



Eat Well to be Well

By Donna Hood Crecca

Health and nutrition is influencing foodservice menus; manufacturers who anticipate operator equipment needs will enjoy a healthy bottom line.

Keeping up with food and menu trends today is like trying to keep up with technology. Well, almost. Technology certainly moves at a faster pace – indeed, much faster – than new developments in the food world, but the same axiom holds true: Those who fail to keep up will be left behind, and those able to stay one step ahead will win.

For foodservice equipment manufacturers, the challenge is even more daunting. Maintaining a sharp competitive edge requires the ability to anticipate foodservice operators' needs as they track the trends, a task that involves staying one or two steps ahead of them. No easy task.

To help NAFEM members get a jump on things, we've identified some emerging menu trends and the implications for operator equipment needs.

In our research, a common theme kept surfacing: Nutrition, diet and wellness are increasingly important in the American lifestyle. Consumers today are seeking new ways to eat healthier in order to live healthier, and in many cases, fight or prevent disease.

Last year, the headlines were all about low- and no-carb diets, and restaurant and foodservice menus quickly caught the trend. Concepts from Ruby Tuesday to Chili's provided carbohydrate-content information to diners, while T.G.I. Friday's partnered with Atkins Nutritionals to make low-carb options easily accessible to casual diners.

While many Americans continue to curtail their carbohydrate intake, low and no-carb diets are on the decline.

The Port Washington, N.Y.-based market research firm NPD Group reports that 4.4 percent of adults were adhering to such diets in February, compared to 9.1 percent at the same time last year. A Datamonitor study also found that lifestyle changes, such as gym memberships or small adjustments to diet – rather than radical ones – are on the rise. Food providers that focus on “health,” rather than “diet” and provide information about healthful choices will win consumer attention, according to Laurence Gould, author of the study published by the New York firm.

The release of the USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans in January sharpened the public's focus more on lifestyle as a means of promoting health. The guidelines also respond to recent scientific research that connects diet to reducing the risk of chronic disease, which resonates with today's consumers. By early spring, Americans' awareness of the guidelines remained fairly low – only six percent considered themselves “very familiar” and 36 percent were “somewhat familiar” with them, according to a study by the Washington, D.C.-based Food Marketing Institute – the release of the new food pyramid has since drawn additional attention, and hopefully, understanding.

“American consumers were focusing on healthier diets before the revised guidelines were released, but the introduction of the new pyramid has given manufacturers, restaurants and food retailers the opportunity to develop new products focused on healthier eating,” says June Alpert, R.D.,

a nutritionist and food consultant based in Roslyn, N.Y. “On restaurant menus, there is an increased emphasis on fresh fruits and vegetables, lower fat foods and whole grains. Cooking methods also have changed, with a much greater emphasis on lower fat cooking methods like grilling and steaming rather than sautéing and frying.”

So, Americans are tuning into the concept of a balanced diet, coupled with an active lifestyle, which restaurateurs are taking into account as they update existing menus and engineer new ones.



Trend #1: Bread is Back

Bread sales at retail rose 2.8 percent as of January, according to Information Resources Inc., Chicago, and bread also is returning to the tables of America's eateries. Of course, anyone tracking the incredible growth of Panera Bread Co. would think the low-carb craze never happened. The chain offers a broad range of breads baked from scratch on site at each location, which serves as the basis of sandwiches and a tasty side to soups and salads. The Richmond Heights, Mo.-based chain of 773 locations posted same store sales gains of 4.7 percent for the year ending May 22, and will add 155 locations this year.

“As a nutritionist, I'm very happy to see the gradual phasing out of the low- and no-carb diet and the phasing in of grains,” says Alpert. “People are finally coming to their senses and realizing the importance of whole grains in their diets.”

Other restaurant concepts are catching on, and not just at the high end. Blimpie's seven artisan breads – baked fresh on premises – have proven successful for the chain since their introduction in 2002. As part of its brand re-imaging initiative, Blimpie incorporated a panini grill into its new restaurant design this spring and introduced three grilled panini sandwiches on ciabatta bread, which required the addition of sandwich grills at its 1,600 locations nationwide.

Quality and freshness truly matter when it comes to offering bread today. “Recall that when low-fat was the trend, you saw an increase in premium ice creams and

upscale steakhouses,” observes Larry Sarokin, partner in the foodservice consulting firm of

Sarokin & Sarokin,

Beverly Hills,

Calif. “Now, people who are into

the low-carb lifestyle feel

that when they want to

indulge, in this case in

bread, they want the

best.”

The Equipment Angle

From raw dough to par-baked to fully baked, operators have many product options in the bread category, and issues like available space, equipment, labor and costs play heavily in their choices.

“An operator can start with a simple program of baking off par-based breads with minimal equipment requirements,” says Alpert. “Full-service chains with a central commissary supplying several restaurants might consider a raw dough program, which provides greater flexibility but is equipment-intensive, requiring proofers, ovens and skilled personnel.”

Equipment vendors able to assist operators in developing the right system for bread production will gain a key competitive edge, she notes. Good bread baking is an art that good bakers know, but that many general foodservice operators don't. Manufacturers who can serve as teachers in the art of good bread production will have an edge.



The Equipment Angle

“Salads require space – cold storage, prep and assembly space,” says Sarokin, adding that efficient produce washer/dryers, choppers, slicers, shredders and other prep units are crucial to fresh salad prep. “The space and labor issue also are why prepped product coming in the back door is gaining popularity. Whichever method operators choose, clever storage solutions that require less space and keep product fresher longer will save on food costs and labor, both of which are hot buttons for operators.”

Mike Gainsley, director of purchasing and logistics for Arby’s agrees. The introduction of Market Fresh salads in 2004 had a huge impact on equipment purchases. “In addition to re-evaluating all of our cold storage, adding capacity

Space, cold storage and smallwares are needed as concepts to add the “green layer” to menus.



A churrasco grill provides the authentic touch required of ethnic dining, another trend.

Trend #2: Going Green

Fresh equals healthy in the diner’s mind, according to a recent study from Chicago-based Technomic Inc., which found that nearly half of consumers equate a fresh menu item as being good for them. The top identifiers of fresh are items that are cooked/made to order and made on premises.

Quick-service restaurants (QSRs) are embracing that fresh position with an increasing number of salad offerings, thereby giving diners something perceived as a healthy alternative to burgers and other traditional fast-food fare. Each of the big three burger chains (McDonald’s, Burger King and Wendy’s) offer salads; McDonald’s reports selling 300 million salads in the 2003-2004 period, and the fast food giant recently upped the ante with the introduction of its fruit and walnut salad, marketed as a snack.

Arby’s, Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., has experienced huge success with its Market Fresh Salad line, which debuted in 2004. Bruegger’s, the chain of 250 bakery cafes based in Burlington, Vt., launched a line of salads that includes a Build Your Own option: diners choose three vegetables, one meat, one cheese and one topping and then watch the salad being tossed in front of them. Introduced in April, the salads required some changes to the existing make line and the addition of new equipment.

in the back of the house, on the line with dedicated refrigerated prep tables and smaller “satellite” refrigeration units positioned throughout the units, we had to review our smallwares packages.” When it comes to produce, shelf life, portion control, efficient “assembly” systems, easy cleanup and food safety, choppers for proteins, and myriad other components come into play.

The other aspect of the salad craze is the grab-and-go component, Sarokin adds. “Customizable display cases for both bulk salad, such as salad bars, and reach-in cases for merchandising and marketing finished salads are important.” “Merchandising options are a big opportunity for manufacturers,” agrees Gainsley. “We continue to search for merchandising solutions that deliver the right, upscale design, retain quality and that are not custom, but will adapt to multiple footprints,” he says. “We don’t have the cost threshold to purchase the kind of units we see in the high-end grocery chains.” Those manufacturers who can help with the whole “green” production, from receiving to storage to prep to service, will have the edge as more QSRs add the green layer.

Small Indulgences

Even as we focus on health and nutrition, we still love to indulge. What we indulge in and how we do it is changing, however. Indulgence is selective and is ushering in some new approaches to desserts and items typically considered, well, less than healthful.



Trend #1: Mini Desserts

Diners can have their cake and eat it too without the guilt when it takes only two or three bites to eat the cake. Miniature desserts are popping up on menus at some innovative dining establishments. Panera Bread Co. is reportedly developing a line of smaller-portion, premium pastries. Houlihan's offers four Mini Dessert selections, including the Mini Chocolate Cappuccino Cake and Mini Crème Brulee. The Leawood, Kan.-based operator of 75 casual restaurants introduced the mini sweets in January 2003 to rave reviews.

Rathbun's, a 160-seat upscale restaurant in Atlanta, has menued mini desserts since its opening in May 2004. "These

desserts are three or four bites full of flavor, just enough to have it but not feel full or guilty," says Kirk Parks, pastry chef and partner. "They're affordable – every tiny dessert is priced at \$3.15 – and made fresh on site every day."

Rathbun's tiny indulgences include Banana Peanut Butter Cream Pie, Georgia Pecan Tart with Chocolate Brownie Crust and Vanilla Bean Ice Cream, and a Mini Banana Split with Roasted Iranian Pistachios, as well as Ice Cream Floats served in three-ounce glasses with whipped cream and a cookie. A Kirk's Pick Four involves four of the pastry chef's daily favorites plated to share and priced at \$10; guests can select their own four faves for \$11. On average, 70 percent of guests order dessert at Rathbun's, compared to 25 percent at comparable restaurants.



Mini desserts (above) from Rathbun's include Banana Peanut Butter Creme Pie and Heath Crunch Candy Bar, not more than three or four bites each.

The Equipment Angle

Mini desserts require more labor and space to prepare, according to Parks, primarily because their current popularity demands more portions be prepared and stored. Rathbun's pastry prep area involves two six-foot tables, one four-foot table, two convection ovens, a 24-quart stand mixer, two additional mixers and an ice cream machine, as well as ample cooler space.

Manufacturers able to assist in creating efficient and effective work spaces and storage systems will help operators drive sales and profitability.

Trend #2: Gelato

It's telling that two concepts covered in these September issues of *NAFEM in print* and in *NAFEM for operators*, Sheetz and Moxie Java, both boast gelato. Italian for ice cream, gelato doesn't have as much air as American ice cream and therefore has a denser mouth feel. It's served about 10 to 15 degrees warmer than traditional ice cream, which means it melts on the tongue – and conveys its flavor – faster. That's why gelato tastes so good despite the fact that it contains less butter fat than most ice cream. Let's see, less butter fat, intense flavor, soft, creamy dense texture – you can bet gelato will gain ground with today's customers looking for healthier, more flavorful offerings.

The Equipment Angle

Most gelato-making equipment and display cases are made in Italy. U.S. makers might have a big opportunity stateside.



Gelato, seen in the case on the left, is a big seller in Moxie Java coffee houses.

Trend #3: Vertical Concepts

In a world of endless choices, the idea of a restaurant offering one item may seem absurd, but consider the singular success of Starbucks. Recognizing the impact of doing one thing and doing it well, a handful of innovative operators are tapping into diners' deepest desires for unique, and sometimes quirky, foods.

New York City now has a fair share of restaurant concepts with a singular focus. Examples include City Crepe. Occupying a mere 180-square-foot location on Manhattan's upper west side, the restaurant satisfies the French inclinations of New Yorkers with crepes made to order. Guests can select from a wide range of sweet and savory fillings.

F&B focuses on the dog. The quick-service restaurant appeals to busy New Yorkers with a penchant for hot dogs through its menu of combo meals. Proprietary hot dogs and sausages are made to F&B's exacting specs by German and Danish butchers from original family recipes and enhanced with a variety of toppings.

Mandler's, the Original Sausage Co., opened in New York's Union Square two years ago, offers 11 signature sausages, all nine inches in length, served on freshly baked breads. Patrons select toppings and hit the mustard bar to

finish off their creation with style. In Chicago, classic Chicago dog concepts have been around for decades.

"The exciting thing about these 'vertical' concepts is that they achieve clarity immediately with the audience because they focus on a core product," says foodservice consultant Arlene Spiegel of Arlene Spiegel & Associates, based in New York. "There is no confusion about what's offered. When hunger or craving strikes, the diner makes a very deliberate decision to go in for a hot dog or a crepe or whatever. They know what they want and they know where to get it."

The Equipment Angle

Single-item concepts are operationally easy because they are so focused on a single item and single preparation method. Most, however, operate in fairly small footprints in areas with heavy traffic, so equipment must be compact and able to produce high volume of product quickly, according to Spiegel. What's more, it's got to look good.

"Equipment manufacturers looking to serve these operators should be thinking about units that are functional in intense environments but also hold their own in a decorative way," she explains. "The preparation is on display because that's what the concept is all about – the preparation is really key to the single item concept."

Trend #3: Global Dining

Emerging cuisines will find their way to American restaurant menus, shaping how operators prepare and present food in several ways.

"Two things are quickly coming to a head. One is the increased demand from the dining public for authenticity. The second is the demand for flavor impact, excitement on the palate," says Mark Erickson, vice president of continuing education at the Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, N.Y., and also managing director of the California CIA campus at Greystone. "As a result, there is a genuine interest in ethnic and world cuisines."

Erickson predicts that three major cuisine regions will influence American menus in the near future: Asia – specifically Southeast Asia – the Mediterranean Rim and Latin countries.

The showmanship of Asian cuisines will gain steam, he says, taking the idea of display cooking to the next level with chefs preparing items such as dumplings in front of guests. The tradition of grilling meats and vegetables on Mongolian grills is already catching on at restaurants such as bd's Mongolian Grill, and will spread as guests warm even more to the theatrical and fresh-prep aspects of the technique.

A new wave of authentic Mediterranean preparation processes also are on the horizon. "We are accustomed to the brick oven, but it will go to the next level as guests seek more flavor. For example, the tandoor, an Indian oven that

is an upright terra cotta drum with a fire built in the bottom, delivers incredible flavor. Marinated meats are skewered and set inside, where a crust develops on their exterior, sealing in juices and flavor," explains Erickson.

Authenticity will take on new meaning as diners further explore Latin and Hispanic cuisines – in fact, the Hispanic market is booming. We see an influx of churrascarias, the Brazilian skewered, roasted meat concepts such as Fogo de Chao and Sal & Carvao, but how many grill makers offer these specialty grills? Erickson predicts chefs will look to use more authentic ingredients and prep methods, such as corn cooked in house and tortilla makers for making tortillas and Mexican moles without blenders. "You just don't get the same texture and flavor when you take the shortcuts," he says. "Today's diner knows that and is demanding authenticity."

The Equipment Angle

Achieving authenticity in ethnic cuisines requires true partnership between equipment manufacturers and restaurateurs, says Erickson. "The opportunity for the manufacturer is to tie how their equipment can produce at a volume level the same gold standard product as the original cuisine. The question to ask is, 'What is the mechanized solution that pays homage to the original cuisine?'"

Customized equipment may be the answer for some restaurant concepts. Manufacturers willing to invest in an operator's effort to differentiate themselves through authentic ethnic preparation methods – can reap rewards, notes Erickson. 