

# FORECASTING FLAVOR AND MENU TRENDS FOR 2017

December 16, 2016

Penton Restaurant Group Custom Content



The New Year is nearly upon us and experts are gazing deeply into their crystal balls in an effort to foretell what trends and changes 2017 holds for the foodservice industry. Curiously, paradoxes abound as seemingly contradictory trends take hold.

While restaurateurs embrace the cuisines of individual Asian and Latin American countries, they also are keeping close to home as they rely more on local and regional ingredients. In another balancing act, operators seek to cater to customers' desire to eat more healthfully while at the same time menuing high caloric indulgences to those who owe themselves a treat. Meanwhile, the culinary South rises again while the Pacific Northwest sets the trends for innovative beverages. All in all, it looks to be an interesting year as operators endeavor to accommodate a diverse range of trends.

## **Biscuits rising**

Long a staple of regional menus, biscuits appear to be everywhere in the Southland these days. For instance, Cracker Barrel debuted its new fast casual concept Holler & Dash, with a biscuit-centric menu that underscores its southern roots. The 80-unit Biscuitville is another regional concept celebrating the southern staple — its restaurants even feature an exhibition biscuit making station, says Fred LeFranc, CEO and president of Results Thru Strategy. Look for biscuit sales to heat up everywhere in 2017.

## **Dixie makes a stand**

In addition to the burgeoning biscuit boom across the South, southern pride in general is helping to shape more menus. Southern-inflected Chicken Salad Chick, a fast casual chain of restaurants based in Auburn, Alabama, for instance, bills itself as offering "The Best Chicken Salad in the South."

However, while classic southern fare is finding new followers among restaurateurs and chefs, the trend is to make the classics — like the universally popular fried chicken — more nutritious, according to **Sharon Olson of the Culinary Visions Panel in Chicago**. "It has to be delicious and healthful," she says.

## **Pacific Northwest points the way**

Cold brew coffee may have originated in Japan many years ago, but it really began to take off in the U.S. when cafe operators and restaurateurs in the Pacific Northwest took an interest in it.

In fact, the Pacific Northwest is expected to remain a trendsetter when it comes to specialty coffees and other beverages," says Olson. "It will continue to be an incubator for new beverages," she says.

## Exploring the globe

As adventurous millennials demonstrate increased interest in exploring global flavors, restaurateurs are drilling down more deeply when it comes to menuing international fare. The growing popularity of broad geographic culinary regions like Southeast Asia and Latin America is prompting more targeted menu strategies, according to Scott Allmendinger, director of consulting for The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York. Look for menu makers to replace less specific Asian fare with more focused dishes from Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines in 2017. In addition, generic Latin American menus will give way to the foods of Argentina and Brazil.

## No place like home

Even as global cuisine becomes more country-specific, chefs and restaurateurs are making the most of indigenous products raised closer to home. They are also showcasing the artisans and specialty foods which their regions have come to be known for. According to Arlene Spiegel of Arlene Spiegel & Associates, at a recent international food show in New York, “Visitors could find aisle after aisle of Taste of the States showcasing their foods: smoked salmon from Oregon, pickles from Texas, cranberry jam from Wisconsin and cheeses from Vermont.” These celebrations of regional and state specialties are being showcased on restaurant menus and provide a halo effect, she says.

## The good, the bad and the indulgent

While Americans’ allegiance to diet regimens comes and goes with the seasons, more consumers are nevertheless factoring in wellness considerations when ordering from restaurant menus. While it’s not news that diners tend to opt for a tasty culinary experience over bland healthfulness,

“They do prefer to limit certain ingredients in their diets rather than completely eliminating them,” Olson observes.

Yet, even as nutritional concerns become more routine among consumers, Americans have certainly not lost their fondness for restaurants featuring “over-the-top” menu selections and indulgent foods and snacks that are “worth the splurge.” For example, David Burke Kitchen in New York tempted guests with a limited time only dessert called a Churro Bowl Sundae, comprised of a bowl-shaped fried churro filled with vanilla bean ice cream, salted caramel ice cream and malted milk chocolate ice cream, and topped with dulce de leche, fresh whipped cream, peanut brittle, caramel popcorn and sprinkles.

## Move over, meat

Chefs are learning that they need not make an all-or-nothing choice between serving vegetables and meat — the two can co-exist peacefully on the plate. However, the “plant-forward” movement clearly advocates that a larger share of the plate be allotted to vegetables while the meat portion is pared down, says the CIA’s Allmendinger. Driven by cost, wellness concerns and sustainability, “The category is taking hold quickly,” he says, as vegetables like cauliflower emerge as a star of the plate. Also, look for more vegetable and meat blends, like mushrooms and ground beef or turkey.