

5 Food Trends revealed by Menu Matters from Culinary Tides' 2020/21 Trends Report

Menu Matters 2/25/2021

As part of our ongoing work, we have been tracking the political and economic unease here and abroad, well before the onset of COVID-19. What the spread of COVID-19, and subsequent Recession, has caused, is an amplification and acceleration of the tide that was already rolling in. It's no less significant for its abruptness and shock value, but pandemics can have the effect of shaping and altering the trajectory of already identified trends.

It can be difficult to know which trends are most likely to rise above the noise over the next 12 months as the situation is still very much in flux. It can be even more confusing trying to decide which will resonate most with your brand and customers. This report's forecasts offer insight into how and why the current climate will affect trends for 2021/22. We help you navigate, trend by trend, what to expect during the immediacy of this crisis, and what the long-term effects could be in shaping the future of these trends. Understanding that a trend is coming is only valuable if you know how to strategically leverage it.

The "*Shifting Sands: Trends Shaping the Food Industry in 2021/22*" report is a cross-analysis of 224 prediction lists for 2021/22 put forth by 179 industry experts. In all, more than 1,900 individual predictions were evaluated for their potential during the coming year, with only the most well-supported predictions included. All trends in the report are anticipated to remain in focus throughout 2021 and into the first quarter of 2022.

Here are five of the most significant food-focused findings from this year's release:

Functional Foods as Shields, Treatments

The term foodceutical is not new but will be increasingly relevant to the post-pandemic consumer looking for anything and everything to give them an edge in feeling healthy, strong, and protected. Functionality has been emerging in the food category over the last few years, and 2021 will see an exponential increase in the innovation around functional food products. Functionality will be as front-and-center as entire products or dishes designed with very specific functions in mind and positioned with the functionality as the lead driver. In other cases, foods in retail and restaurants will leverage ingredients that now enjoy a critical mass of assumed functional benefits to impart a healthy halo and allow those food items to lean heavily into guiltless dining; and guiltless is something the post-pandemic consumer will both need and demand. Those functions that will resonate most will be functions that speak directly to pandemic issues: immunity and cognitive health. Gut health will roll into immunity-focused functions. Sleep will bridge the gap between immunity and cognitive health. And cognitive health will incorporate everything from depression and stress to focus and energy. How a food product achieves its functional benefits will range from incorporating exotic ingredients such as ashwagandha, communicating specific categories of ingredients like nootropics and adaptogens, highlight less familiar elements such as L.theonine or feature familiar ingredients with commonly understood healthy offerings including blueberries, cauliflower, vanilla and ginger. Even CBD is acting in the functional space and increasingly added to food items.

Whole Taps into the Need for Authenticity

Whole ingredients were enjoying increased focus and appreciation before the pandemic struck, and the trustworthiness of these ingredients will keep that focus from straying. After a year of uncertainty and anxiety, consumers are looking for products with authenticity. Here, we're not talking about culinary or culture authenticity but rather honesty and transparency. Whole ingredients have nothing to hide and offer consumers nothing but exactly what they are. This is extremely comforting to consumers who have little solid ground to stand on over the past 12 months. As both retail products and restaurants focus more on whole ingredients, the dishes will also be more authentic in their greater simplicity. Here, simplicity isn't boring but rather comforting in its ease of understanding, approachability, and lack of challenge. Simplicity can be beautiful, impart surprise and delight, and offer unique flavor experiences, but without the uncertainty with which consumers are exhausted.

Produce Retrenches, and Evolves

Pre-pandemic, restaurants certainly and retails increasingly were looking for unique produce to add to dishes to create unexpected experiences. We saw a plethora of the unique and exotic expand consumer options and eating occasions. Post-pandemic, produce is retrenching to safer grounds and focusing on classics that consumers know and love. Berries continue to gain ground and new berries – new but still very familiar in size, usage, and appearance in many cases – are increasingly available. Heirloom or heritage varieties are reviving the ubiquitous apple, peach and pear categories, while new (and many heritage though lost to our modern awareness) varieties of lettuce are offering a more vibrant flavor and

color palate. Even completely new varieties that alter either the taste or the color (think pink pineapples) are increasing excitement around categories that have been around for a long time.

Global Provides New Experiences and Comfort

There's been a lot of talk about comfort over the past year, and comfort will still be the base of much of the innovation that occurs over the next 12 to 18 months. But much of this innovation will likely center around the comfort food of other nations. International comfort food, which encompasses peasant, street, country and farmer fare from every culture, looks familiar but offers that element of the unexpected or a new experience within a very familiar format such as stews, savory pies, handhelds, fried fare, and skewers/ kabobs. Beyond the applications and dishes, however, global cuisines will play a critical role in helping to revive our palates after a year of home cooking. Spice mixes from around the world, many of which were emerging prior to the pandemic, will flourish as both operators and consumers look to experiment within safe bounds. Herbs added to dishes in unexpected ways leverage the familiar to create the unexpected. Sauces are also an easy and safe category to add to any type of item from burgers and sandwiches to casseroles and bakes that suddenly spice – in many cases quite literally – up the dish and ease consumer back into a life away from home.

Searching for Restaurant Special in a Restricted World

Behind all of these trends is the idea that consumers are looking for something that is more “restaurant special” after a year of limited restaurant experiences. Yes, delivery continued through the pandemic and many consumers leveraged that to ease the burden of cooking at home. In delivery situations, however, many consumers revert to favorites and those dishes they know they love and will travel well so even with the exponential increase in delivery occasions for many consumers that did not exactly expand their awareness of trends or push their comfort boundaries. And while consumers want “restaurant special” that will continue to be from a more conservative space where experimentation will be safer and caution will continue to rule many decisions. Manufacturers have spent the last year, with retail sales up and more consumers more deeply engaged in their retail shopping experiences, innovating against frozen, refrigerated and shelf-stable products that seek to replicate “restaurant special” and many have succeeded in grabbing share both from restaurants and from competitors with these new innovative products.

So what does restaurant special actually mean? Restaurant special are those dishes that are difficult to prepare well, or at all, at home. It includes the ingredients that are difficult for consumers to source, and the formats that are difficult to pull off without a certain level of skill. At its most basic, it includes those dishes for which a restaurant is known for that no competitor or consumer could ever effectively recreate for reasons that are known only to that restaurant. Restaurant special also includes the atmosphere and experiential elements of being at a restaurant. Perhaps most important, restaurant special is the hospitality that the restaurant industry was built on but was easy to abandon to varying degrees when times were good and consumers were so enmeshed in habitual restaurant behavior that they would seemingly never *not* visit a restaurant regardless of whether that hospitality existed. Now, a return to classic hospitality – authentic, honest, and full of gratitude – is what should underpin all restaurant occasions from quick service to fine dining to truly give consumers what they have been missing.

All insights taken from Culinary Tides, Inc.'s 2020 report, with contributions from Menu Matters, “*Shifting Sands: Trends Shaping the Food Industry in 2020/21*” <https://menumatters.com/trends-forecast-report/>