



[CONSUMER TRENDS \(/CONSUMER-TRENDS\)](#) | [January 2017 \(/byissue/January-2017\)](#) | By [Bruce Horovitz \(/category/authors-19\)](#)

12 Fast Food Trends for 2017

These are some of the major trends operators can expect in the year ahead.



Bowls will continue to rise in popularity. THINKSTOCK / TOMMASO CAZZANIGA

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Several fast-food trends—from the evolution of new technologies to veggies creeping closer to the center of the plate—are expected to kick into overdrive in 2017, while others will make their debut. Here’s what restaurant experts say will be the 12 biggest limited-service trends this year.

Tech runs wild. In 2017, tech is where it’s at for the fast-food and fast-casual sectors, says Gary Stibel, founder of New England Consulting Group. “It’s not the food, stupid. It’s the tech that matters,” he says. This will affect everything from ordering to pick-up to delivery. And curbside pick-up will explode in 2017 as improvements are made, Stibel says.

Delivery on steroids. Food delivery raised eyebrows in 2016, but 2017 will be the year it explodes into hyperspace, says restaurant consultant Michael Whiteman, president of Baum + Whiteman. As dozens of food delivery specialists take shape in an app- and tech-driven world, the delivery revolution will “uberize” the limited-service industry, he says.

Bowled over by bowls. To call 2017 the year of the bowl would not necessarily be an overstatement, says Melissa Abbott, vice president of culinary insights at The Hartman Group. Some bowls will be loaded with salad. Others will be filled with grains and veggies. And some will be protein-infused. Chains like Sweetgreen and Cava Grill are already bowl havens. “Bowls are all about seeing things made right in front of you,” Abbott says.


Hybrid eats. If you can have hybrid cars, why can’t you have hybrid foods, too? “The world seems to be coming apart politically, but with so much culinary mixing and matching, the world is coming together on the dinner plate,” Whiteman says. Look for an explosion of hybrid menu items in 2017, he says, including these unusual mash-ups: bulgogi hamburgers, pastrami-stuffed bao, Mexican ramen, congee with Polish sausage, sushi burritos, and hummus “in every flavor but pork belly.”

Workers matter, too. Animal welfare issues began to take center stage in 2016, with major moves like McDonald’s announcing it planned to switch to cage-free eggs. But 2017 will be the year that animal-rights issues play second fiddle to growing consumer concerns over how restaurant employees are treated, Abbott says. “It’s a new millennial mindset that asks: How are the people treated who work for this chain?” she says.

Want kombucha with that? Most Americans have probably never heard of kombucha, the fermented tea that’s made by adding a culture of bacteria and yeast to a solution of tea and sugar. But they will in 2017, Abbott says. “This is a fun, magical, low-cal drink that has lots of beneficial properties,” she says. Such familiar names as Safeway and Celestial Seasonings already have dabbled in it. It won’t be long until familiar fast-food and fast-casual chains sell it, too.

Veggies go viral. Vegetables will extend their domination of the dinner plate in 2017, shoving animal protein to the edge or sometimes off the plate altogether, Whiteman says. “You can gauge the growing impact of veg-centric dining when you discover a steakhouse scrapping ‘sides’ and moving vegetables to the middle of the menu,” he says. In the fast-casual space, Pret A Manger recently made permanent its 40-item Veggie Pret pop-up experiment in London, with plans for expansion.

Pop-ups explode. Now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t restaurants have a strong rationale: buzz. That’s why In-N-Out Burger tested a pop-up restaurant in London in September that caused a frenzy—particularly after it ran out of food. Pop-ups in both quick service and fast casual will become more common state-side, says Stephen

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Dutton, consumer foodservice associate at Euromonitor. “It’s all about offering an exclusive, limited-time-only experience,” he says.

Breakfast becomes brunch. The very texture of breakfast is being transformed, Whiteman says. He says the morning meal used to be populated with “smooth and soothing” foods like scrambled eggs and oatmeal, but has since become full of “aggressive” meals like fried chicken, chorizo, and coarse whole-grain cereal. For example, Jack in the Box launched “Brunchfast” with an assortment of heavier items; Starbucks spiced up its breakfast sandwiches and is testing weekend quiche and French toast; and Einstein’s launched a green chile bagel with eggs, avocado, chorizo, pepper, and jalapeño salsa.

Drive thru goes fast casual. Now that Panera has proved that fast casuals can successfully implement drive-thru restaurants, look for a slew of other fast-casual chains to embrace the drive thru in 2017, Dutton says. He envisions some fast-casual salad-focused chains testing drive thru in 2017 along with others that focus on healthier fare.

Suppliers become competitors. It’s one thing when the competition opens a location right next door. But it’s something else entirely when your supplier does—and competes against you. Uncomfortable as it sounds, this may become relatively common in 2017, Whiteman says. Kellogg’s, after all, opened a cereal restaurant in the heart of Times Square last year. If it succeeds, there could be more.

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Fast casual embraces value. For years, the biggest wall between quick service and fast casual has been price. But that wall will finally start to collapse in 2017, as fast-casual chains will be forced to embrace true value offerings, Stibel says. No, you won’t see a value menu featuring dollar items at fast casual. But Stibel believes consumers might see \$5 meals. “[Quick service] is infringing on fast casual’s space, so fast casual will have to

compete on value,” he says.

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