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Feeding Generation Z's High Food IQ

Move over millennials, this up-and-coming 24/7 generation is coming of age. Growing up in a digital world, this group favors robust, sustainable, creative flavors and innovative mashups.

By Lauren R. Hartman, Product Development Editor

Sep 26, 2017

Millennials get a lot of press these days, but there's another generation that's already a force in food consumption. Generation Z (or the iGeneration) is raising the stakes on what millennials have popularized, from ethnic fusion and health-conscious eating habits to digital and social connectivity.

Now in high school and college, aged 16 to 24, the post-millennial group seems to want it all. Gen Zs love delicious food and exciting flavors, any time and anywhere. The food industry needs to prepare for these digitally savvy and diverse up-and-coming shoppers as their spending power increases. But food formulators need to understand their needs and develop ways to attract them.

Representing 12-17 percent of the total U.S. population, the Gen Z group is the product of a fast-paced world. It has nearly \$250 billion in spending power so far, says Chicago-based Technomic (www.technomic.com). Further, the group is active and connected; literally with instant access to the world around the clock, because they're plugged into computers, laptops, tablets, smartphones, smartwatches and other electronic devices.

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Gen Zs gravitate to innovative and ethnic cuisines because they're more diverse than other groups, according to Mintel (www.mintel.com), Chicago. In fact, 66 percent of ethnic food eaters who are parents say their children enjoy eating ethnic/ international food. This trend may also be attributed to the fact the generation is the most culturally diverse, with 24 percent being of Hispanic origin.

Market research firm NPD Group (www.npd.com), Port Washington, N.Y., finds many Generation Z consumers love salad in particular, followed by sandwiches and breakfast foods that require some cooking, such as eggs and pancakes. Easy-to-assemble meals and better-for-you food consumption will increase over the next five years, explains Matt Powell, an industry analyst at NPD Group. "Brands must be completely transparent, which earns trust."

A couple of sources suggest plant-based foods -- such as the Beyond Burger plant-based meat alternative from Beyond Meat, and Impossible Foods' Impossible Burger -- are popular with this age group. So are ramen noodles, LaCroix carbonated/flavored water from National Beverage Corp., Chobani yogurts, meat snacks like Fusion Jerky and Jack Links, and frozen Asian and Indian-inspired meals.

Marcia Mogelonsky, director of insight for Mintel, says Gen Zs look for meat snacks that are more sophisticated, with flavors described more expressively and the meats given a "pedigree." Mintel also points out that nearly three-quarters of teens in the group drink bottled water, while only two-thirds of adults do. Many adults weren't raised with bottled water in the home, and consider water something that should be free of charge. Young adults have never been without bottled water, either from vending machines, convenience stores or events, and therefore are not averse to paying for water.

Digital natives

More than 70 million strong and growing, Gen Z kids are often called digital natives, states investment banking firm Goldman Sachs (www.goldmansachs.com), New York City. Their digital prowess is noteworthy because they're online every day. Technology is fundamental to them.

"They're the first generation born in the post-internet world and are accustomed to shopping online and do nearly all of their research online," notes Goldman Sachs analyst Christopher Wolf. "Their backgrounds have exposed them to a variety of cuisines and cultures. They're also laser-focused on the consequences of their decisions. And they live truly 'device in hand.'"



"Gen Z is the first generation to completely grow up in the digital age, so to them, there's no question that can't be unanswered, which is really affecting the food they eat," says Livio Bisterzo, CEO and founder of Green Park Brands (www.greenparkbrands.com), which produces fiber- and protein-rich Hippeas organic chickpea snacks.

Social media has been around for most or all of their entire lives. This cohort has grown up with companies marketing products as much through social media as any other advertising channel. They're most likely to blog live or post their food experiences online, because they often learn about food in the online social arena.

They've also grown up with TV and online cooking shows and recipe demonstrations, and they post selfies of favorite restaurant dishes.

It's easy to overlook the mostly teen-aged Gen Zs because many of them are still at the point where their parents purchase their meals. The older ones are in college, and the rest are growing up and starting to make purchasing choices. They're learning from their parents, many choosing more healthful, transparent eating. Thus, many of their favorite brands overlap with their parents' favorite brands, says Mintel. Contrary to the popular belief that teens view brands their parents like as "uncool," the Mintel data reflects that eight in 10 kids agree with the statement, "My favorite brand is a brand my parents love as much as I do."

According to Lauren Bonetto, a lifestyles and leisure analyst at Mintel, "American teens have internalized messages about tolerance and acceptance. They will expect brands to be tolerant as well."

Health conscious and diverse

Global offerings with Southeast Asian, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and Korean flavors attract this group. "Gen Z has been exposed to global food influences and [has] a more holistic approach to health and wellness [than other generations,]" says Bisterzo. "They view organic products as not only healthier, but better tasting. We see more brands creating healthier options from traditionally unhealthy snacks. The food industry is moving toward more organic and better-for-you ingredients while also considering the diverse tastes of Gen Zs. Their diversity will continue to drive food culture trends we already see around the exploration of authentic, global food experiences, and the impact of this diversity includes how they eat."

Available in five flavors (including Vegan White Cheddar, Sriracha sunshine and Far Out Fajita), Hippeas are a favorite of Gen Zs and millennials alike, Bisterzo adds. "When choosing our flavors, we really focused on the tastes that would appeal to millennial and Gen Z groups."

Gluten-free, vegan, non-GMO and organic ingredients are important to this group, he mentions. Connecting to Gen Zs means telling product stories of origin, special sourcing and describing ingredients. They also look for sophisticated, fresh and sustainable ingredients, and expect standards of humane animal treatment and food production.

They also look for clean labels on food packaging, notes the Hartman Group, (www.hartman-group.com), Bellevue, Wash. " 'Clean label' and 'simple' ingredients are important to them, and Gen Z also likes classic fare with fun twists, healthy options and new flavors."



Suji's Korean Cuisine (www.sujiskorean.com), Omaha, Neb., has the Gen Z demographic on its radar. "The industry is beginning to realize the benefits of meeting the needs of Gen Z and transitioning from millennials," says founder/CEO Suji Park. She mentions yzu, tamarind, lemongrass and vinegar as popular global flavors with this group.

"Gen Zs explore ethnic cuisines and are interested in knowing where their food is sourced, what the ingredients are and how it's produced," she adds. "Their palates are used to spicy foods, having been raised with Tex-Mex heat, Thai and Szechuan cuisines, and they're open to trying new flavors. They're also more conscious of the chemicals found in the foods they eat."

Suji's offers a variety of adventurous grab-and-go options for this group: rice bowls, Korean style kimchi rice with pork, plant-based "meat," vegan and vegetarian options. "We're making a deliberate effort to remain preservative-free, knowing this is a hot-button for consumers, particularly those skewing younger."

Suji's refrigerated and frozen "true-to-the-culture" Korean meals, entrées and sauces are designed to appeal to this crowd, Park says. "Gen Z kids, especially young adults, do pay attention to their health. They live an active lifestyle, are introduced to organic and non-GMO products at a younger age than previous generations and care about the ingredient labels on the foods they consume. They like many of our products because we focus on clean ingredients that are easy-to-recognize and all natural. Gen Zs are multi-taskers who want products that are quick to prepare but still abundantly nutritious with complex flavors."

Snacking unlimited

This group eats significantly more snacks than other generations, says Mintel. They will pick up any type of food for a quick bite at any hour of the day, which harks to the theory that all types of foods are now considered "snacks," affirms Mogelonsky. Their snacks can be both healthy and not so healthy.

"At this stage of their life, Gen Z pays the least attention to special dietary considerations," says Blaine Becker, senior director of marketing at the Hartman Group.

"Although they always seem to be snacking, the after-school snack is the most popular with teens. Gen Z teens actually know what healthy means when it comes to eating, but they don't care as much as other [generations] — they think they have plenty of time to eat right in the future. As much as they favor global cuisine, they go for fast food and traditional cooking, but 'traditional' food means whatever they have been exposed to at home."

There isn't a lot of hard data available on the ingredients Gen Z consumers prefer, says Dax Schaefer, executive chef for custom spice marketer Azenzya (www.azenzya.com), Oak Creek, Wis. Nevertheless, the company's R&D team is working to understand them. "Gen Z is just coming of age, and follow one of the most prolific and idealistic generations of our time," he says. "Due to their age, Gen Zs are just coming into their own purchasing presence."



They will be the most global generation yet in connection with others as well as in flavor preferences. They'll eat for flavor and indulgence at times, but will also be aware of what they're eating in the big picture. Exotic flavors don't have to be complex, just delicious, and don't have to have more than five ingredients."

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