

Clean: a new definition: millennials keep it simple but expect more options

Larry Etter

Film Journal International. 119.9 (Sept. 2016): p88.

Global Media, LLC

With the federal government insisting that calorie counts are placed on menu boards by the end of 2016, theatres have scrambled to address the issue of proper education in this regard. The federal government is moving to eliminate Genetically Modified Foods to create a healthier ingredient list and better-for-you foods. This application has led cinema owners to consider healthy inductions into the menu selections. The end result will be "cleaner" food facilities.

It is no longer okay just to be conscious of calorie counts, as that train has left that station. Allergens are now becoming equalized by questions about GMO. People are now dissecting food labels in grocery markets. What this represents is that the food and beverage consumer is becoming more aware of the contents being put into the human body. Theatre patrons are eaters: Therefore, theatre patrons are reading labels. Studies show that Millennials are more concerned about simple than complex; less is more for this generation. But Millennials have also come to expect more for less; some call it entitlement, but in truth they have witnessed the difference in improvements of food production since they were babies.

This expectation is pushing all food and beverage operators to higher standards. Recently, an article published by Cindy Han in Flavor & the menu addressed many of these changes.

"eat Clean," a web-based media company, reports that "even macaroni and cheese will no longer have artificial ingredients, announced by Kraft Foodservice. Natural ingredients such as paprika and turmeric are to be used as coloring agents." Eisenberg has introduced its All Natural Hot Dog with no GMOs and Pillsbury is integrating baking goods with no artificial ingredients. Customers are saying they now care and they know when food is "clean" and when it is not.

"The fundamental definition of clean labels in the cinema channel is transparency," states Diana Kelter, a foodservice analyst at Mintel, a global market firm and advisor to Flavor. In reality, no theatre guest can tell if the food is better for you; rarely if ever are there labels to read before buying a large popcorn, yet packaged goods such as nacho chips or candy items all have nutritional labels that identify potentially harmful ingredients, trans-fats or allergens. What theatre operators can do is announce to their patrons that food is in its most unpretentious condition. Unadulterated foods can be defined by the eater as not only healthy but higher in quality. Terms such as "organic" speak directly to this belief; unfortunately, organic does not mean completely unadulterated and can include some enhancements.

Today we exist in a period of huge richness, with no shortages of options, hence the question: "What to eat, not if to eat," states June Jo Lee of the Hartman Group. This translates to an expectation that there is a choice. The rise in menu options has grown exponentially in the cinema experience for good reason. How do we meet the patron's needs fully? The challenge for theatres now is: How can we exceed every customer's expectation? It is no longer a question of "captive audiences" but a question of how we can compete with the foodservice industry as a whole. Addressing the "clean" slate will be the next opportunity.

The average guest at a movie theatre is much more knowledgeable about food, its preparation, guidelines and additives. The intellectual components are derived from the Internet, websites, Google and Yahoo as quickly as you can type four words; it's not hard to search for labels in a theatre when they're only a few thumb movements away. The sense is that no movie patron will say I want more junk food, or cuckolded edibles that give me 1,000 more calories than I need. What cinema patrons are looking for are options. This is not to say they will choose the healthy options; they just want to know if they exist.

Lee reports that the next generation of eaters takes pride in sustainability and "closeness to the Earth." Her premise is that Millennials take pride in wellness. "They are savvy" and the next value proposition "will not come from price but from quality and convenience," Lee states. These theatre guests will know the difference between low sodium and low fat, they don't want cut-rate snacks, they desire simple and transparent. Can you make me better by offering food without complicated preservatives, chemicals and genetics?

Clean foods can stretch across all considerations. Eliminating stabilizers and emulsifiers in ice cream creates "clean ice cream." Considering whether meats and proteins have been treated with hormones or enhancers creates "clean meat" selections. In other words, sustainability and clean come in a variety of forms and can be extended to nearly every food group. Proponents of "clean foods" swear that the food itself tastes better, as the mouth feel is not interrupted by intangibles and chemical compounds.

As June Jo Lee puts it, "This is just the beginning." The revolution of food consumption has begun, and as theatre operators re-tool their facilities for adult beverages and wider menu selections, I am tempted to say food production is the next forefront that will challenge us. It is inevitable that food companies will be introducing even more fresh-yet-portable snack options in the coming months, primarily because the snack channel is expanding so rapidly. According to Euromonitor, Millennials eat an average 3.