

by A. Elizabeth Sloan

Seafood: The Next Wave

New generations of seafood eaters, an unprecedented desire to make favorite restaurant foods at home, and a virtually untapped opportunity for fish-based snacks and breakfast items are sending a tsunami of opportunities in the direction of the fish and seafood industries. And savvy frozen food, sauce/seasonings, and packaged mix marketers had better catch the wave.

Moreover, although they may have traded down, one-third of fish/seafood consumers increased consumption last year, according to Mintel's *Fish and Seafood—U.S.*, a December 2008 report. Tuna and salmon remain America's favorite fin fish; shrimp tops the shellfish list.

With those ages 55+—historically the most likely to order fish/seafood at restaurants—being the highest restaurant spenders and increasing their visits despite a down economy, according to the National Restaurant Assn.'s *2009 Forecast*, there's already bright news for the seafood business. In 2008, seafood ranked No. 6 on the Top 10 list of foods most ordered at restaurants among those ages 65+ and No. 10 for baby boomers, according to NPD/CREST.

Shrimp is the favorite seafood choice for the majority of those ages 55+, according to a University of Florida research study. Top fin fish choices were salmon, tilapia, grouper, catfish, snapper, and tuna.

Importantly, for the first

time, the average frequency (21.1 times/year) of restaurant shellfish consumption by young adults ages 18–24 surpassed seafood order frequency (20.2 times/year) for those ages 65+, signaling a new, untapped generation of fish and shellfish consumers.

Those ages 18–24 are twice as likely as those ages 35–53 and those ages 55+ to eat sushi two or more times a month, according to Technomic. Nearly two-thirds of chain

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supermarkets have a sushi station, according to Food Marketing Institute 2008 data.

America's new generation of "foodie" kids will also help drive demand for more fish and seafood, both at home and on menus. NPD reports that two-thirds (66%) of school feeding programs served Asian stir-frys, sushi, and egg rolls in 2007; 98% served tacos, including fish tacos.

Once the purview of restaurants, fish and shellfish are now more likely to be eaten at home, with a mean consumption of 38 and 22.5 times per year, respectively, at home vs 20.1 and 17.7 per year, respectively, at restaurants, reports Mintel.

Although those over age 45 are the most likely to eat fish at home, according to Mintel, those ages 18–24 show above

average consumption rates and represent an enormous untapped opportunity. With 42% of consumers surveyed by Roper GfK in 2008 admitting they don't know how to cook well, fish/seafood products that carry cooking instructions, are pre-marinated, or include sauce/seasoning packets will likely get the nod. Also, with consumers trading down on the type of fish they're purchasing due to price, it's time to start thinking of fish, seafood, and surimi as

of hottest overall restaurant culinary trends for 2009; sustainable seafood was No. 10. Local and regional fish such as Lake Superior trout, walleyed pike, and Louisiana crawdads will continue to gain attention.

And how about more fish/seafood products targeted to children? Fish ranks eighth on the list of foods served for dinner in households with children in 2008, according to a Gallup study. Eating more fish/seafood is among the top

key ingredients in stir-frys, casseroles, and skillet meals.

Bar snacks are helping to drive liquor sales, home entertaining was up 27% in 2008, according to Booze & Co., and diners are making meals and social events out of appetizers—all of which suggests that mini fish/seafood items also have strong market potential. Shrimp remained the No. 1 restaurant appetizer choice in 2008, according to NPD data.

Breakfast is another potential growth area for fish and seafood. American Culinary Federation (ACF) chefs named seafood items such as oysters, crab cakes, and fish sausages the No. 3 hot breakfast trend for 2009. ACF chefs ranked nontraditional fish, e.g., branzino, Arctic char, and barramundi as No. 13 on the list

eating strategies among healthy families, according to FMI's 2008 *Shopping for Health* report. Eight in 10 families say they're trying to eat fish/seafood more regularly. It's time to swap some chicken nuggets with flavored fish nuggets and offer fish tacos or more interesting fish sandwiches, both grilled and fried.

Without a doubt, the biggest untapped opportunities for fish and seafood—whether at home or away from home—lie in the snack and breakfast dayparts. Add diversity to menus with crab cake sliders, flavored fish nuggets, mini fish wraps, or to-go cups of popcorn shrimp and dip. **FT**



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