



Limited-Service, Unlimited Possibilities

8 Fast-Food Trends for '14

Experts agree that of the many trends expected to affect the restaurant industry this year, these eight will leave the biggest impact on quick service.

There is always excitement at the beginning of a new year, with renewed hopes of health, wealth, and happiness. It's no different in the limited-service industry, where brands are studying up on potential trends for the next 12 months to ensure a prosperous 2014.

For now, operators are feeling cautiously optimistic about the next year. The National Restaurant Association's (NRA) most recent Restaurant Performance Index, a measure that tracks the industry's health and outlook, was on the upswing after a late-2013 swoon.

Potentially faster economic growth this year will be a positive for restaurants, observers say, and consumers are already growing more confident thanks to an improving jobs picture.

"Economic factors are supporting stronger consumer confidence at NPD Group, a Chicago-based consulting and market research firm, and consumer confidence and restaurant traffic."

Dozens of forecasts have been issued over the past few years, but the ones that will stem from that newfound confidence. Many of the trends created by chefs, consultants, and culinary experts are expected to be disruptive in 2014 than ever before.

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"People love flavors that take them somewhere," says Sharon Olson, executive director of the Culinary Vision Panel, a Chicago-based group that looks at culinary trends. "Young people have grown up with various ethnic styles, but everyone is looking for new things."

1. Ingredient transparency

People increasingly want to know about the ingredients in their food. In the case for a few years, 2014 should see the trend gain more momentum.

"Customers are more interested in what they're eating and where it comes from," says Annika Stensson, the NRA's senior manager of research communications. "They want to know it's being grown responsibly."

More than half of the top 10 trends in the NRA's "What's Hot" culinary forecast, as determined by a poll of chefs, revolve around the origins of food, including the top two: locally sourced meats and seafood and locally grown produce. Other trends in the forecast involve sustainability and farm-branded items.

"Making it real is very important," says Mary Chapman, director of product innovation for Chicago-based market research firm Technomic Inc. "This comprises a whole lot of issues, but consumers are increasingly focusing on them."