

Value-Added Equals Efficiency Without Compromising Quality

As Millennials are growing up and moving to the next chapter of their lives, college foodservice will face the exciting challenge of welcoming a new demographic of students: The Gen Z consumer.

Chicago-based research and consulting firm **Y-Pulse** has tracked thousands of interviews with college students for more than a decade. Here are some of the key ways college consumers' tastes are setting the pace for tomorrow's menus.

Rise Of The Omnivore — Even as “flexitarian” and Meatless Monday trends waiver, more young consumers proudly identify themselves as omnivores. Vegetable-centric cuisine doesn't necessarily mean vegetarian, but it tops the list of menu items that feed college consumers' desire for fresh and healthful food. The Gen Z consumer is accustomed to robust and adventurous flavors, as well as more innovative cooking methods like smoking and fire roasting.

Mindful Dining — According to a recent study by the **Culinary Visions Panel**, a Chicago-based food-focused insight and trend forecasting practice that develops and tests new ideas that connect with modern consumers, Millennial consumers care more about ethical factors in foodservice compared to the general population. When surveyed about the factors that most influence their food and beverage choices, the top three responses were a simple ingredient statement, a company known for ethical standards, and sustainability.

More than half of the 1,200 young consumers surveyed also 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.

Snacking provided no exception, with **83 percent considering healthfulness an important criterion for the snacks they choose.**

Living Well — Ideas like “stealth health” are on their way out as younger consumers increase emphasis on full ingredient disclosure and allergen awareness. Transparency matters to young consumers who have had nutrition education and want to be empowered to make their own choices.

Wellness programs on campus are also taking on a more 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 campus services, including health services, foodservice, athletics, counseling and residential life. Seventy-seven percent of students said they were satisfied (or very satisfied) with the campus wellness program available to them.

Community Building — In addition to dining spaces specifically designed to foster community, students are reacting positively to platters that evoke a shared experience. Traditional steam table service is, more often than not, regarded as institutional.

On campuses, foodservice workers and consumers are often one in the same. Foodservice directors must be mindful on how important it is that workers want to eat the food coming out of their kitchens and share it with their friends. When it comes to 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 due to the continued momentum of the farm-to-table movement.

Cooking On Campus — Food television has captivated and enabled an entire generation of consumers. As a result, cooking classes and chef demonstrations on campuses are well attended. Many classes have an inspiring and practical nature. One example of a practical cooking class is chefs and dietitians demonstrating recipes where all of the ingredients have come from the campus store.

According to a **Y-Pulse study, 26 percent of college students say that a registered dietitian is available on campus for personal consultation.**

Connected Consumers — College consumers expect to have the information they need about food and beverage choices available instantly and their opinions taken seriously. According to a Y-Pulse study, 95 percent of foodservice directors in college and university foodservice say they use social media to connect with their customers.

Campus dining apps are also becoming more widely available as operators look to connect their offerings with student lifestyles and social media habits.

The Global Kitchen — Today's college consumers are more diverse and aware of global cultures and cuisines than any previous generation. Most students expect to see ethnic foods on the menu, regardless of their background.

South American cuisines are becoming popular because of the diversity of agricultural products, from tropical fruits and vegetables to cocoa and coffee. Foods from the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa are gaining interest as the allure of the Mediterranean diet expands. Some of the classic ingredients in these foods include olive oil, dates, sea salt and exotic spices and herbs like za'atar.

What's next? Much of what's next on campus menus is building momentum for fresh and sustainable offerings and more flavor exploration. Campus foodservice also needs to find ways to satisfy students' growing interest about the people and processes behind the food they eat.

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