



TRENDING ON CAMPUS

CAMPUS CONSUMERS ARE DEFINING
THE MODERN DINING EXPERIENCE

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The taste trends of tomorrow are being shaped today on college and university campuses throughout the country. Today's students enjoy everything from global comfort food to cutting-edge experimentation with foods and flavors. They are among the most food savvy and adventurous consumers in America. Seemingly full of contradictions, wanting healthfulness one minute and indulgence the next, they can be both a challenge and an inspiration for foodservice operators and chefs.

Tracking thousands of interviews with college students over more than a decade, the following are some of the key ways college consumers' tastes are setting the pace for tomorrow's menus.

RISE OF THE OMNIVORE

Consumers on campus enjoy the opportunity to explore many food and lifestyle choices as they continue to develop culinary habits that will last a lifetime. Vegetarian and vegan consumers are likely to be more satisfied with menu variety on campus than in any other foodservice venue, but they still represent a relatively small part of the total population. The term "flexitarian" and Meatless Monday promotions are waning from the trend lexicon as more young consumers proudly proclaim themselves to be omnivores. However, many new menu items continue to feature protein sparingly, even as they provide layers of craveable flavor.

For example, produce tends to play a much more prominent role in young consumers' diets, as a growing number of them are making food choices that favor more plant power on the menu. Vegetable-centric, but not necessarily vegetarian, cuisine is topping the list of menu items that feed college consumers' desire for fresh and healthful food. This is a generation accustomed to robust and adventurous flavor, which inspires more aggressive cooking methods such as smoking and fire-roasting.

MINDFUL DINING

Millennial consumers care more about ethical factors involved in food production, preparation and delivery than the general population, according to a recent study by the Culinary Visions® Panel about away-from-home dining expectations. Fresh, local, whole grain, and all-natural were among the top menu claims that mattered to these consumers. (There were more than 450 millennial consumers in this study, which totaled more than 1,200 respondents.) More than half of surveyed millennials noted the following claims as important in their food decisions: Grass Fed/Pasture Raised, Hormone Free, Antibiotic Free Protein, Free Range/Free Roaming, Non GMO, Sustainably Caught/Raised, Fair Trade, Heirloom Fruits and Vegetables, Cage-Free and Organic.

One can conclude from the survey that young consumers evaluate campus dining decisions using many of the same factors they use to evaluate restaurant experiences. For example, campus consumers said they are more likely to choose restaurants that treat employees well and support the community. In addition, when student consumers were surveyed about the factors that most influence their food and beverage choices, the three most important factors were simple ingredient statement, a company known for ethical standards, and sustainability.



Even when it comes to snacking, campus consumers are mindful of their choices; they want fresh and healthy snacks to feed their cravings on demand. 83 percent said they consider healthfulness an important criterion for the snacks they choose. They also want fresh, fast fuel for their bodies; fresh “homemade” taste has become the new definition of quality for these consumers.

There is a traditional belief that students care about healthful offerings during the day, but indulgence reigns supreme in their late-night eating habits. Yet an emerging sentiment, especially among women, is a desire for healthier late-night offerings and more healthful grab-and-go choices.

LIVING WELL

There is still conversation about stealth health in many segments of the foodservice industry, but many young consumers have had nutrition education and want to be empowered to make their own choices. The idea of hiding healthy ingredients is going by the wayside as full disclosure and allergen awareness take on greater importance. Transparency is particularly important to college consumers.

Wellness programs on campus take a holistic approach. A Y-Pulse® study noted that 82 percent of college and university operators said that campus wellness programs were a collaboration of many services on campus including health services, foodservice, athletics, recreational sports, human resources, counseling, nursing schools, and residential life. 77 percent of students said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their campus wellness program.

COMMUNITY BUILDING

Young consumers are interested in food for far more than fuel. Food connects people. And, dining areas designed to encourage gathering and personal connections among students create a sense of community on all types of campuses. Students are also reacting positively to residence hall dining experiences that feature platters or family-style service, which evoke a shared experience, rather than traditional steamtable service that feels institutional.

On campuses, foodservice workers and consumers are often one and the same because many operations rely heavily on student labor. Ingredients coming into the back of the house are often scrutinized as heavily as prepared items being served to customers. Foodservice directors must be mindful of everyone in their campus community and how important it is for the employees to want to eat the food coming out of their kitchens and share it with their friends. When it comes to residential dining design, eliminating barriers between food preparation and service connects those preparing the meal with those who are enjoying it in a powerful and positive way.

Gardens are also becoming part of the culinary landscape as the farm-to-table movement continues to gain momentum. Campus and community gardens are another way of bringing people together.

COOKING ON CAMPUS

Today's students have grown up with a foodie culture that they enjoy and respect. They like being connected with chefs and appreciate seeing them as an important part of their foodservice program. Chefs conducting demonstrations or classes add culinary credibility to campus foodservice.

Registered dietitians (R.D.) are a force on college campuses for much more than managing the nutritional integrity of menus; they also provide nutrition education. 26 percent of college students report that an R.D. is available for personal consultation on their campuses, according to a Y-Pulse study.

Cooking is also very much on trend among young consumers, many of whom are more skilled than their parents. Food television has captivated and enabled an entire generation of consumers; and, cooking classes and chef demonstrations on college campuses are well attended. Many campus cooking classes have an inspiring and practical nature. For example, chefs and dietitians teach classes where all of the ingredients have come from the campus retail store. Cooking also makes good economic sense for students who understand not only that the cost of ingredients is far less than a restaurant meal, the preparation and enjoyment of the meal also becomes a great social occasion.



CONNECTED CONSUMERS

College consumers expect to have information they need about food and beverage choices instantly available to them. They also expect their opinions as consumers to be taken seriously. 95 percent of college and university foodservice directors say they use social media to connect with their customers, according to a Y-Pulse study. 85 percent say social media tools are very important or important for promoting foodservice venues. Foodservice directors are also handling customer feedback in real time to continually improve the relevance and satisfaction of their foodservice programs.

Student consumers also have voracious “app-etites,” using technology to enhance the efficiency of their everyday life. Campus dining apps are becoming more widely available as operators look to connect their offerings with student lifestyles and social media habits. Many apps are location-based, providing basic information such as hours and offerings. Some of the newer apps allow students to track calories and evaluate menus across campus in real time.

THE GLOBAL KITCHEN

Today's college-age consumers are more diverse and aware of global cultures and cuisines than any previous generation. Most students expect to see foods from around the world on the menu regardless of their own ethnic background.

American, Latin, Mediterranean, and Asian have been the top menu offerings on campus for many years. Microcuisines from all of these regions of the world continue to emerge as trends in surveys of chefs year after year. The momentum for microcuisines continues to build. American regional foods are being celebrated far beyond their local origins. Latin inspiration is hotter than ever. South American cuisines are becoming popular because of the diversity of agricultural products from tropical fruits to cocoa and coffee. Foods from the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa are gaining interest as the allure of the Mediterranean diet expands.

Olive oil, dates, exotic flavors (like za'atar), and simple sea salt are classic ingredients in some of these foods. Asian noodle bowls and barbecue have become the global comfort food with flavors from all over Asia.

There is no denying the appeal of classic comfort food among campus consumers. What's new is how some of the international flavors are finding their way into mainstream American menu items.

WHAT'S NEXT

Much of what's next on campus menus is building momentum for fresh and sustainable offerings, more flavor exploration, and growing interest from students in every person and every process that is involved in bringing food to the table. ♦

ABOUT Y-PULSE

Y-Pulse® (ypulse.org) is a research and consulting firm headquartered in Chicago, IL, that focuses on consumers in the education segments, specializing in helping companies in the food business better understand tomorrow's tastemakers today.

