

10 Consumer Trends Driving Restaurant Decisions

Convenience and value still rank among the top criteria for consumers making food decisions, yet there is a growing mindfulness of food and beverage choices and a sincere desire to create a lifestyle that balances healthfulness and indulgence in everyday life.

Mindfulness is a quality shared by both foodservice professionals and consumer foodies, according to Culinary Visions Panel, a food trend forecasting firm. That conclusion reflects analysis of primary research involving more than 3,500 consumers and information gathered from culinary professional groups and more than 20 trade conferences.

Following are some common themes that emerged from the research and what they suggest for the coming year:

1. Deliciousness as a lifestyle choice. Food must be delicious to appeal to consumers, both the value conscious and the gourmet. When consumers are asked to list the most delicious foods, that list often includes some of the most notorious processed foods of minimal nutritional value. Yet when consumers are presented with provocative menu descriptions that focus on taste, flavors and ingredients, they will often rate the more healthful items as highly desirable.



2. Seeking balance. Consumers want to be in charge of balancing their choices and enjoy the freedom to indulge when they choose as part of an overall healthy lifestyle. Culinary Visions Panel research shows that consumers evaluate various types of food venues differently when they balance their choices. The research covered away-from-home venues including quick service, casual dining, convenience stores, cafeterias at school and at work, gourmet retail and supermarket delis and bakeries.

3. Escape from deprivation. The concept of banning foods does not work on school and college campuses and it fails in the commercial market as well. Identifying villainous ingredients is on the way out.

The future is about reformulating, and many food manufacturers are making subtle changes to product formulations to create more healthful profiles without compromising enjoyment for consumers.

4. **Minimalism.** When consumers look at labels, they want to see ingredients that sound more like a recipe than a science formula. “Homemade” is the term used often by young consumers and adults to describe a high quality experience. Scale and uniformity are not in style as consumers are enjoying foods that look less processed and more like they have come from a kitchen than a factory.

5. **Invisibly healthy.** Seductively healthy foods that provide the satisfaction of “junk” food are finding favor with consumers. Fun packaging and contemporary marketing are adding new appeal to healthy produce snacks like blueberries and carrots. The salty, crunchy snack satisfaction of packaged snacks is now available in a variety of sizes and includes many different types of vegetables like kale and sweet potatoes.

6. **All-day satisfaction.** College campuses are best positioned to understand the consumer of tomorrow. Few professionals are as adept at the all-day balancing act as those that must satisfy customers who sometimes eat five to six times a day and expect fresh food at all times. In a spirited discussion at an industry conference this year, a college operator warned her commercial colleagues that when today’s students graduate they will bring their high expectations for quality and service with them.

In designing menus, restaurants open early and late might learn a lesson from the day and night dichotomy of college campuses. During daytime hours the demand is for healthy, mindful eating, but when the sun goes down indulgence is what sells.

7. **Idealism meets reality.** More mindful of the realities of embracing local products, consumers are learning that integrity can still exist with some mindful compromise. When large food companies and restaurant chains get involved in supporting their local communities, they are finding favor with mainstream consumers who want to enjoy their meals and have a clear conscience.

8. **Mindfulness of brand language.** Consumers use many criteria to evaluate healthfulness, including ingredients, emotion and social concern. Traditional “free-from” claims are moving to more contemporary claims that sell fresh and homemade with clean ingredient statements. Ethical food is becoming a cue for healthy.

Descriptive words without a standard of identity have proliferated to the point that they have become meaningless. Consumers are more inclined to seek out the source and understand their food philosophy rather than pick up products with unsupported claims like natural or artisan. Leading food manufacturers and food retailers are making it easy for consumers to connect with their philosophy in statements on their website and practices in their businesses.

9. **The need for trust.** Trust is a significant factor in brand choices. Consumers want food from companies they trust to deliver nourishing, great tasting food with respect for those who produce it and the planet. Millennial consumers in particular are evaluating companies not only on their products and their brands, but on their corporate conscience.

Today’s consumer is active and in charge when it comes to the foods they like and the places they like to eat. When surveyed about sources they trust, friends, family and social networks outrank marketing messages. Savvy marketers have learned how to stimulate or join the conversation, not just react to fallout.

10. **Smart and connected by technology.** Technology has made everything “smart,” empowering consumers with information to fuel their decision making and helping them make more mindful choices about what they choose to eat and drink. Economic conditions have created a new scrutiny of value by consumers across every socio-economic level. Enabled by technology and social networks, consumers are smart and connected.