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BUSINESS

CONSUMER TRENDS

2024 is well underway, but industry forecasters are still predicting what's ahead

In the latest restaurant, culinary and consumer reports, some surprises await in the year ahead, sprinkled in with the more expected trends and predictions.

By *Patricia Cobe* on Mar. 10, 2024



As 2023 drew to a close, forecasters from every corner of the industry were looking into their crystal balls to **pinpoint the top trends for 2024**.

Now that we're two-plus months into the new year, trendspotters are continuing to release reports based on data, surveys and professional observations. Some of their latest findings are gathered here.

2023 morphs into 2024

First, a look back at the last quarter of 2023. POS provider Toast on Thursday released its consumer trend findings based on Q4 restaurant sales data. With the holidays falling at the end of the year, it makes sense that catering orders surged, but Toast reports a pretty huge 71% increase year over year. Of that increase, 30% came from online ordering and tickets averaged \$160.

In general, Tuesdays and Wednesdays were the busiest days for catering orders, perhaps indicating that holiday gatherings at workplaces were up. Although the fourth quarter is also a big time for parties, Toast data showed a much tinier bump in that activity. Overall, large parties in restaurants (eight or more guests) only experienced a 2% increase year over year.

But that doesn't mean consumers weren't drinking. Toast reports that whiskey orders were up 21% in Q4 compared with the rest of 2023, and wine was next, rising 13%. Overall, restaurant and bar guests drank 11% more alcohol during the holiday season than in Q1-Q3.

Zero proof cocktails also continue to trend upward, according to a survey by Les Dames d'Escoffier International, an organization of women leaders in food, beverage and hospitality. In a report released in February, a key point of agreement among the 2,600 industry professionals polled was "non-alcoholic beverages are not just a trend, but a lasting presence in the culinary landscape." They are an integral part of the increasing array of options available for making balanced choices during special occasion dining, said the report.

Retro revival

Consumers continue to seek "experiences" on those special dining occasions, and tableside preparation supports that trend. Futurist Liz Moskow cites tableside flaming desserts like cherries jubilee, baked Alaska and crepes Suzette making a comeback, as well as cocktails crafted and shaken by skilled servers at the table and tableside decanting of wines. Along the same lines, chefs are reimagining classic recipes with modern twists. "Beef bourguignon, lobster thermidor and coq au vin will make their way onto menus this year," said Moskow. "You'll also see 1950's era staples making a comeback; chicken à la king, anything in a vol au vent pastry, beef Wellington, Swedish meatballs with lingonberry jam, fondue, and even Salisbury steak."

She also suggests looking local instead of global for the next trending cuisine, as in Italian American. "There will be a resurgence of red sauce restaurants in 2024 and beyond," Moskow predicts. One reason: Dishes such as spaghetti and meatballs, lasagna, eggplant parmesan and all types of pasta are easy on the budget, a plus for restaurants in these inflationary times.

There's also a whiff of mafia nostalgia in the air, with the 25th anniversary of "The Sopranos" fueling a fascination for spaghetti dinners and "the family meal." Even Kraft Heinz is jumping on the trend, Moskow said. "The CPG company just launched 'The Godfather' tomato sauce in the U.K."

Restaurant and retail sectors blur

In compiling data from several surveys, Culinary Visions, a Chicago-based food-focused forecasting company, found that foodservice segments are getting blurrier. Quick-service and fast-casual restaurants are the preferred choice of 45% of consumers when it comes to catering everyday events, while only 25% would choose a catering company.

That behavior was already trending in Q4 of 2023, as Toast reported. The main motivators, according to consumers, are quality of food (90%), ease of ordering (70%), variety of menu items (60%) and ability to customize (56%).

And restaurant chefs are increasingly moving into the supermarket arena, starting to curate grocery selections and even shopping lists, according to Culinary Visions. Consumers who regularly dine out are looking to create those same restaurant flavors and dishes at home, and 71% of those surveyed were in favor of a professional chef curating a box of groceries.

We can also look forward to more chef-prepared meals in the supermarket case, as well as actual restaurants inside supermarkets. The first of the smaller, urban-style Whole Foods markets is opening in New York City with a **café concept inside called Juice & Java.**