

Rediscovering American Foods and Flavors

After years of taking a back seat to Italian, Chinese, and Mexican/Tex-Mex cuisines—especially among younger adults—traditional American and American regional foods, preparations, and flavors are finally poised for growth.

Americans age 50+, the population segment most likely to say they “really enjoy” American cuisine, according to 2008 GfK Roper consumer research, are

Gen Yers are 5% more likely than the general population to “really enjoy” California cuisine, for example; those age 55+ are 7% more likely to savor New England fare.

Territory is becoming as important to food as it is to wine, and American regions are no exception. From Long Island duckling to Copper River salmon, food quality is being conveyed by the location where the product

and places behind regional products connect emotionally with many of today’s shoppers, according to the Hartman Group’s 2008 *Pulse Report: Buying Local from a Consumer Perspective*. Charismatic founders (think Annie’s Homegrown), geographic origins (Cascadian Farms is a good example), and unique, small-scale production stories such as hand-cut doughnuts are grabbing the national spotlight.

specialty liquors will remain a popular trend. American Culinary Federation (ACF) chefs polled in the National Restaurant Assn.’s 2008 *What’s Hot?* survey cited micro-distilled/artisan liquor as a hot cocktail trend for 2009, along with organic wine and craft beers.

Entrées are also ripe for regionalization. Eight in 10 ACF chefs (78%) cited new fabricated cuts of meat, e.g., Denver steak, as hot for 2009; 71% mentioned nontraditional fish, e.g., Lake Superior trout, perch, or Walleye; and 60% pointed to specialty gourmet sandwiches, e.g., Philly Cheese Steaks, Milwaukee Bratwurst, or Louisiana Po-Boys. And with home entertaining in vogue, watch for party fare to go regional and events with a particular geographic association such as an Iowa pig roast or a Wisconsin fish boil to move center stage.

There is no doubt that Americans are beginning to view the country as a diverse culinary landscape, and those marketers that capitalize on America’s food heritage will win. But one question remains to be answered. As older Americans set a new pace with traditional foods less familiar to younger Americans, will traditional flavors and foods once again become trendy as younger generations mature? **FT**

Narratives about the people and places behind regional products

connect emotionally with many of today’s shoppers.

now the highest per capita spenders at restaurants, according to the National Restaurant Assn.’s 2009 *Forecast*. America’s 31 million “foodies” have been inspired to look for more adventuresome foods closer to home by factors ranging from the economic downturn to the growing popularity of down-home celebrity chefs, e.g., Paula Deen.

Southern cuisine has high appeal to 57% of those classified as “influential Americans” by GfK Roper. Cajun/Creole has high appeal to 35% of this group, and California cuisine appeals to 24%, so expect these American regional cuisines to enjoy strong future growth. Only 60% of “influential Americans” say they enjoy Tex-Mex, suggesting that interest in this cuisine will wane unless it is reinvented.

The appeal of regional American cuisine also varies according to the consumer’s age.

was produced. Locally grown, raised, and/or produced foods are “very/somewhat important” to 57% of food shoppers; farm-raised to 34%, reports the International Dairy Deli Bakery Assn.’s 2008 *Health & Wellness Consumer*. A 2008 Iowa State University study found that one-third of consumers defined local as coming from within their state; two-thirds said it meant the item was produced within 100 miles or less of where it was purchased.

State-certified programs/labels, e.g., Alaskan Seafood, Made in Wisconsin Cheese, or California’s Real Milk Seal are also gaining momentum. For example, the first year that the “Select Michigan” program was conducted in Western Michigan, sales of fresh fruits/vegetables jumped 110%, and they have grown 10–20% annually in subsequent years.

Narratives about the people

Artisanal claims are moving onto restaurant menus, up 40% since 2006, per Mintel Menu Insights. Seasonal, heirloom beans, fruits, and vegetables, and unique varieties such as Saskatoon berries or broccolini are other important directions within the produce industry.

With members of the older generation the No. 1 consumers of veal, duck, lamb, ham, turkey, roast beef, potatoes, beans, soup, desserts and boldly flavored cheeses, look for these traditional American items to reappear on restaurant menus, along with classic American flavors such as buttermilk, honey mustard, and sour cream and chives.

Because Empty Nesters typically increase their alcohol consumption after the kids have gone, and those ages 45–64 are most interested in local and regional foods, according to Mintel, it is likely that artisan and



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