

Tracking Foodservice Trends

Understanding what your customers want from foodservice will go a long way in meeting their daily need for fresh foods.

IN THE HUNT

The hunter has indeed become the hunted. One of the biggest barriers to foodservice acceptance was that c-stores lacked the skillset, space and labor to produce fresh food on a daily basis. And while some people may still associate c-store food with old hot dogs, this stigma is quickly vanishing.

To keep moving the needle forward, convenience stores must track foodservice trends and keep tabs on the competition. Here's a look at some consumer trends that are driving foodservice purchases:

Changing Customer Preferences. Bold and exotic flavors, snacking and health and wellness are at the forefront for consumer food preferences in 2018, and the Millennial generation is frequently driving those choice options with their adventurous palates.

Subscription food home delivery will also continue to evolve, keeping in mind consumers' wishes to be part of the meal-making process with easy-to-follow recipes and healthy, fresh ingredients, according to RSM US, a Chicago-based consulting firm.

Likewise, on-the-go, convenient packaging, like bowl-based choices will grow in demand as eager consumers look for quick but healthy eating options. Bowls, in particular, said Jerry Weiner, president of Weiner Consulting, are an ideal solution for convenience stores.

"Bowls are easy to create, cost-effective and portable for a variety of occasions for consumers," said Weiner, who retired from Rutter's in 2016 after serving more than 30 years in the c-store foodservice business. "That's what customers are looking for—something quick and easy, that tastes great. Keep it simple, but make sure it's good."

Food Safety. A variety of healthy, fresh food options are currently accessible from most c-stores, as many have adapted their facilities to meet consumer demand. C-stores also offer prepared food options in addition to onsite food preparation stations as store concepts converge to keep up with consumer tastes. As a result, delivering fresh food that customers want while keeping the food safe, reliable and profitable is a growing issue. Customers need to know the food is fresh and safe, especially as chains like Chipotle struggle with repeated outbreaks of foodborne illnesses.

According to a **Y-Pulse (ypulse.org) study titled, "The Modern Consumer: Understanding Tomorrow's Tastemakers Today**, young consumers are pushing this trend forward with 71% of Millennials saying they enjoy attending food-focused events and 81% stating that they appreciate exploring new cultures through food. Foodservice operators will see a continuation of this trend, both in dining experience and innovation in global flavors.

High Expectations. Consumers of all ages wish to establish trust with food providers, and young consumers are expected to continue this trend in future years. The Y-Pulse study found that some **68%** of Millennial consumers prefer local sourcing of ingredients and **66%** of them are willing to pay a little more for food that comes from local producers.

Foodservice consumers want it all and it's a trend that's here to stay. **Sixty-seven percent** of Millennial consumers said they love ordering healthy options offered at a restaurant, yet, **63%** of Millennial consumers also say they love restaurants that offer "over-the-top" menu items, according to the study.