

9 Trends That Defined Quick Service in 2017

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For all of the quick-service twists and turns that 2017 will be best remembered for, there is one that stands head and shoulders above the rest, according to industry experts: Food finally became our friend.



It was the year when Americans began to worry less about diets and more about food quality. It was the year when all kinds of ethical food issues cemented their presence across the limited-service restaurant industry. It was the year when the cleanliness of food became no less important than the tastiness. It was the year when the technology of how food is prepared, served, and sold went into overdrive. And it was the year when plant-based food proteins no longer elicited a snicker—or a shoulder shrug—at the quick-serve level.

Some restaurant gurus even have a term for this last year of restaurant consumer trends: ethical indulgence.

“Everyone is looking for a way to feel better about indulging,” says Michael Schaefer, global lead for food and beverages at Euromonitor International. “We increasingly live in an era where everyone needs reasons to indulge.”

We spoke with four food-industry trends experts—Melissa Abbott, vice president of culinary insights at the Hartman Group; analysts Stephen Dutton and Michael Schaefer of Euromonitor; and Michael Whiteman, partner at Baum + Whiteman—to get their take on which trends dominated the last year in foodservice, and what those trends have to say about the direction of the restaurant space. These are the 2017 trends they found most compelling:

1. Transparency mattered.

Decisions on quick-service food purchases became less about calorie counts and more about what the food actually is—where it comes from and what are its ingredients—says Euromonitor’s Schaefer.

2. Beverages got cleaner, too.

Some fast-casual chains, like Panera Bread, started to take beverage ingredients seriously, too. And instead of sugary apple juice, McDonald’s began to sell its Happy Meals with a low-sugar organic juice from Honest Kids.

“It’s great to see young palates becoming accustomed to less sweet flavors,” Abbott says.

3. Plants became OK to eat.

Millennials and Gen Xers are embracing plant-based food while still young and probably will stick with it, Whiteman says.

Consider: Some 31 percent of Americans practice meat-free days, according to research specialist Mintel, and 35 percent of Americans get the majority of their protein from sources other than red meat. The organic burger chain Bareburger, for example, started selling the “Impossible Burger,” a plant-based vegan burger developed by plant-based-food specialist Impossible Foods.

4. Tech went into hyperspace.

The more consumers become used to seeing technology and using technology in restaurants, the more they want it, Dutton says.

“Consumers are interested in seamless dining experiences, and technology helps make that happen,” he says.

5. Customizing became (even more of) the norm.

There was a time when asking to customize your order got you a dirty look and a longer wait. But that time is no more. Fast-casual chains—from Blaze Pizza to Sweetgreen and Chopt—have perfected the Chipotle (and, of course, Subway) formula that encourages guests to customize.

“We want to be the directors of our plates,” Abbott says.

6. Communal dining became common.

Starbucks keeps adding communal tables to its stores, while food halls have especially encouraged communal dining. “I think the community mindset has a lot to do with the current political climate,” Abbott says.

7. Fun and funky formats opened.

New chains began to reimagine what fast-casual dining could be like—and became much more millennial-minded, Abbott says. For example, Cracker Barrel’s Holler & Dash format, with its exposed brick and industrial lighting, is catering to the 20-something crowd.

8. Kale finally got overkilled.

These days, it’s hard to find a major fast-food or fast-casual chain that doesn’t offer a kale something-or-other on the menu, Abbott laments. The trend that took off just three or four years ago has become as widespread as french fries and fried chicken.

“I’m a full-on kale lover, but it’s ridiculous how the industry will take one product and offer it nonstop,” Abbott says. “Can’t someone be a leader and find another product to sell?”

9. Pink drinks overthink.

Then there was that flurry of media attention focused on, of all things, the pink drink. Starbucks borrowed from its own “secret” menu in the spring by nationally rolling out the Pink Drink, which blended coconut milk, passion fruit, açai, and strawberries into a pricy drink.

And the trend toward brightly colored menu items didn’t stop there; Starbucks itself went on to release a Unicorn Frappuccino, a multicolored beverage that followed in line with other brightly hued menu items from around the food industry.

Pink Drink: Thinkstock / unalozmen, Veggie Burger: Thinkstock / count_kert, Kale: Thinkstock / Karaidel