond their time-honored favorites.

The Persian Salad of chopped romaine, seedless cucumber, fresh mint, green onions, farro, crumbled Feta cheese and cumin-scented lemon and yogurt dressing was preferred by 48 percent of respondents. The second choice, scoring a 44 percent preference, was the Latin-inspired Ensalada Santiago, featuring shrimp, avocado, hearts of palm, roasted corn kernels and chili-lime dressing. These results speak to an opportunity to merchandise some signature salad dressings with specialty cheeses and recipe suggestions that can be assembled easily by consumers.

The concepts in the study were chef-inspired ideas that are undoubtedly a bit more complex than the average

consumer might make from scratch at home, yet scores over 40 percent make these ideal candidates for special limited-time offers to create more interest in your deli and build incremental sales in already popular food categories.

Some items received interest scores in the 35 to 40 percent range, indicating they may be worth watching as emerging trends. Among these were the Santorini Burger, a Greek-inspired burger featuring a braised short rib patty; Thai Kobe chopped salad; and a Havana black bean side dish with fried plantain.

The challenge for deli operators is to understand their customers' tastes and the product mix that will gain their loyalty. The trick is making the everyday shop exciting and moving beyond the destination-only shop that's just for special occasions. One of the founders of a showcase operation in Chicago talked about the rave reviews for their offerings and their struggle to become the regular shopping source for their customers. She described the operation as a "food museum" — customers would admire and marvel over the food but hesitate to become regular customers because the offerings were unfamiliar and beyond the culinary context of mainstream consumers.

The solution was not to eliminate the challenging offerings but to add more expected items that made their customers feel comfortable enough to try some of the more adventurous fare. If your store doesn't already have a large following of foodies, it may take some time for the word to get around and bring in new customers. You can also expect more of your regular customers who trust your deli for their favorites to try a sample of something new — after all, it is on trend to be a foodie.

The Culinary Visions Panel includes an annual roundtable discussion with food-industry leaders from retail, food-service and culinary education disciplines. Thought leader insights are used to craft a series of consumer surveys on emerging issues throughout the year.

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