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Eating Trends Revealed at IACP Conference

The following insights from the 2008 International Association of Culinary Professionals (IACP) Conference in New Orleans, April 16-19, are reported by Olson Communications, a Chicago-based, full-service marketing firm that specializes in developing innovative communication strategy exclusively for the food industry.

IACP is the place where culinary professionals and a wide range of food enthusiasts gather to be inspired by new ideas, challenged by exotic cuisines and engaged with their peers for a weeklong intellectual and gastronomic festival of food. It is the place we go to explore leading-edge thinking and identify what we think might become mainstream trends in a few years.

The Buzz

Our favorite new catch phrases this year included:

- Culinary Epiphany – that moment when a person discovers a life-changing cuisine.
- Culinary Depression – the result of a privileged English child’s experience at boarding school.
- Yuk Factor – the line one simply cannot cross when exploring new cuisines.
- Don’t Ask Don’t Tell Vegetarian – Vegetarians who have grown tired of the limitations of uninspired dishes and crave flavor, and who often enjoy a meal with a bit of meat if they are not told what’s in it.
- The Grandma Initiative – A main tenet of Culinology™, keeping true to the “gold standard” behind a packaged or frozen food, and to the best of abilities, identifying the ingredients and mimicking the processes that made Grandma’s cooking so memorable.
- Intangible Heritages – As opposed to “tangible” heritages such as iconic restaurants, “intangible” heritages comprise the combined cultural knowledge of cooking, music, art and conviviality that endures over generations and characterizes a community.
- Social Media – The “new” new media characterized primarily by interactive weblogs that promote real-time reaction and commentary to food information posted online.

Contemporary Comfort

Exotic, exciting, intoxicating flavors always create a buzz, but consumers are not going to give up their favorite comfort foods—especially in an uncertain economy where they crave comfort more than ever. Amid the micro-cuisines and emerging trends, classic American comfort food shared the spotlight.

One session was devoted to the hamburger as an icon of American culture and its deference to regional tastes and preferences throughout the nation. Drink got its due via focuses on the contributions of bourbon, regional cocktails and tea to shaping U.S. foodways.

Food memories provide historical perspective and reference to today's cravings. One speaker suggested that even Grandma took some shortcuts that compromised classic home meals, and it might be better to look to Great Grandma for insight on the real culinary traditions.

Olive oil, emblematic of cuisines of Southern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, has had huge impact on the American diet in the last decade, and is now an essential pantry item here.

Culinary tourism, once a specialty craft, has grown into a mature industry as consumers thirst to explore cuisine as part of their leisure trips.

Culture, Cuisine and The Big 3

Latin, Mediterranean and Asian cuisines continue to micro-segment as consumers become increasingly adventurous. Case histories noted the geometric increase in sales of authentic ethnic foods in college foodservice to more American students than international. One example: U.C. Berkeley serves 85% local students and only 5% international students.

Global street food has inspired the fresh, fast, handheld movement around the globe. More than one breakout session explored the expression of culture and craftsmanship that is found in Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia and India. The distinctive flavors of each country are often expressed in their purest sense in the street cuisine, which is billed as good food, fast—not fast food.

Locavores, and Shades of Green

According to presenters and the applause they received, there is growing support for the belief that organic is okay, but sustainable is everything. There is building momentum in the quest for transparency in the food chain more than there is for government-identified labels. Increasing demand for locally produced and harvested foods is driven not only by concern for the environment, but by desire for better-tasting foods in season as well as economic support of area farmers and producers.

Leading food communicators, aware of the public's increasing interest in environmental issues, caution that many restaurants and food-production facilities that aren't 100% "green" are nevertheless taking steps to reduce negative impacts on the environment and should be lauded for their contributions and setting an example for the rest of the world. In other words, "Don't let perfect be the enemy of the good," as expressed by The Los Angeles Times.

Conversely, few government regulations of "green" exist, and consumers must beware of hype. "Agribusiness," for instance, is a newfangled term suggesting a concerted effort to grow food efficiently, yet any farming without sound business practices is merely gardening. Restaurants and other businesses committed to "going green" must do their research: What might be sustainable according to one scorecard might be deleterious to the environment on another.

Food Media: Embracing a Changing Landscape

To meet growing interest among sophisticated readers, mainstream consumer food media have been focusing more on local, seasonal, sustainable (and sometimes organic) ingredients without necessarily force-feeding an agenda. Particularly among print markets, articles that promote these issues illustrate with recipes that make use of such ingredients, but aren't reliant on them.

Protecting dining élan in the communities they serve is paramount to restaurant critics on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet the maxim that "less is more" in electronic publishing is impacting the number of column inches devoted to print articles. When virtually anyone can voice an online opinion about a recent meal, all critics have far less influence over a restaurant's reputation than they're credited with. Nevertheless, a vibrant critique culture in any city by critics who aim to serve the public interest can elevate overall food quality and educate about food at the same time.

Top 3 Trends of Generation Y Consumers

- Taste and Flavor – no exceptions, no excuses. Today's young consumers want it all without restriction, and even vegans are coming to expect great taste.
- Nutritional Awareness – educated and informed young consumers are coming of age with an unprecedented knowledge of nutrition that is making them more aware of food choices than any previous generation.
- Environmental Sustainability – the idealism of this generation of consumers is focused on leaving the earth better than they found it.

Implications

Look for foods that use flavor to add a hint of the exotic to the classics for a safe culinary adventure.

Expect transparency to be a driving force in the food chain as consumers seek out more than brands and label information.

Culinary activism is not just a fringe activity for college students and culinary thought leaders. Expect mainstream consumers to become more active and weigh in with their food dollars.

Relevance is critical when pitching food news to a wealth of media outlets, and so is brevity—readers and listeners with little time need to know how news impacts them now. The successful promoter will deliver just-in-time solutions to hectic lifestyles.