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November 28, 2007

Survey: What's Hot, What's Not on Menus



R&I offers a look at The National Restaurant Association's just-released menu-trend data.

Bite-size desserts, small plates, locally grown produce and organic products are the latest red-hot food items, while low-carb dough, tofu, chai and foie gras are cooling off on menus according to the National Restaurant Association's second annual "What's Hot and What's Not" chef survey.

The NRA study, which asked 1,282 American Culinary Federation members to rate nearly 200 menu items as "hot," "passé" or "perennial favorites," illustrates how consumers' demands for control over their dining experiences, knowledge about the foods they eat and specialty, premium products are shaping the future of foodservice.

"The restaurant industry has been and always will be a consumer driven business," says Hudson Riehle, NRA's senior vice president of research. "The advantage that professionally trained chefs have is that they can lead consumers to experiment with new flavor and taste combinations and consequently, incorporate that into their mainstream behavior. What's changed dramatically over last couple decades is the rapidity with which these trends are assimilated."

Chefs rank the Top 10 "hot" items for 2007 as follows:

1. Bite-size desserts

On the Fence
 The jury's still out on the ingredients, which found similar percentages of chefs voting on both sides of the hot-or-not spectrum.

Hot **Passé**

Tartare/carpaccio

40% 41%

Gourmet pizza

43% 39%

Middle Eastern cuisine

40% 43%

Mexican/Tex-Mex/Southwest entrée salad

40% 39%

Flavored liquors

39% 37%

Wasabi

37% 38%

Mexican/Tex-Mex appetizers

36% 36%

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2. Locally grown produce
3. Organic produce
4. Small plates/tapas/mezze
5. Specialty sandwiches
6. Craft/artisan/microbrew beer
7. Sustainable seafood
8. Grass-fed items
9. Energy drink cocktails
10. Salts (e.g. sea, smoked, colored, kosher)

"If you were to look at the typical American restaurant menu from 20 years ago and then go through the 194 items [in the survey], in many instances they would appear nowhere on those menus," says Riehle, crediting the perpetual menu evolution to the restaurant industry's pattern of year-over-year growth as well as the broader availability of new and different ingredients.

"Because the industry continues to post real sales gains year after year and the proportion of the food dollar allocated to the away-from-home market continues to grow, it allows substantial diversification not only within restaurant concepts but on restaurant menus," he says.

By delving deeper into the comprehensive menu-item ratings, several overlying themes emerge:



Trend: Small is (still) big. Bite-size desserts once again garner the top spot on chefs' lists of what's hot, and dishes categorized as small plates, tapas or mezze also ranked in the Top 5.

Why? Consumers want more control over their dining experiences, and that includes small plates and snacks at their discretion—and share and sample as they please—while diners do not overdo it.

Trend: Every ingredient has a story. Chefs cite locally grown and organic products. Sustainably raised and grass-fed products also make the top 10, with free-range

Why? Diners increasingly are interested in how and where foods are grown, making responsible choices. The feel-good factor plays a key role here, as consumers seek kinder to the environment and more humane to animals.

Trend: Ethnic flavors are going places. Global influences abound on chefs' menus, including Latin American, Mediterranean, Thai, Pan Asian, Cuban, Spanish and

Why? Consumers are learning that ethnic cuisines often have the bold, assertive flavors, and seeing an exotic ingredient or two woven into recognizable menu items adds

Biggest Declines

| % ranking as hot in 2007 | % ranking as hot in 2006 |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
|--------------------------|--------------------------|

Bottled water

| | |
|-----|-----|
| 49% | 75% |
|-----|-----|

Focaccia

| | |
|-----|-----|
| 42% | 61% |
|-----|-----|

Fresh herbs

| | |
|-----|-----|
| 48% | 67% |
|-----|-----|

Whole-grain bread

| | |
|-----|-----|
| 56% | 70% |
|-----|-----|

Espresso/specialty coffees

| | |
|-----|-----|
| 58% | 71% |
|-----|-----|

Pan-seared items

| | |
|-----|-----|
| 55% | 68% |
|-----|-----|

Top 10 Perennial Favorites

1. Berries
2. Asparagus
3. Chicken
4. Onions
5. Tomatoes
6. Beef
7. Italian cuisine
8. Rice
9. Ice cream
10. Iced tea

Source: NRA's "What's Hot and What's Not" chef survey.

adventurous.

Trend: Specialty alcohol's shaking things up. Eight of the Top 25 hot mer drink cocktails, martinis, mojitos, artisan liquors, organic wine and specialty b

Why? Credit the theory of trickle-down menu development. Instead of the big restaurants, they're moving from the kitchen to the bar. Diners are demanding what they eat but also what they drink.

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