



Top Trends from 2011's The Flavor Experience

FEATURED



Big shifts in U.S. foodways emerging at this year's conference included "clean" menu descriptions, Korean influences, strategic use of salt and black pepper and "invisibly healthy" indulgence.

Courtesy of Olson Communications

The annual commencement of The Flavor Experience, presented in strategic alliance with *Flavor & The Menu* magazine, brings together the top flavor innovators in the food-and-beverage industry. The sponsors-only event presents the latest research, trends, menu ideas and hands-on flavor experiences that are relevant to more than 100 leading foodservice operators.

The seventh conference, August 1-4 in Newport Beach, Calif., brought flavor front and center for all conference attendees.

Menu Trends—Fine Dining to Quick Service

- "Casualization"—This trend has evolved into a more-casual dining atmosphere; however, menu offerings have trended toward upscale bites and unique ingredient pairings.
- Designer Produce—Spigarello, romanesco and black kale are finding their way onto independent menus. Even quick-service operators are upgrading their produce with items like red onion.
- Ethnic Influences—Korean is the hot ethnic flavor this year from Korean tacos to Gochujang, a Korean chili sauce with less heat and more balance than traditional spicy sauces.
- Umami Burgers—Carnivorous or vegetarian, various meats, mushrooms, sausages, tomatoes and cheeses can add a savory crave to burgers.
- A Pinch of Salt—Lowering sodium has been a key challenge with operators as the demand has increased in the last year. Ironically, salt menu mentions have increased 144% since 2005.
- Politely Declined—Some Los Angeles restaurants are adopting a stance on menu changes that does not allow for modifications. The "trend" has many operators scratching their heads; don't look for this to become a "megatrend."
- Currywurst—The latest emerging micro-trend combines classic brats with a curry/ketchup sauce for an added bite of heat.
- Dive In and Get Dirty—From popcorn to peel-and-eat shrimp, unfussy and fun is making operators take notice.
- Clean Descriptions—Cutting out the jargon and simply listing basic key ingredients is an emerging trend for menu descriptions.
- Amuse Cocktail? —As cocktails become more complex, mixologists are adding a new level of flavor to their adult beverages such as a margarita with a sausage stirrer.

Emerging Flavor Concepts

An annual feature of The Flavor Experience is a discussion and debate of the emerging flavor trends. Following are flavor profiles that gathered the most attention:

- Salt—Salt usage has become strategic: using salt as a garnish, for craveability or a textural element. Operators are using exotics salts like pink salt or truffle salt to elevate the plate.
- Pepper—Bold flavor at a lower cost, from cracked pepper to smoked pepper; pepper is the most traded spice in the world and menu mentions in the United States have increased 43% in the last five years.
- Spices—Chili pepper, chipotle pepper and coriander are appearing more on menus across the country. The next spice to become mainstream might just be garam masala.
- Custom Grinds—Big opportunity in combining more than one premium meat together in a single ground “package” that moves burgers from menu staple to signature item. Some operators are even flying in their custom grinds.
- Citrus—From cocktails to marinades, this flavor can be seen almost everywhere; menu mentions have grown 222% since 2005. Look for calamansi limes as the next Asian citrus to take off.
- Balsamic—Rich and luxurious, this reduction has been known to add depth to salads, marinades and even dessert. Up to 28% in menu mentions in five years, connoisseurs are giving great balsamic the same respect as wine.

Breakfast of Champions

The breakfast category is the hot topic on operator’s minds as everyone is looking for a way to take a piece of the pie ... or pancake. With nearly half of all restaurant breakfast consumption occurring on the weekend, the challenge is how to increase traffic during the week. A panel of operators shared their viewpoints on how to best tackle the breakfast challenge, which included the following highlights:

- Oatmeal—Deliciously simple and highly profitable; look for oatmeal to become a breakfast staple.
- Breakfast by Region—Some parts of the United States, most notably the Southwest, demand breakfast all day as an option.
- Portability—As much as 75% of orders can come through the QSR drive thru and portability is a mandate, not just a luxury.
- Charitable Causes—Consumers expect their brands to give back to the community and want charitable causes they can get behind.

There’s an App(etizer) for That

As time becomes more and more precious, consumers are looking to reduce dining time; however, they are not willing to sacrifice “fine-dining” food quality. Small plates and appetizers offer diners a taste of high quality ingredients, unique flavor profiles, and innovative cooking methods at a fraction of the time and cost.

Virtually every major chain has a small plate offering that reduce food costs and increases profit margins and customer satisfaction. Royal Caribbean reinvented the bento box—a concept not just for Asian cuisine anymore—by offering flavor bites to diners.

America the Bountiful

Portion sizes have increased ten times in the last 20 years, and are often blamed for the rise in obesity. Choice is another factor. As portion sizes have grown, restaurateurs have made it easy for consumers to choose MORE. In the last 20 years, calories in a small order of fries have risen from 210 to 610; a burger has soared from 330 calories to upwards of 1,420.

At the same time there has been more talk of healthy eating. A new Culinary Visions

Panel™ survey finds more evidence that casual-restaurant diners are enticed by invisibly healthy menu items that sound delicious and indulgent. The survey polled casual-dining consumers on their opinions of 16 invisibly healthy menu concepts and asked consumers to rate how likely they would be to order each item. Although every item was healthy by design, consumers rated those they perceived as the most indulgent as their favored choices.

Taste Talk Tweet

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