

FEATURES

The Year's Hottest Food Trends

From ancient grains to nouveau cauliflower, chefs reveal what's cooking in 2016

By Cheryl-Anne Sturken | February 01, 2016

Choosing a menu that will impress the masses is all-important -- and increasingly difficult. Just like fashion, food trends are fickle. Last year's must-have spice can easily lose favor when an exotic new ingredient gets the spotlight. And today's diners are more demanding than ever. Easily bored, eager to have their taste buds challenged, self-proclaimed "foodies" are everywhere.

What will impress attendees in 2016? M&C asked several hotel and restaurant chefs for key trends planners should keep in mind when devising menus this year.

1. Vegetables are the main attraction. Veggies are no longer just side dishes. Sure, meat proteins are still in the picture, they just aren't getting all the attention. It's no small wonder that last August, *Bon Appetit* named the tiny 46-seat Al's Place in San Francisco's Mission District, under the guidance of chef and owner Aaron London, best new restaurant. The eatery's unusual, even quirky, menu places most meat, including brisket and duck, on the side-dish list, while vegetables -- like cucumber grilled or sautéed in brown butter, and yellow eye bean stew with torn bread -- get star billing.



Because vegetables are so seasonal, says Gian Nicola Colucci, executive chef at the 200-room Four Seasons Hotel St. Louis, they allow chefs the opportunity to continue to keep their menus fresh and exciting throughout the year. "It's not a trend to eliminate meat from one's diet, but rather adding high-quality, plant-based foods to enrich your health and boost energy levels," Colucci says.

According to an October 2015 report on food-and-beverage trends by the Chicago-based **Culinary Visions Panel**, vegetable-based sandwiches, where protein is merely a garnish, are a popular choice with Millennials. "Consumers are telling us they are ready for delicious, flavorful veg-centric sandwiches," says **Sharon Olson**, executive director of the Culinary Visions Panel.

Chicago's Parson's Chicken & Fish in Logan Square is already ahead of the trend. Its vegetable club sandwich, made with pickled beets, radishes, cucumber, herbed cream cheese and pea shoots, hits all the right notes.

2. Ancient grains are new again. According to the Whole Grains Council, 50 percent of the calories eaten worldwide come from grains. With health-conscious eating habits on the rise, chefs are looking to a whole new lineup of these ancient foods -- grains that have not been crossbred or genetically altered -- to introduce to diners.

A decade ago, the average consumer would not have known what quinoa was, much less how to pronounce it ("keen-wah"). Today, thanks to the gluten-free boom, this Peruvian grain has gained status on menus, from college cafeterias to swanky reception halls. At the 195-room Peninsula Beverly Hills, quinoa linguine with tomato sauce is the most requested item on the hotel's gluten-free room-service menu.

Other venerable grains, such as kamut, millet, sorghum spelt and teff, also are popping up on menus. At Blue Hill at Stone Barns, an 80-acre farm 30 miles north of New York City, well-known chef and co-owner Dan Barber makes a rice-free risotto of unpearled barley, buckwheat groats and spelt, and has a fondness for hardier specimens such as rye. "It's an incredible grain with an amazing rich flavor, but we don't eat enough of it in this country," Barber says.

There are no menus at Blue Hill at Stone Barns, which includes a 22,000-square-foot greenhouse, two silos and 33 bee colonies. Instead, guests are offered a "Grazing, Rooting and Pecking" tasting menu featuring the farm's current produce. (The price: \$218 per person, not including drinks.)

3. Local goes hyper. Late last year, when the National Restaurant Association polled some 1,600 chefs for its survey of the top 20 food trends for 2016, the number-one spot was taken by locally sourced proteins, and "locally sourced" was chosen by 44 percent of respondents as the food trend that has grown the most over the past decade. Today, "local" has gone hyper local, with more restaurants and hotels sprouting rooftop and backyard gardens for growing their own vegetables, herbs and more.

The 540-room Fairmont Orchid in Hawaii grows its own fruit, including coconuts, papaya and bananas, and the 545-room Fairmont Dallas sports a 3,000-square-foot organic herb and vegetable garden. In addition, many Fairmont hotels have been cultivating bee colonies to harvest honey.

Last October, executive chefs Stephen Henry and Mathew Wiltzius of the 1,641-room Palmer House, A Hilton Hotel, unveiled a unique collection of barrel-aged maple syrups, made in-house -- actually 65 feet below the property, in an old rail passage originally used to transport coal. The syrup, collected in six five-gallon oak barrels and infused with tequila, single-malt scotch, rum and bourbon, is destined for dishes like savory bone-in bacon chops sauced with bourbon maple-syrup glaze and served with a kimchi puree and kaffir lime salt, at the hotel's Lockwood Restaurant & Bar. "The old Chicago passage system is an ideal environment for aging the syrups, as the humidity and temperatures remain consist through out the year," notes Stephen Henry.

In New York City's Harlem, chef Shinichi Inoue of Sushi Inoue, which opened last July, makes his own blends of soy sauce -- darker and richer for fatty fish, and lighter and milder for leaner varieties.

And at the 386-room Hilton Chicago/Oak Brook Hills Resort & Conference Center, pastry chef Erica Tomei uses fresh honey harvested from hotel-roof beehives in her sweet pastries and cake creations. She also is cultivating her own yeast strain at home to use in a new line of artisan bread to be served in the hotel's restaurants and at events.

Meanwhile, local food sourcing continues to gain steam in some unexpected locations. The newly renovated Bellfarm Kitchen/Bar at the 336-room Hyatt Regency Pittsburgh International Airport sources from more than two dozen local family farms and distilleries for its organic menu, which features specialties such as a house-cured and smoked pork belly quesadilla.

In Nashville, at the 122-room Hermitage Hotel, chef Tyler Brown takes the locally sourced trend one step further: He has his own 65-acre garden just a few miles from the hotel's Capitol Grille restaurant, and he and his culinary team also have invested in the 250-acre Double H Farms nearby, home to the cattle that provide the beef for his restaurant and other local eateries.

4. Oysters are hot -- and spicy. Bays and inlets across the country are being detoxed, and old oyster beds are being reseeded to meet a growing demand for oysters, part of the continuing sustainable seafood effort. According to Sterling-Rice Group, a Boulder, Colo.-based research and branding firm, which released its 2016 *Cutting-Edge Culinary Trends* report late last year, Millennials in particular are warming to the bivalve mollusks' appeal, especially since they come without the hefty sushi price tag. "These foods have been refashioned with a contemporary palate in mind, one that is appreciative of unusual textures," notes Kara Nielsen, director of SRG's culinary team.

While raw oysters on the half shell still are a popular offering, chefs are finding new and vibrant ways to prepare this shellfish. At Del Campo, an award-winning 174-seat Latin steak house in Washington, D.C., chef Victor Albisu's signature grilled seafood smoke box features char-grilled oysters with chorizo butter. Drago's Seafood Restaurant & Oyster Bar at the Hilton New Orleans Riverside serves them brushed with garlic, butter and herbs, dusted with a blend of Parmesan and Romano cheeses, and cooked in their shells on a flame grill.

5. Cauliflower is the new kale. Mark Twain famously said, "Cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education." That degree is finally paying off for the vegetable.

When San Francisco-based Kimpton Hotels & Resorts polled 162 of its chefs and bartenders across 30 U.S. cities for their take on 2016's *Hottest Dining & Drinking Trends*, it turns out cauliflower, not kale, was on many chefs' minds. "It's like the risotto of vegetables," says Alex Taylor, Kimpton's senior vice president for restaurants and bars. "You can use it to highlight other things. It can take whatever shape you want it to."



Some examples: At Brabo restaurant in Kimpton's 107-room Lorien Hotel and Spa in Alexandria, Va., chef Harper McClure serves cauliflower panna cotta with hackleback caviar. And, at Cusp in the 110-room Hotel La Jolla in La Jolla, Calif., chef Donald Lockhart's signature dish is apricot-glazed cauliflower with marinated charred vegetable couscous and yogurt chimichurri. Delicious!