



## Vegetables step into the spotlight

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When it comes to crafting a menu, vegetables have long resided in the shadow of meats, poultry and seafood. But no longer. Menumakers are now responding to consumer demands and investing more time and creativity on the development and preparation of flavorful vegetable-centric recipes.

Vegetables are more top of mind among today's chefs, according to the National Restaurant Association's What's Hot 2016 Culinary Forecast. The study, which polled nearly 1,600 members of the American Culinary Federation, found that 59% regarded meatless/vegetarian main dish items as a "Hot Trend".

The days of restaurants relying on a plate of unadorned steamed vegetables is definitely on the wane. "As vegetables get more of the spotlight, restaurants need to get creative with their offerings," says Arlene Spiegel

of Arlene Spiegel & Associates, a New York restaurant consulting company. "It's not enough to offer the ubiquitous vegetable platter by combining sides. Restaurant concepts are not only roasting, sautéing, caramelizing and charbroiling vegetables, they are making vegetables the main event. This makes sense from a food cost standpoint as vegetables cost much less than expensive proteins."

In addition to employing a wider variety of cooking methods, chefs are amping up the flavor quotient of vegetables by combining them with such accompaniments as grains, beans, nuts, purees and ethnic herbs and spices as well as a diversity of condiments.

Clearly, consumers' health concerns are helping to drive interest in the vegetable category. "Vegetables, especially those with touted health benefits, are now center of the plate instead of an afterthought," Spiegel says. ●