

Here Are 5 Gen Z Dining Trends

Think functional foods, shared meals and knowing how their food got to them.



CHICAGO – A new Y-Pulse study explores campus food lifestyles, finding five trends that shed light on Gen Z’s dining preferences, including their appetite for shared culinary experiences and concern for everyone involved in bringing meals to the table.

“Sharing food is important in building community, and ethical concerns continue to be a priority for college-age consumers,” said Sharon Olson, executive director of Y-Pulse. “Just two years ago, the young adult consumers we surveyed were exploring new cooking techniques and managing virtual connections as a way of life. Today they are enthusiastically embracing a return to in-person dining.”

Here are five key trends expected to be important to college and university foodservice operations:

Life In Balance: Plant-forward menus have become a mainstream trend, yet only 29% of respondents to the survey said they are committed to a vegan lifestyle. Omnivores are the majority, and 60% agree with the characterization that they are carnivores who love vegetables.

Consumers in this demographic group are known to be substantial consumers of functional foods with well-being benefits. They readily balance healthfulness and indulgence, with 80% saying they want warm, rich, satisfying meals that make them feel good.

(NACS Magazine explored the plant-based trends in “Plant-Based Food Takes Root” in the May 2021 issue.) *cont.*

Beyond the Take-Out Box: Whether it is a meal to-go or to dine in, there has been a growing understanding of the importance of everyone involved in bringing food to the table. This group of consumers expresses concern for everyone in the process—from producers to foodservice employees. Eighty percent reported that they like to dine where employees are treated well, and 78% say they appreciate restaurants that focus on supporting local food producers. Sixty-three percent agree that the restaurant is just as important as the food menu.

Tech and Touch: Technology enables this group in ways that are second nature to them, yet the study suggests that they may be discriminating in how they use technology related to their food experiences. Fifty-nine percent say they have concerns when scanning a QR code to get a menu because of possible security issues. This tech-savvy generation expresses an appreciation for some of the traditional, higher touch aspects of restaurant dining as well, with 70% saying they miss printed menus.

They expect foodservice operators to be proficient in using technology in day-to-day operations and are impatient with those that do not measure up. Seventy percent are frustrated when they dine in a restaurant that does not have an updated menu with current offerings.

Shared Experiences: Young adult consumers like to share dining experiences with others, with 63% saying they are reluctant to dine in a sit-down restaurant if they do not have a companion. Even waiting in line at a popular pop up can become a shared experience, as 65% of those surveyed said they do not mind waiting in line for breakfast pastries.

The consumers surveyed are finding that some of the private dining options offered during the pandemic have enriched their experiences when they gather. Although 55% say they enjoy the energy of the people around them in a full-service restaurant, 70% report that they enjoy dining in enclosed, private outdoor dining structures.

Flavor Exploration: Culinary adventure is on the menu for this generation with 83% saying they consider themselves adventurous eaters when dining out, and 68% saying they usually like to try new dishes and flavors when they dine out. They also appreciate culinary technique, with 77% saying they admire the artistry of chefs who create beautifully composed meals.

Part of the flavor exploration is learning the back story of the food, the chef and the ingredients in their meals. Seventy-six percent of those surveyed said knowing details about the source of their food is important to them.

A major point of agreement among the majority of the survey participants was that beautiful food, well prepared with a few simple ingredients is consistently on trend.