



Exceeding beverage expectations

Fast casual operators broaden their beverage menus to offer consumers a wider variety of selections. Sponsored by Crystal Light.

Peach tea proved to be the perfect match for the peach prosciutto pizza, a limited time offer Your Pie rolled out this summer, says Drew French, founder of the fast casual pizza concept.

Fast casual restaurants, which already have a reputation for offering fresh, higher quality fare, are stepping up their beverage offerings, from iced teas and smoothies to flavored waters and beer, in an effort to meet consumers' evolving expectations for quality drinks.

Fast casual restaurants increased in unit count by 5 percent in 2015 and customer visits by 6 percent in 2016 over the previous year, according to The NPD Group, the Port Washington, New York-based data research firm. But while the fast casual segment has been growing, it is also facing, along with the rest of the restaurant industry, a sea of change in consumer beverage consumption.

Americans are drinking fewer carbonated soft drinks at home and away, according to NPD's Eating Patterns in America report, while, dining out customers are instead more frequently choosing water and healthier beverages. This change in consumer preferences marks an opportunity for fast casual concepts, which are known for offering better quality foods and beverages, say operators and industry observers.

Offering specialty drinks is important in attracting customers and improving check averages, says New York restaurant consultant Arlene Spiegel.

"You always want to raise the bar on a popular item and enhance your own brand by taking the time and effort to promote something special," she says. "No one ever loses money selling liquid, whether it's homemade sodas, coffee, teas or shakes."