

FOOD & BEVERAGE

New study reveals the dining experience Gen Z really wants

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CHICAGO—Is it time to forget the days of mobile phones at the dinner table? A new study by Y-Pulse called “Understanding Tomorrow’s Tastemakers Today” explores the dining culture, attitudes and behaviors of more than 900 K-12 consumers toward foodservice segments. Y-Pulse surveyed U.S. consumers between the ages of eight to 18 years old and included topics such as their opinions on foodservice venues, social media and food perceptions. The results indicated that food media, peers and the need for community are major influencers of Gen Z’s dining preferences and expectations.

Maybe Generation Z won’t be putting down their devices too quickly, but the age group is definitely more conscious of dining experiences than many may think. “The sense of community is important in any hospitality venue. Designing dining and common areas that facilitate socializing can appeal to consumers who are looking to interact with others,” said Sharon Olson, executive director, Y-Pulse LLC. “Although every generation is unique, sharing food has always been a way of connecting people, and it continues to captivate today’s young consumers.”

In the study, 66% of kids said they like restaurants that offer shareable food and 76% said they like to hang out with their friends at a restaurant. Olson said that hotel chefs are learning this—and how sophisticated and inclusive this generation is—so chefs are aiming to appeal to them in a more grown-up way.

According to Olson, when children reach eight or nine years old, the majority of them prefer ordering from the adult menu. Some 66% of those surveyed said they like the fun activities that often go along with the kids’ menu, but prefer to order from the adult menu instead.

“They do like kids’ menus but consider it more for their younger siblings than themselves. When kids are dining in a hotel venue, it is often for pleasure,” she said. “Keeping this in mind, hotel foodservice can use different techniques

that can add appeal to kids and families without alienating the business traveler. It could be something as simple as adding some fun toppings to the self-service oatmeal bar or a specialty pancake that will appeal to kids and the kid in most adults.”

While hotel restaurants and chefs are trying to appeal to a more advanced palate while keeping options approachable, what does this mean for other aspects of the dining experience, such as atmosphere and presentation? Food media is a major influence here, driving curiosity

and expectations. With videos, photos and recipes readily accessible, it’s hard for any smartphone user to avoid food-related media. Some 56% of Gen Z consumers surveyed said they like to watch the Food Network, and 52% of these consumers said they like to watch “Tasty” style videos on Facebook and Instagram.

“Food media has become a part of the mainstream cultural landscape and this generation has grown up with it for entertainment,” Olson said. “Technology is an important element of today’s culture and sharing experiences. They expect food to be beautiful, healthful and delicious.”

Olson also mentioned how many kids are even creating their own online cooking shows via YouTube and other media platforms—and hotels are recognizing

this. “Hotel chefs are creating appetizing and delicious menus while keeping in mind that their customers may want to capture and share items on social media,” Olson said.

Olson added that while younger consumers like to use technology to make ordering quick and error-free, millennials and Gen Z consumers are some of the most appreciative when it comes to quality service and positive interaction.

“Technology is being used more to enhance efficiency in the back of the house with ordering and management systems. When it comes to front of the house, even young customers appreciate great service, and technology is not likely to replace great service staff in the near future,” she said.

Even though Generation Z may be more adventurous and open to healthier options, they’re still kids, and expect a level of comfort when it comes to dining. According to the study, 71% of the kids surveyed like trying new dishes and flavors at restaurants, while 91% of kids like ordering their favorite foods or foods that they’re familiar with.

“Hotels are offering veg-centric but not necessarily vegetarian items to appeal to today’s health-conscious consumers. Salad is among kids’ favorite foods,” Olson said. “Much to the chagrin of their parents paying the bill, growing teens may often order an entrée salad with protein as a starter and then move on to a hearty entrée. Serving smoothies in remote locations is another great way to capture breakfast business from those who prefer to sleep late or don’t wish to visit the dining room for breakfast.”

Hotels are now focusing on this age group but aren’t necessarily forgetting millennials, a group that Olson believes to have a little more knowledge about food, a better understanding of global cuisines and a greater expectation of knowing where their food comes from and who’s involved in bringing it to the table. But the hotel industry will continue to adjust and appeal to the ever-changing guest.

“Considering these trends, we believe that these expectations and the demand for ingredient transparency will increase with Gen Z consumers,” Olson said. “Treating kids like customers with a grown-up perspective makes their experiences memorable for them and hassle-free for their parents.” **HB**



Many kids prefer eating off the adult menu.



Smoothies are a great way to capture breakfast business.