

Some regional specialties, like the Alaska seafood in these rösti-topped pot pies, carry menu clout across the nation.



# Home-Grown FLAVOR

Operators rely on regional roots to add local flavors,  
down-home foods and artisanal beverages to the menu mix

BY DR. A. ELIZABETH SLOAN

A global quest for the next great menu idea has occupied American chefs and diners for the past two decades. Now, many have narrowed the search closer to home, pushed along by an interest in local foods, smaller carbon footprints, regional culinary styles and a desire to learn more about America's complex and diverse culinary heritage.

Diners 50 and older are most likely to say they "really enjoy" American cuisine, according to global research firm GfK Roper's 2008 consumer research. This demographic is also among the top restaurant spenders and continued to increase their restaurant visits in 2009, reports NPD/CREST.

Overall, 58 percent of Americans say they "really enjoy" American foods, and a whopping 72 percent of those aged 55 and older show a preference for domestic fare, according to GfK Roper.

Menuing American regional cuisines also may help attract younger diners, whose restaurant dollars have been declining. The National Association of the Specialty Food Trade's (NASFT) 2009 Today's Specialty Consumer Report found that those aged 18 to 34 were significantly more likely to purchase regional American foods than the general population.

Overall, the future looks bright for regional foods. NASFT reports that 62 percent of all consumers serve true "barbecue" cuisine. One-quarter of U.S. households with children regularly eat Tex-Mex, another 76 percent enjoy Mexican, 15 percent eat Cajun, 10 percent, "soul food" (Southern-rooted African-American items like ham hocks and collard greens) and 8 percent, Creole, according to a 2008 Gallup Study of Dinner.

## EMERGING AMERICAN CUISINES

Among those identified as trend-setting influential Americans by GfK Roper, the top five regional cuisines with high appeal are Texas, Cajun/Creole, California and New England, in descending order. These regional American cuisines should continue to grow in popularity. Technomic's 2009 Flavor Consumer Trend Report found that 71 percent of consumers had a high interest in trying Hawaiian cuisine.

A 2008 study by The Hartman Group, a consumer research firm based in Bellevue, Wash., shows that American regional food preferences vary according to age. Compared to the general population, 5 percent more of those in the Gen-Y age group say they "really enjoy" California cuisine. In the 55-and-older demographic,

FIGURE 1

# PLACE & TASTE

## Top American Region Menu Claims

- 1 Texas
- 2 New York-style
- 3 Southwestern
- 4 Southern
- 5 Southern-style
- 6 St. Louis-style
- 7 Memphis
- 8 Cajun-style
- 9 New England
- 10 California
- 11 Boston-style
- 12 Santa Fe
- 13 Chicago style
- 14 Philly-style
- 15 New Orleans

SOURCE: MINTEL, Q3 2009

7 percent more say they prefer New England cuisine. The same report shows that four out of 10 Gen-Y's are interested in preparing restaurant-style New Orleans cuisine at home, compared to 26 percent of those 65 and older.

Texas topped the list of geographical claims on American menus in the third quarter of 2009, according to Mintel's Menu Insights, followed by New York-style, Southwestern, Southern, St. Louis, Memphis, Cajun-style, New England and California (see Figure 1).

Domino's American regional pizzas come in Brooklyn, Philly Cheese Steak, Cali Chicken Bacon Ranch, Memphis BBQ Chicken and Honolulu Hawaiian flavors. Bojangles' Famous Chicken 'n Biscuits and Grilled Pork Chop Biscuit give a taste of Southern cooking, as does Perkins Restaurant & Bakery's Southern Fried Chicken Scrambler.

Meanwhile, Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen introduced the Crawfish Tackle Box of breaded crawfish bites, Ruby Tuesday cites a New Orleans Seafood platter and Cracker Barrel Old Country Store menus Lemon-Pepper Grilled Rainbow Trout, bringing the flavors of New Orleans mainstream.

## BUYING CLOSE BY

From Chesapeake oysters to Michigan-grown blueberries, food quality is closely tied to origins, growing and raising conditions and the distance the food item travels from farm to fork.

Local sourcing of ingredients topped the list of the hottest restaurant menu trends for 2010 among American Culinary Federation (ACF) chefs surveyed by the National Restaurant Association in October 2009 (see Figure 2). The Culinary Institute of America's 2009 Sustainability Survey noted that 72 percent of foodservice companies were addressing this issue of sourcing sustainable seafood, and 68 percent, sourcing more local products.

Although 72 percent of consumers find locally sourced foods "extremely/somewhat appealing," according to Technomic's August 2008 American Express MarketBrief, about half (48 percent) order local foods from the menu "some of the time." The Hartman Group's 2008 Buying Local from a Consumer Perspective Report found that 50 percent of consumers define local as "made or produced within 100 miles," while 37 percent define local as "in my state."

Crab-topped fried green tomatoes with Creole mustard are a small-plate idea for bringing a big taste of the South to menus.



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FIGURE 2

# HOT TRENDS FOR 2010

## ACF Chefs' Top 20 Predictions

- 1 Locally grown produce
- 2 Locally sourced meats & seafood
- 3 Sustainability
- 4 Bite-size/mini desserts
- 5 Locally produced wine & beer
- 6 Nutritionally balanced children's dishes
- 7 Half-sized portions/ smaller portion for a smaller price
- 8 Farm/estate-branded ingredients
- 9 Gluten-free/food-allergy conscious
- 10 Sustainable seafood
- 11 Superfruits
- 12 Organic produce
- 13 Culinary cocktails (e.g., savory, fresh ingredients)
- 14 Micro-distilled/ artisan liquor
- 15 Nutrition/health
- 16 Simplicity/back to basics
- 17 Regional ethnic cuisine
- 18 Non-traditional fish (e.g., branzino, Arctic char, barramundi)
- 19 Newly fabricated cuts of meat (e.g., steak, pork flat iron, Petite Tender)
- 20 Fruit/vegetable children's side items

SOURCE: NRA, OCT. 2009



PEAR BUREAU NORTHWEST

Mentioning regional sources, as in "Northwest pears," is an easy way to highlight regional foods and add value to menu copy.

Moreover, The Hartman Group found that the most-motivating sustainability cues differ by menu item. For example, while "wild" is the most-important descriptor for seafood, "local," "organic" and "artisanal" are most important for bread.

Local sourcing provides a newly accessible connection on the menu to freshness and taste — more so than environmental stewardship, according to the Food Marketing Institute's 2009 Shopper Trends Survey (see Figure 3). However, relatively few operators are taking advantage of the concept's marketing power. Mintel Menu Insights reports that "local" ranked 39th among all menu marketing claims for the third quarter of 2009, down 3 percent from 2006.

Burgerville, Eat'n Park and Chipotle are among the leaders in sourcing local items for multi-unit menus. Burgerville features a Cherry Chipotle Pulled-Pork Sandwich made with Oregon-grown cherries. Eat'n Park's FarmSource purchasing program is a partnership with regional farms and dairies that enables the company to offer locally grown and produced foods.

In a further extension of the local movement, many upscale independents are raising their own herbs, produce, meat and poultry, and limiting sourcing to small producers. Chef Dan Barber's Blue Hill at Stone Barns in Pocantico Hills, N.Y., promotes its sources (many raised on premise) on the menu and lists the fresh foods currently in house that day.

Similarly, Joseph Decuis restaurant in Roanoke, Ind., raises its own American Wagyu beef and grows its own organic produce. L'Etoile Restaurant in Madison, Wisc., touts local sources like Uplands Cheese Co. and Creekside's greens on its menu.

FIGURE 3

# HOW TO BUY

## Freshness and flavor guide shoppers' purchasing decisions (percent of respondents)

Freshness	82%
Support of local economy	75%
Taste	58%
Like knowing the source of the product	51%
Price	38%
Nutritional value	36%
Environmental impact of transporting foods across great distances	35%
Appearance	28%

SOURCE: FOOD MARKETING INSTITUTE'S 2009 GROCERY SHOPPER TRENDS REPORT

FIGURE 4

## SIDE DISH STANDOUTS

ACF Chefs' Top Picks for 2010

- 1 Quinoa
- 2 Braised vegetables
- 3 Brown/wild rice
- 4 Steamed/grilled/roasted vegetables
- 5 Buckwheat items
- 6 Barley
- 7 Mashed/pureed vegetables (e.g. potatoes, parsnips, cauliflower)
- 8 Lentils
- 9 Couscous
- 10 Polenta

SOURCE: NRA, OCT. 2009

State descriptors like Maine lobster or Georgia peaches and regional associations such as Northwest berries are other ways to show pride of place. Ram Restaurant & Brewery offers beer-battered Alaska Cod, Texas-based Black-eyed Pea added a Colorado Turkey BLT and Eat'n Park features a cod entrée in Nantucket, Floridian and Chesapeake preparation styles.

### LOCAL NEWS

Narratives about the people, including chefs, farmers and places, and the production values behind a local/regional menu item are important to 60 percent of consumers, reports Hartman. Charismatic founders/farmers, family farms and recipes and unique, small-scale production stories are fast grabbing the national spotlight. NASFT reports family food traditions are important to 77 percent of consumers.

Micro-distilled artisan liquor, artisan and house-made ice cream and artisan cheese are cited as hot trends by ACF chefs for 2010. Mintel Menu Insights shows that the word "artisanal" has gained menu momentum, with claims up 44 percent since 2006. Other

menu marketing claims that help convey artisan and local roots are home-made, which Mintel shows ranking third among menu marketing claims; seasonal, rated seventh; garden fresh, 18th; and freshly made, 22nd.

### DOMESTICATING THE MENU

Many of the 2010 entrée trends cited by ACF chefs in the NRA survey are perfectly aligned with regional flavors and ingredients. High on the list are locally sourced meats and seafood. Chefs can make the most of another high-ranking ingredient — non-traditional fish — with regional offerings like Alaska salmon or local lake trout and perch, or newer varieties like swai or barramundi. Inexpensive, under-used cuts of meat are other opportunities for regionalization: Think barbecued brisket, Denver steaks and pulled pork shoulder.

Specialty gourmet sandwiches stack up some great potential for menuing notable regional varieties like Philly cheese steaks, Milwaukee brat sliders or Louisiana po' boys and muffulettas.

Game and wild sources of protein ranked high on chefs' 2010 predictions, all of which lend themselves to rustic, even historical, American meal preparations. Four in 10 chefs cited buffalo/bison as a hot trend; 41 percent, game meats (venison, elk, rabbit, boar); 30 percent, game birds (quail, squab/pigeon, pheasant and duck); 31 percent, lamb; and 30 percent, bluefish.

Heirloom tomatoes; specialty potatoes like purple, fingerling and Baby Dutch Yellow; root vegetables like parsnips, rutabaga and beets; fresh beans/peas, including fava, sweet and snow; dark, bitter greens, such as collards, kale, beet tops and broccoli rabe; and radishes, sweet potatoes/yams and watermelon are



At Rye Restaurant in Brooklyn, N.Y., Americana favorites like the meatloaf sandwich topped with crispy buttermilk-battered onions reinforce a neighborhood tavern atmosphere.

among the trendy produce items, all perfect for American regional recipes in 2010.

Rustic and hearty ingredients like braised vegetables, brown and wild rice, buckwheat, barley, mashed/pureed potatoes, cauliflower, parsnips, lentils and grits are among the up-and-coming sides (see Figure 4).

Moreover, preparation methods well suited for American regional cuisines will remain in vogue in 2010. Grilled, spicy, sweet and smoky remain among the most appealing flavors, according to Technomic's December 2009 American Express MarketBrief, and all lend themselves nicely to regional dishes.

As Americans look for more fun in their foods, expect regional food celebrations, such as Midwestern pig roasts, New Orleans gumbo pots, San Francisco cioppino and New England fish boils, to grab diners' attention. American street foods, from the ubiquitous hot dog to cheese steaks, burritos and soft pretzels, are other rapidly growing and fun menu opportunities.

Finally, don't forget specialty regional beverages. ACF chefs name locally produced wine and beer, micro-distilled/artisan liquor, craft beer and microbrews among the hot

trends for 2010. And don't forget regional soft drinks like Pennsylvania Dutch birch beer, Sioux City sarsaparilla and the classic New York egg cream.

Operators can search the world over for exciting new cuisines, but they're finding that, when it comes to delivering satisfying flavor, east or west, north or south, home is best. ☺

DR. A. ELIZABETH SLOAN, *president of the consulting firm Sloan Trends & Solutions, can be e-mailed at [lizsloan@sloantrend.com](mailto:lizsloan@sloantrend.com).*

**TAKE-AWAY TIPS**

**THINK LOCAL:** Local is a valuable marketing claim on the menu; look for ways to incorporate close-to-home ingredients like honey, relishes, breads or spirits

**SAY CHEESE:** With artisan cheese ranking No. 1 on the NRA/ACF chefs' list of hot ingredients for 2010, consider a dessert or appetizer sampler of American artisan cheeses

**HOME IN:** Regional favorites like fried chicken, ribs, meatloaf, mac and cheese and pot roast are already popular comfort foods. Those recipes can be tweaked to give authentic regional flavor — think Cajun pot roast or New England mac and cheese with lobster meat

## INSPIRATION TIMES FIVE

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