

# Captivating Today's Consumers

Understanding their relationship with food

BY SHARON OLSON



Serving up the latest trends to today's deli consumers is a continuous challenge. A recent news story or a celebrity touting a new diet can be all it takes to create demand. To better understand if, how and when to jump on the latest food fad, the Culinary Visions Panel surveyed over 2,800 consumers to better understand their relationship with food and the choices they make related to food and flavor in a wide range of venues, including the deli.

The inspiration for the research was to explore why demographically identical customers can have very different purchasing behavior. The

study found that the consumers' relationship with food can be more important in anticipating their purchases than their demographic profile.

Although it is possible to micro-segment consumers by many different characteristics, the Culinary Visions Panel focused on the consumers' purchase intentions and desire to try new foods as opposed to sticking with their tried-and-true favorites. Foodies were identified by their stated purchase intentions, not just by their interest in food. Foodies always or usually like to try new items on a menu or in a retail food store. Mainstream consumers were defined as those who like to stick with their favorites but will some-

times try something new.

In this study foodies and mainstream consumers made up 98 percent of the consumers surveyed. Of this group, 54 percent were foodies and 46 percent were mainstream consumers.

Foodies matter because they are going to be the first to try new items and tell their friends and family about the experience. Mainstream consumers are important, too, because they can be the loyal core-customer base for a store. Captivating both foodies and mainstream consumers is important to successful food businesses to build a reputation for exciting new offerings and maintain strong, steady business that

relies on more than the occasional culinary adventure seeker.

### Flavor Preferences

Foodies and mainstream consumers have very different perspectives on flavor. Since the experience of flavor is essential to creating satisfaction, Culinary Visions Panel explored the differences in perceptions and understanding of the five flavor profiles — sweet, sour, salty, bitter and umami. Menu concepts were developed that included key ingredients that would typify each of the major flavors. All of the menu concepts were designed to sound desirable and delicious on a restaurant menu or as an offer-



### Demographics of Foodies and Mainstream Consumers

	Male	Female	Age: 17-34	Age: 35-46	Age: 47-65	Age: 66+
<b>Foodies</b>	54%	54.5%	60%	57%	45%	26%
<b>Mainstream</b>	46%	45.5%	40%	43%	55%	74%

Source: Culinary Visions Panel 2012

ing in the deli case.

Foodies and mainstream consumers preferred distinct differences in flavors. Salty (54 percent) and sweet (52 percent) were the preferred flavors for mainstream consumers. However, consumer foodies who were interested in more culinary adventure noted bitter (62 percent), umami (61 percent) and sour (59 percent) flavors more often as their favorites.

#### Preferences for Ethnic Flavors

Foodies were more willing to try new items with ethnic flavor profiles than mainstream consumers. Mainstream consumers were more willing to take a chance purchasing something unfamiliar if it were not the main focus of the meal but rather a side

dish or a dessert. More than half (56 percent) of foodies also considered the availability of ethnic flavors important to their deli shopping experience as opposed to 43 percent of mainstream consumers.

Mediterranean, Latin and Asian flavors were studied as the most popular ethnic platforms. Mediterranean salads were the most commonly mentioned items that consumers wanted to see more of in the deli. Latin flavors requested most often related to sandwiches, the Cuban sandwich in particular. Thai dishes were the most commonly desired Asian dishes.

Mariano's Fresh Market stores in the upper Midwest serve up a wide range of ethnic recipes at their World Eats Food Bar. Chefs create destination flavors in authentic

recipes from many parts of world including China, Italy, Mexico and India. Certified sushi chefs work on-site delivering a restaurant quality sushi experience for shoppers

#### Value Perceptions

Consumers valued different characteristics in the deli versus a restaurant or a convenience store; their expectations adjusted for the venue. Foodies and mainstream consumers had similar opinions on many of the key characteristics of a good shopping experience in the deli.

Foodies and mainstream consumers valued quality and price, but in a different order of preference. Ninety-three percent of mainstream consumers considered price important or very important in their deli

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### Flavor Preferences of Foodies and Mainstream Consumers

	Salty	Sweet	Sour	Bitter	Umami
<b>Foodies</b>	43%	45%	59%	62%	61%
<b>Mainstream</b>	54%	52%	35%	37%	35%

Source: Culinary Visions Panel 2012

choices compared to 83 percent of foodies. For foodies the most important characteristics of their deli experience were flavors they liked and cleanliness of the deli department, noted as important or very important by 89 percent of them.

The variety of prepared foods offered was important to 83 percent of foodies and

ager Candace Warner says they focus on satisfying their foodie customers' taste with less perishable items such as a selection of exquisite olive oils because they don't have high enough volume to warrant bringing in a

large variety of fresh foods for foodie tastes.

### Culinary Discovery

Understanding where consumers go to learn about foods and flavors is important to capturing their attention. Foodies seek out a lot of different sources — culinary research is somewhat of a hobby to them. Mainstream consumers rely heavily on friends and family, and some foodies are undoubtedly among those friends and family members.

For foodies, cookbooks were the No. 1 source, noted by almost 60 percent of foodie consumers. Mainstream consumers relied more on family and friends at 66 percent.

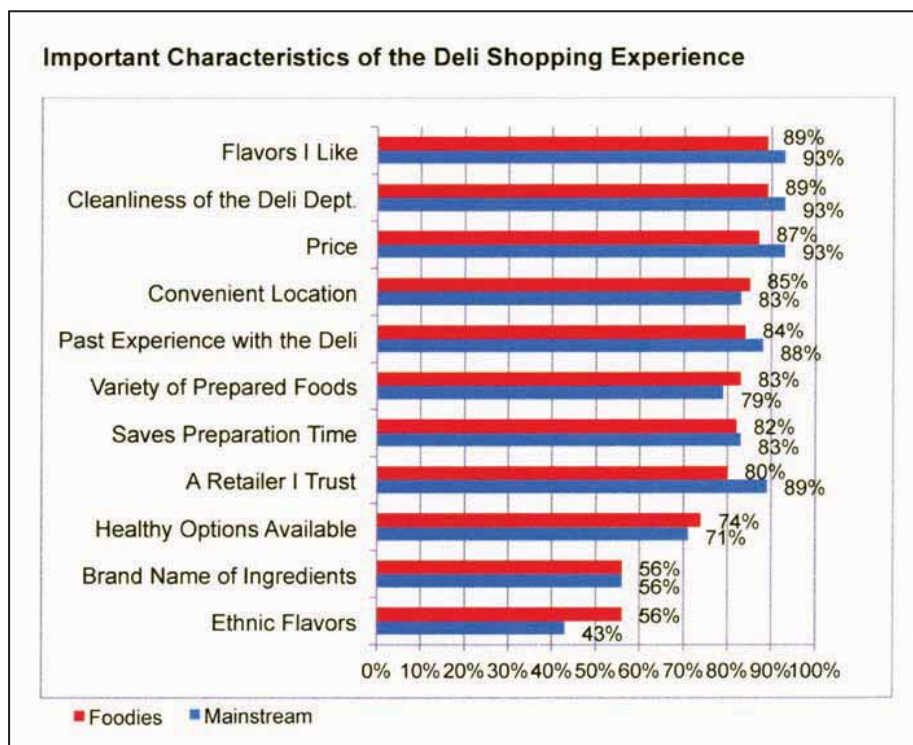
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FOODIES MATTER BECAUSE THEY ARE GOING TO BE THE FIRST TO TRY NEW ITEMS AND TELL THEIR FRIENDS AND FAMILY ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE. MAINSTREAM CONSUMERS ARE IMPORTANT, TOO, BECAUSE THEY CAN BE THE LOYAL CORE-CUSTOMER BASE FOR A STORE. CAPTIVATING BOTH FOODIES AND MAINSTREAM CONSUMERS IS IMPORTANT TO SUCCESSFUL FOOD BUSINESSES.

79 percent of mainstream consumers. Feeding the need for variety is a focus at New Seasons Market stores in Oregon and Washington where over 100 different artisan and farmstead cheeses are offered. Their locally sourced offerings range from tangy blue cheese from Rogue Creamery to Tillamook Cheddar perfect for burgers.

Offering an extensive variety is often a challenge for the retailer that needs to turn pricey perishables quickly. At Convito Café and Market in Wilmette, IL, general man-





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recipes and television programs all play a role in our food-centric culture, each being noted by at least 30 percent of all respondents.

Consumers are most likely to experience a new flavor at a restaurant rather than at home, at a friend's or relative's home or sampling while shopping. Fifty-three percent said they experienced new flavors at a restaurant, while only 13 percent noted a retail sampling experience. Foodie consumers were much more likely to have experienced a new flavor at a restaurant, with 64 per-

cent of foodies reporting such, compared to 45 percent of mainstream consumers.

Mainstream consumers were more likely than foodies to report having a new flavor experience at a friend or relative's house or from an in-store sampling experience, at 20 percent and 18 percent respectively. Only 6 percent of foodies reported having a new flavor experience at a friend's or relative's home and 7 percent reported new experiences from in-store sampling.

Few understand the relationship between the restaurant experience and the deli experience as well as Nancy Brussat and Candace Warner, partners at the Convito Café and Market. They have been treating their customers to an authentic Italian food and wine experience in their restaurant and deli for 33 years. A recently installed cooler at the front entrance features single and sharable-for-two portions of some of their most popular restaurant recipes for market shoppers to bring home.

Although Convito has distinctively different customers in their restaurant and their deli, their authentic recipes have made both a destination for local consumers. Among the ten varieties of homemade cannelloni and lasagna they make, one special is offered daily. "When we first started we had to call some of our more adventurous flavors 'tortas' because our customers only considered one or two of our classic recipes to be real lasagna. Today our customers enjoy a much wider range of flavors including our butternut squash lasagna," accord-

ing to Brussat.

### Thrilling a Foodie

When foodies were asked what thrilled them at the supermarket, the answers resoundingly focused on taste. Fresh, colorful and appetizing were adjectives used to describe food offerings that were hard to resist. When it comes to ingredients, less is more. There were many comments about the importance of "no" — no antibiotics, no hormones, no preservatives. "A nice person handing out samples," was a recurring comment related to positive market experiences.

Understanding demographics are only the beginning of understanding how customers make their decisions about food. Understanding their relationship with food and crafting a selection of offerings to appeal to both foodies and mainstream consumers can be the tipping point for success. **DB**

### About the Culinary Visions Panel

The Culinary Visions Panel ([www.culinaryvisions.org](http://www.culinaryvisions.org)) explores a wide range of culinary topics with leading food industry professionals and consumers. Roundtable discussions with food industry thought leaders guide the crafting of consumer surveys on emerging issues throughout the year. Sharon Olson is the executive director.