

by A. Elizabeth Sloan

A New Vegetable Medley

More and more these days, veggies are finding a place on the menu—in the home and at restaurants—and for good reason. According to Mintel's 2009 *Healthy Eating & Weight—U.S.* report, consumers now consider consuming a lot of vegetables a top component of healthy eating.

Gallup's 2009 *Study of Dinner* showed that six in 10 meal preparers (58%) served vegetables at weekday dinners last year; 45% regularly served a vegetable side, 22% a green salad, and 6% a main course salad. One in 10

sales of \$2.4 billion remained enormous categories for the year ended June 13, 2010, according to SymphonyIRI, it's prepared vegetables—featuring more gourmet combinations and sauces—that are enjoying explosive growth, with sales up 10% to \$263 million.

American Culinary Federation (ACF) chefs surveyed by the National Restaurant Assn. in October 2009 named locally grown produce, organic produce, micro-vegetables, micro-greens, heirloom tomatoes, and specialty potatoes among the hot vegetables for 2010. With the strong

the à la carte side dish list. Butter and cheese sauces, marinara, barbecue, garlic, and soy sauces are topping off vegetables served in fine-dining restaurants. Mexican, Cajun, Italian, and Asian are among the trendy vegetable seasoning blends; dill, ginger, cinnamon, chives, rosemary, and basil are among the spices frequently used to season veggies, according to MenuMine.

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among the most important kids' menu meal items.

Also, watch for some new buzzwords when it comes to vegetables. With the concern over safety and country of origin, expect hothouse products and hydroponics to get a boost. And with nearly seven in 10 consumers saying they'd go out of their way to buy local produce, according to a 2010 Hartman Group survey on organic products, it's not surprising that supermarkets are starting to sell their produce outdoors in set-ups designed to resemble farmers markets.

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made a stir-fry for the previous night's dinner, 12% a Chinese entrée, 7% a vegetarian main course, and 4% a veggie burger. And with all ages and incomes cooking more from scratch than a year ago, according to the Louis Harris July 2010 cooking survey, frozen or fresh chopped, pre-seasoned vegetable ingredients will have strong appeal.

Fresh potatoes, tomatoes, onions, carrots, celery, bell peppers, salad mix, corn, lettuce, cucumbers, and broccoli are regularly purchased by more than seven in 10 consumers, according to *The Packer's 2010 Fresh Trends* report.

But it's not just about fresh vegetables. While frozen plain veggies with sales of \$1.8 billion and canned vegetables with

movement to American regional cuisine, ACF chefs expect sweet potatoes, root vegetables, fresh beans/peas, and dark/bitter greens to move onto mainstream menus. Jerusalem artichokes/sunchokes, edamame, hot peppers, Asian mushrooms, chanterelle mushrooms, and morel mushrooms are other vegetables that ACF chefs predict will be hot.

In cutting-edge fine-dining restaurants, asparagus, eggplant, peas, okra, corn on the cob, artichoke hearts, and grilled vegetables are among the top vegetable sides on menus, according to the Foodservice Research Institute's MenuMine database. Eggplant, plantain, Brussels sprouts, and Swiss chard are among the gainers on

vegetable-based products. Other product concepts with potential include vegetables mixed with beans, pulses, or pasta and vegetable dishes spiced up with a twist of Szechuan or jalapeno pepper or even with the addition of a signature item such as Chinese cabbage. Or how about sesame- or panko-breaded appetizer vegetable tidbits? Vegetable ceviches, pizzas, terrines, and soufflés are other hot side dish menu trends. Salad sandwiches are among the big gainers on restaurant menus, according to Technomic's 2010 *Sandwich Report*. ACF chefs ranked appetizer salads as the No. 4 hot appetizer for 2010; vegetable side dishes targeted to children and children's entrée salads were No. 2 and No. 4, respectively,

In addition, with 57% of consumers aware of the term phytochemicals, according to Mintel's 2009 *Functional Foods—U.S.* report, look for more "natural goodness" and "naturally rich in" descriptors on vegetables and vegetable-based products such as *Green Giant's Health Blends*. Blending vegetables to achieve very high fiber or antioxidant levels is a smart product positioning strategy.

Lastly, don't sell homegrown short; 43 million households grew their own vegetables in 2009, up 19% over 2008, reports the National Gardening Assn. **FT**



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