



# Cafeteria Cravings: The Scoop on 2019 College Dining Trends

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From mystery meat to fish sticks, cafeterias are notorious for having some questionable food items, but modern-day college students are putting their collective foot down and demanding more. The students have spoken, and according to newly released research, they expect food that is functional, ethical and of course, flavorful.

Youth marketing and millennial research firm Y-Pulse explored the dining expectations, attitudes, and tendencies of more than 1,000 people between the ages of 18 and 34 in the US in a new **consumer report**. Revealing exactly what this group is looking for when it comes to their meals.

“We found young consumers are using a sophisticated set of criteria involving health, nutrition, ethical concerns, and culinary adventure when making dining out decisions,” says Sharon Olson, Executive Director of Y-Pulse. “These trends are most likely to have a great impact on college campus dining in the coming years, if not months,” she adds.

In an interview with Xtalks, Olson explains which **five culinary trends** are predicted to make a big impact on college cafeterias and dining halls across the nation:

## 1) Purposeful Snacking

Cue the blueberries, beans and nuts. The power of superfoods is not lost on this group of consumers who want to fuel their minds and bodies at the same time.

In fact, **73 percent** of overall consumers surveyed said they **enjoyed eating superfoods that serve specific functional purposes**, according to the report. While **67 percent** of consumers say that eating organic makes them feel better and **55 percent** of them say that they are willing to pay more for organic menu items.

“The current trends reveal that students are much more aware and eager to eat more healthy and responsibly than previous generations. They are also willing to pay more for organic and ethical snacks and meals,” explained Olson.

## 2) Conscious Consumerism

**Many young consumers consider themselves advocates for ethical and sustainable practices, and these values extend to their food choices.** The report advises campus foodservice operations to openly communicate their ethical practices and efforts in order to attract this group.

“For food manufacturers, being an ethically-sourced product gives them an advantage over competitors because foodservice operators are actively looking to add more and more ingredients that are ethically-sourced or produced. Foodservice operators will consistently be making changes to satisfy young consumers’ need for ethical meal and snack options in the coming years,” said Olson.

The report showed that **64 percent** of respondents said there were not enough ethically-produced snacks available and **67 percent** of them would pay more for ethically-produced snacks.

### **3) Customizable Dishes**

While this group is more open to trying plant-based foods than perhaps their parent's generation, they are not looking to limit their access to meat. More importantly, the report highlights the **desire to be able to customize dishes to suit dietary requirements that are changing daily**.

"They may want to go meatless a few times a week or they may want to limit their intake their meat throughout the week by piling on vegetables and fruits," continued Olson. "It's not so much about always offering a meat-alternative option as it is about offering the option to let the consumer increase, decrease, or remove certain ingredients."

Of the survey respondents, **60 percent** say they admire vegetarian diets, while **56 admitted** appreciation for the vegan lifestyle, however, **82 percent** said they still overwhelmingly love meat. Only **42 percent** of overall consumers said they enjoy eating meat substitutes. Making options key for this sometimes indecisive and aspirational group of diners.

### **4) Fast (Healthy) Food**

For Gen Zers, the ideal food is healthy, quick and most importantly, tasty to eat. **Many young consumers prioritize their dietary goals but aren't willing to compromise on unsatisfying or unpalatable food**.

Healthy grab-and-go snacks have an opportunity to shine here, with **81 percent** of those surveyed saying they shouldn't have to try too hard to eat healthy, while **66 percent** said they don't mind paying extra for a snack if it's a healthy option. The report attributes this trend to the on-the-go lifestyle that is common among many young and busy students.

### **5) International Flavors**

Although students may be stuck typing essays in the campus library for hours on end, that doesn't mean they want their taste buds to be confined to one space. The report claims that this group wants to taste flavors from every corner of the world, however, it is also important that these dishes remain true to their roots.

According to the survey, authenticity is crucial with **79 percent of consumers agreeing that a restaurant's ethnic food should be authentic**. Olson says the growing demand for multicultural food is likely from growing exposure to diverse cultures and interaction between people of different backgrounds.

"As more and more young consumers are growing up exposed to international cuisines like Mexican, Korean and Indian foods, there is a natural progression to further experiment with new flavors during their young adult years. The culinary trend to experiment with adventurous flavors is also due to the popularity of food fueled by social media, culture and television," said Olson.

In order to cater to this group of foodies, college dining halls will have to step up their game to match increased expectations when it comes to the flavor, convenience and food production practices.

**"Young consumers and K-12 consumers are demonstrating an unprecedented interest in food than previous generations**. In order to get a firm buy-in of future Gen Z students, it will be important to develop menus around the priorities emphasized by young consumers today," concluded the report.