

The background of the cover is a close-up photograph of several burritos stacked on a wooden cutting board. The burritos are cut in half, revealing a cross-section of their fillings: layers of white cheese, green lettuce, pink deli meat, and a white sauce. In the upper right background, there is a blurred image of a bowl of green salad.

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The Future of Deli Food

New research provides insight for the modern deli.

BY SHARON OLSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CULINARY VISIONS

Looking to the future has taken a backseat to managing the present for the past few years, as consumers and retailers navigated a fragile post-pandemic world. The cadence of everyday life is taking on a new normal, and the memory of the past few years is fading for many consumers. Today's shoppers are more aware of everyone involved in bringing food to their table and ready to embrace personal experience and culinary adventure with renewed enthusiasm.

The newest research from Chicago-based Culinary Visions was inspired by revisiting some of the inspirational discussions of the future of food from the World Food Exposition in Milan eight years ago. The Expo focused on the power of food to create community and included stunning demonstrations of new technology that provided in-depth product information at the point of purchase, massive vertical gardens and a tasting exploration of international cuisines from over 140 countries.

The research team at Culinary Visions set out to learn if the futurist scenario of

the food world of 2050 presented by the Expo was a blueprint for the future of the food business or just some lofty ideas. The research team began traveling again, talking with opinion leaders in the food industry and conducting a series of consumer surveys over the past two years. The most recent survey of more than 2,100 consumers nationwide was fielded late in 2022. Results indicate consumer interest in personal culinary exploration and the global importance of food and sustainability have widespread awareness.

Here are some highlights of the new research that provide insight and inspiration for forward-thinking deli operators.

SEASONAL PLANT-FORWARD MENUS

Visitors to World Food Expo were awestruck by the enormous garden walls on the exteriors of the U.S. and Israeli pavilions that provided a dramatic look at the opportunity to bring fresh produce to urban areas. The 7,200-square-foot vertical farm in the U.S. pavilion was harvested daily, demonstrating the ability of urban agriculture to feed local communities. Many of the emerging cuisines focused on vegetables and grains in flavorful dishes. Interest in these types of foods has grown exponentially in the U.S.

Participants in a recent Culinary Visions Professional Panel agreed that the challenges posed by supply chain issues prompted food-service professionals to seek out new sources and establish new relationships, often with local farmers and specialty food providers. Seasonal menus featuring more vegetables and modest portions of protein allow consumers to manage meal cost and feed their interest in healthier eating. Local producers are also top of mind according to consumers who participated in the recent study. Eighty-two percent of those surveyed said they appreciated restaurants that focus on supporting local food producers.

The pandemic narrowed the radar screen on sourcing products close to home, and that has made local and sustainable food offerings a welcome part of the new normal. Culinary professionals reported words like plant-forward, veg-centric, local, sustainable, single source and globally-inspired are drawing consumers to these new items.

EXPLORING THE WORLD THROUGH FOOD

The culinary diplomacy witnessed at the World Food Expo brought people together in a very special way. In the most recent Culinary Visions survey, 83% of consumers surveyed said they enjoy exploring new cultures through food.

Many of the country pavilions showcasing their heritage cuisines were drawing crowds, and those cuisines have subsequently gained increased popularity with American consumers. Mediterranean countries including Italy, France, Turkey, Israel and Morocco were among those with the longest lines of people. Brazil captivated visitors with



an educational exhibit that demonstrated how the country had been able to sustainably increase its food production six fold over the past 40 years with controlled expansion of cultivated areas. Mexico brought in visitors with an exuberant fiesta atmosphere and then enlightened them about the rich cultural diversity of Mexican food with tastings from major regions of the country.

Japan and Korea have invested significantly in promoting their cuisines throughout the world, and are widely enjoyed in the U.S. today. Japan is widely desired for its culinary quality and distinctive technique. At the World Food Expo, modern Korean vegetable-centric and fermented food menu items touted anti-aging, detox and other dietary benefits.

Promoting international offerings in the deli provides an exceptional opportunity to sample new flavors and share a distinctive story. Eighty-six percent of consumers in the latest study said they enjoy sampling products when shopping for groceries. Seventy-three percent of consumers shared that they like to hear the story behind the food that is being sampled when they try new items in a store.

THE POWER OF FOOD TO CREATE COMMUNITY

Instant communities of global visitors to the World Food Expo gathered around food truck installations at the U.S. and Netherlands pavilions. The organizers were mindful of wholesomeness, sustainability and nutrition; yet hungry showgoers appreciated the indulgence of iconic American street food from around the U.S.

Bleacher-style seating, adjacent to the trucks, demonstrated how a restaurant, supermarket or chef brand could take to the streets and create an instant food

community. Visitors to the Netherlands pavilion encountered a vibrant scene of trucks set up in a park with welcoming outdoor gathering spots for sharing in small groups.

Food trucks continue to be an important part of today's culinary lifestyle for many consumers. As indoor food halls and marketplaces have reopened, they are offering some of the same benefits. The variety of vendors appeals to 74% of consumers surveyed. Seventy-eight percent report that experiencing new foods with their friends is one of their favorite social activities.

As everyday life has returned to a more hectic pace for many families, sharing food continues to be important even if it is on the go. In the recent report, 80% of those surveyed said they enjoy taking their to-go meal somewhere else to relax and enjoy with others.

FAMILY DINING AND FOOD TRADITIONS

Sharing a meal with family and friends is one of life's pleasures, and the past two years have left consumers craving personal connection. Sixty-six percent of consumers surveyed said they miss being around other people when dining. Seventy-nine percent of those who participated in the most recent survey said their family makes time to share a meal together more than twice a week.

The pandemic provided time for study, reflection and experimentation in the kitchen for many consumers and culinary professionals. That time has spawned new interest in heritage cooking, immigrant cuisines and American regional fare. Many traditional recipes focus on flavor and use less expensive protein. Embracing this approach to prepared foods would allow deli operators to offer greater value without higher prices. Frugality

has become fashionable with flavorful and affordable foods that offer a taste of culinary adventure. Seventy-six percent of consumers surveyed considered themselves to be adventurous eaters.

Today's consumers are creating their own food traditions and sharing their food heritage with friends and family. Eighty-four percent said they like to create their own food traditions when they cook for friends and family, and 78% said they like to share foods that reflect their heritage.

THE POWER OF AMERICAN CHEFS

American chefs gained recognition at the World Food Expo in pop-up dining experiences in downtown Milan, where top American chefs were invited to prepare meals for visitors from around the world. These sold-out events treated guests to a unique and intimate showcase of American gastronomy.

Chefs emerged as powerful forces doing good in local communities during the pandemic era when they stepped up in ways that made a big impact on consumers. In 2021, Culinary Visions reported that 73% of consumers surveyed agreed that chefs had become heroes serving their communities in difficult times. That appreciation motivated post-pandemic loyalty, with 53% of consumers saying they changed the restaurants they patronized because of positive behavior they observed.

The influence of chefs in the supermarket is growing in importance. In a recent study, 67% of survey participants said their local deli would become their go-to source for meals if there was a chef creating the menu. Beyond prepared meals, 71% of survey participants liked the idea of a professional chef curating a box of groceries for them.

The most recent survey points to the opportunity for delis to publicize not only their food, but the chefs behind the offerings. Eighty-two percent of those surveyed said they expect better quality food offerings when they see there is a chef working in the deli.

FOOD ORIGIN INFORMATION ON DEMAND

Consumer interest in the source of their food has been steadily increasing, and the pandemic fueled even greater concern for everyone involved in bringing food to the table. At the World Food Expo, The Future Food District allowed visitors to walk around a prototype supermarket of tomorrow.

Augmented labels enabled shoppers to see the story behind a product by simply brushing their hand over a panel and looking at the display screen. This technology connected the consumer with the provenance of every item they might wish to purchase in a supermarket or deli. Important to note was that the technology enabled a free flow of information for those who wanted to know, yet it would not deter shoppers

who knew what they wanted and wanted to get it quickly.

In the recent Culinary Visions study, 80% of consumers surveyed reported that they would like to have more information about the sources of the fresh items they purchase readily available to them in the grocery store. Even without that latest technology, it is an important reminder to make it easy for customers to get the information they want about the source of the ingredients in their meals.

As much as technology captivated those attending the Expo, personal interaction with in-store experts took center stage attention in the supermarket of the future. Product specialists were able to connect with consumers, providing product details, tasting samples or tips on serving and preparation. Seventy-two of participants in the new survey agreed that when there are experts available to answer their questions on specific items they feel like it is worth the trip to the store.

When today's consumers are in-store, they value knowledgeable experts and a worthwhile experience. Value is about much more than price for today's shoppers. **DB**

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