

A Produce-Centric Hot List

NRA survey casts fruits and vegetables in starring roles for 2016.

From trendy heirloom apples to perennially popular zucchini, the What's Hot 2016 Culinary Forecast from the Washington, D.C.-based National Restaurant Association (NRA) predicts the menu items that will resonate with consumers in the year ahead. Fresh produce figures prominently in this year's prognostications. In fact, locally sourced produce is No. 3 on the list of top food trends, trailing only locally sourced meats and seafood, which is No. 1, and chef-driven, fast-casual concepts at No. 2. Hyper-local sourcing, and natural ingredients/minimally processed foods — two trends in which produce often plays a big role — round out the Top 5.

Among the rising culinary trends to watch are produce-centric menus and restaurant concepts where vegetables are the star, says Annika Stensson, director of research communications at the NRA.

Mindful Dining Impact Trends

Sharon Olson, executive director of the **Culinary Visions Panel**, Chicago, sees several culinary trends pointing toward the importance of produce on menus in 2016.

"The movement toward mindful dining has consumers rethinking indulgence with a healthy perspective that favors the produce business," she says. "Sustainability has become a sign of quality worldwide, and verifiable sustainability is a compelling competitive advantage."

Among the biggest trends she describes is the **"rise of the veg-enthusiast."**

"Look for vegetable-centric — not necessarily vegetarian — cuisine to be the next macro trend influencing menus across all segments of the foodservice industry," she says. "Vegetables are moving from side to center with new and aggressive cooking techniques like smoking and fire-roasting. Vegetables also have the ability to make many popular favorites 'invisibly healthy,' which is widely appealing to consumers."

Other trends she sees:

- **Conscious comfort in food:** Consumers feel good about selecting foods that are "created with mindfulness for the people who grow, harvest and deliver their food," says Olson. "The triple bottomline of people, planet and profits is gaining acceptance among many food businesses."
- **The new "agri-culture":** This reflects the evolution of farming to become a "revered and respected profession." She notes this trend not only reflects a new generation of modern farmers approaching the profession differently, but also generations-old family farms that are "now turning to sustainable practices that are closer to the way their great grandparents farmed."

- **Root-to-stem cooking:** “Creative chefs are embracing all parts of the vegetable, moving vegetables from compost to the kitchen,” says Olson. “From carrot tops to parsley stems, vegetables are making their way into imaginative preparations and garnishes and finding their own section on contemporary menus.”

- **Beets are hot:** Beets can be enjoyed in ice cream, Veggie Kefir, ravioli stuffing mixed with goat cheese, savory tea and kimchi, says Olson. Beet pearls, which come packaged like caviar, “provide little flavor bombs for beverages, salads and desserts,” she adds. Beets are being used in kids’ beverages, on sandwiches, and in salads and desserts.

- **The next hot vegetable:** kohlrabi. This versatile member of the cabbage family is popular in some cuisines, which incorporate its root, stem and leaves in various preparations. “Kohlrabi might be destined to become the new kale because of its unexpected versatility in hot and cold applications and its nutritional power,” says Olson.

Another of the key opportunities for produce items is their use in cocktails, Olson points out. The Culinary Forecast reports 70 percent of chefs cite culinary cocktails — those made with savory or fresh ingredients, for example — as a hot trend for 2016.