

Customize Lunch and Dinner Trends for Your Customers

By Marilyn Odesser-Torpey, Associate Editor

Trend reports from research firms can tell you a lot about what foods and flavors are craved by America's taste buds. But c-stores don't have to reinvent the wheel each time to keep their lunch and dinner menus fresh and relevant.

When incorporating the latest craze into your foodservice menus, it's important to remember who you are and who your customers are, said New York-based restaurant, retail and hospitality consultant Arlene Spiegel. Because credibility is key to building a loyal clientele.

"You have to be able to deliver authentic flavors in a quality product," Spiegel said. "And any menu addition has to meet the convenience criteria that bring these customers to you in the first place."

She pointed to the example of Asian flavors that have been trending for quite a while and are predicted to continue to gain in popularity. One easy menu addition, for example, might be a dumpling.

"It's portable and can be eaten in the car," Spiegel said. "Adding crispy wontons and an Asian sesame dressing to a salad offer other ways to bring in the ethnic influence."

Many manufacturers, suppliers and distributors — including regional ones — are offering quality ethnic products that can be prepared and/or packaged in c-stores, she said. Convenience stores also have ample opportunity to create different flavors from ingredients already in their inventory.

"You can take a basic offering such as a turkey or chicken sandwich and make it Mediterranean by adding cucumber and a few herbs to yogurt to make a tzatziki sauce to spread on instead of mustard or mayonnaise," Spiegel said.

Spiegel also suggested putting meal combos together. For example, a Mexican-inspired meal could include tortilla soup, a half sandwich of turkey with chipotle



mayonnaise and a salad with salsa dressing.

"The customer gets lots of authentic flavor at low risk to the retailer," she said.

Think in Thirds

To make the most of valuable merchandising space, foodservice consultant Arlene Spiegel counsels retailers to break their foodservice offering into thirds. The first third consists of traditional items such as the chicken club sandwich.

The second third uses the same fully prepared chicken breast, but gives it a brush of teriyaki sauce and puts it over vegetables to become a Japanese dish. This gives the retailer the opportunity to create exotic or signature items that cannot be found at other c-stores or restaurants.

Finally, the last third should feature combinations of items in your store's inventory. Her example was mixing apples, raisins and walnuts with the chicken to make a Waldorf salad.

"Using the same basic item, you're creating three different culinary points of view," she said. In the end, retailers should strive to:

- Deliver authentic flavors.
- Work with manufacturers, suppliers and distributors.
- Use ingredients in your inventory.
- Offer new twists on comfort foods. ■