

5 foodservice trends for 2016

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The trend of this year's foodservice trends feels different.

Annual food trend predictions tend to focus on new foods, ingredients, cuisines and flavor profiles. This year the trends are bigger; they are more like movements changing the way we feed the world. We are serving customers and utilizing food systems differently.

Here are five trends making a big impact in foodservice not just for 2016 but also for the foreseeable future.

Foodservice Goes to the Customer

Thanks to fast food chains adding delivery operations to their stores, Amazon and Uber getting into the business of delivering food from farm to retail to home and several niche companies delivering meal ingredient kits right to the front door, consumers are getting used to having their meals brought to them. Operators across all sectors are adapting, developing unique and creative programs that make it convenient for their customers to eat what they want when they need to.

Take Ball State University in Muncie, Ind. The university is preparing hundreds of Sack Meals per day, which are available for pickup from almost all of its dining locations on campus for breakfast, lunch and dinner.



“This program is targeted toward students with busy schedules or who will be away from campus during meal times or for several days,” says Amanda Kruse, RD, CD, wellness nutritionist. “Meal options vary at each of the four locations offering them, but include a variety of wraps, sandwiches, salads and sides. Students preorder by submitting a form found on our website. Students use their meal equivalency as their sack meal allowance, as they would at any dining location that isn’t all you care to eat.”

Management companies are getting in the game, too. Sodexo has launched Twelve, a self-checkout concept that is open all day and offers a wide variety of products.

“The name [Twelve] has a couple of meanings—one related to time and the other related to offering variety,” says Diego Raso, director of design & development. “We aim to save consumers time every day. The idea is that 12 minutes saved per day adds up to an hour saved per week. Additionally, we made a commitment to providing variety and choice. Twelve delivers 12 distinct product categories day in and day out, thus ensuring there are always alternatives available.”

Self-service hot beverage stations are a traffic builder and the packaged goods offered are highly targeted to the specified audience.

“Twelve is primarily an unattended space, with some exceptions when there is staffing, in which consumers use self-checkout terminals for every purchase, thus allowing the concept to be accessible 24/7,” Raso says.

“Twelve is typically implemented in addition to the on-site café, offering both an alternative destination for breakfast and lunch and a space for a break and quick snack at any time of day.”

Twelve is currently offered at the U.S. House of Representatives Cannon, Ford and Longworth office buildings in Washington, D.C. A nationwide rollout is expected.

Technology Feeds Everything

Technology is at the heart of enabling operators to expand their service beyond the dining room, whether that be delivery, pickup, self-service or beyond. It’s also the ideal way to communicate with customers about what is being offered and how that food is being raised, procured and prepared. Communicating with the customer is no longer a nice-to-have, it’s a must-have; and cutting-edge technology is what enables that.

Sodexo’s Twelve program brings good, quality food to customers on their time and relies heavily on technology to do that. The unmanned space utilizes the SoGo Cash Card to take payment from customers and there is also a reward card component called the App Card that offers savings, special offers and unique promotions.

“Being an unmanned environment, digital technology becomes crucial for Twelve to engage with consumers on a regular basis,” Raso says. “Digital screens are tactically located along the consumer journey to deliver the right message at the right time—from the welcome screen that introduces the brand at the entry point, to the ‘hero wall’ that shares information about different products and promotions.”

Twelve also utilizes technology to deliver to all the senses, including music to support different purchasing occasions and scent marketing to pump in aromas into the lounge area.

Technology is a no-brainer on college campuses, and Chartwells Higher Education is now in the game with App on Campus. The app shares detailed information about the nutrition of the food being offered, identifies the locations, addresses and hours of each dining outlet on campus, and announces special events and promotions.

What's really interesting about App on Campus is that, according to Patti Girardi, vice president, marketing & creative services, Chartwells Higher Education, "students can share menu items, events and specials via Facebook, Twitter or email and submit feedback about their campus dining experiences."

This is the essence of communicating with the customer via technology, and a point all operators should keep top of mind when considering how to implement it—use technology to engage with customers and have a two-way dialogue about the food and services being offered.

Vegetables Quietly Move to Center of the Plate



This trend has been taking root for a while now. Specialty restaurants are not just making meals vegan or vegetarian with plant-based proteins, they are actually celebrating vegetables as the star ingredient of a plate. This may work in restaurants where veggie-loving patrons choose where they want to eat, but how can foodservice operators feature produce for customers who may not be seeking out this trend?

Education institutions are mastering this concept as they know how important it is to instill good habits in young children and adults.

Ball State is using The Comfort Zone station to feature vegan and vegetarian options. Offerings that replaced meat options include a spicy bean goulash, cucumber feta stuffed tomato, potato leek casserole, spinach fettuccine with veggie ricotta sauce and a pulled barbecue mushroom sandwich. Comfort Zone options are available for breakfast, lunch and dinner Monday through Friday.

“Offering plant-based options that appeal to everyone and integrating healthier takes on comfort food favorites are the two main reasons we started offering more veggie-centered options,” Kruse says. “It took a semester or so to get the word out to guests that more of these options were available. Since most of our locations are not all you care to eat, guests can sometimes be more apprehensive to try new foods so sampling events, word of mouth and other promotions were and still are required to keep guests interested.”

The approach used by Austin Public Schools in Minnesota is increasing fruit and vegetable consumption by including more vegetables in the entrée itself versus serving them as a side that may or may not be eaten.

“We are just trying to make vegetables more appealing to students so they are interested in taking them rather than having to take them to meet the [USDA] requirements,” says Jen Haugen, RDN, LD, registered dietitian.

Examples of how the district is doing this include serving Asian rice bowls where stir-fried vegetables are a part of the entrée rather than served as a side, featuring more vegetables in soups and offering burrito bowls filled with vegetables rather than a meat-centric burrito with a vegetable side.

Nothing Goes to Waste

Food and culinary experts have been raising awareness about food waste prevention for years. Now the federal government is getting on board. In September, the USDA and the Environmental Protection Agency, along with private sector and food bank partners, announced they were challenging the country to reduce food waste by 50 percent by the year 2030.

Noncommercial operators are up to the challenge, coming up with real solutions to reduce food waste.

Compass rolled out its Imperfectly Delicious Produce (IDP) program in April 2014 with the goal of connecting chefs with farmers to rescue imperfect produce that would be sent to landfill or compost simply because of cosmetic imperfections.

“Compass Group created IDP—our own grading system of produce—to meet our quality assurance standards for safe food,” says Christine Seitz, vice president of culinary, business excellence for the Compass Group. “IDP tier grading and labeling systems categorize where and why the product is IDP.”

According to Seitz, the IDP program has reduced water by 50 percent used on crops of spinach, baby kale and chard in California, increased the yield on a field of cauliflower by 20 to 40 percent and captured items such as carrots and beets in fields where 40 percent of the product was sent to compost because it was imperfect.

Boulder Valley School District is also getting into alternative produce sourcing. “Sustainability is one of our core values,” says Ann Cooper, director of food services. “With that as a guiding principle, we look to eliminate waste in all of its forms; whether it be composting, recycling or purchasing ‘seconds’ from farmers.”

The district purchases “gleaned” food, which is fruit picked from local trees that would otherwise go to waste, as well as “seconds,” which is produce not considered up to quality for selling at the farmers market. Because kids can be picky eaters, the district uses gleaned and seconds fruit in recipes where cosmetic imperfections don’t matter, like apple and pear sauce.

Sustainable Seafood

We've seen sustainability efforts focused on eating animal parts nose to tail and produce root to stem. Now it's seafood's turn. In fact, the National Restaurant Association's "What's Hot 2016 Culinary Forecast" places sustainable seafood at No. 9 in its top 20 foods trends list.

For their Maine Course Initiative (MCI), Sodexo has partnered with the Gulf of Maine Research Institute (GMRI) to support local economic growth in Maine and highlight the benefits of sustainably sourced seafood, which focuses on using underutilized species.

Sodexo's goals for the MCI program include purchasing in the fresh whitefish category to include at least 20 percent Gulf of Maine Responsibly Harvested fish by Jan. 1, 2016, and 100 percent by Jan.1, 2020.

According to Varun Avasthi, Sodexo district manager, three of the seven college campuses Sodexo manages in Maine have already met the goal of 100 percent Gulf of Maine Responsibly Harvested whitefish as of September 2015, including Colby College, and the University of New England at Biddeford and Portland.

"Sodexo has committed to helping local suppliers connect to the company's vast distribution chain," Avasthi says. "Sodexo will also co-host education sessions at GMRI and provide information to students at the campuses it serves, teaching them about under-harvested seafood species and how their purchasing decisions can help create positive change."

An even more unique program is being done by Sodexo in the Chesapeake Bay area.

Joe Cotton, area executive chef for Sodexo at the National Aquarium in Baltimore, is using two invasive fish species—the lionfish and the blue catfish—on menus for special events. Why? Because these aggressively invasive fish species pose a threat to the local reef and marine ecosystems on the East Coast of the United States and the Caribbean.

"The [lionfish] is capable of eating 30 times its own weight, and it eats just about anything," Cotton says. "One of these fish can eat [the contents of] an entire bay in just six weeks."

Trends that introduce new flavors, ingredients and cuisine styles are fun to watch and provide new skills and creative ideas for foodservice chefs and operators. But there's something far more rewarding when we can experience and implement trends that have far-reaching and positive effects on the way we eat for the health of people and the future of our planet. Foodservice customers will have much to celebrate in 2016.

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