2016: A Year in Review

As the year comes to a close, we take a look back at the biggest changes in limited service.

Try to sum up the top fast-food trends for 2016, and a few words rise to the top. Wacky. Creative. Simple.

But what were the most significant trends of the year? We asked four experts to reflect on this year’s big food innovations. Here’s what they saw as being the quick-serve industry’s most compelling trends for 2016.

**Mashups go wild.** There may be no more powerful millennial magnet than the very notion of combining two items that you wouldn’t normally mix together. “To be successful, a mashup has to be new and different, but it also has to feel safe,” says Jana Mann, senior director at Datassential. Burger King did it with Cheetos Chicken Fries, and Pizza Hut tried it with the Grilled Cheese Stuffed Crust Pizza.

**Breakfast unchained.** Who knew that breakfast would become the new dinner? Everyone wants his or her piece of this once underserved daypart, says Stephen Dutton, consumer foodservice associate at Euromonitor. Sure, McDonald’s grabbed the headlines by extending breakfast to an all-day option. But Taco Bell continues to push breakfast in new directions, too, as breakfast burritos have suddenly become more common—as have breakfast tacos, breakfast flatbreads, and, yes, even breakfast pizzas.

**Cheap eats.** In 2016, a key question in quick service was: How low can you go? That’s low as in, well, cheap. The $5 meals at Dairy Queen, KFC, and Pizza Hut begat $4 meals at Carl’s Jr., Hardee’s, and Wendy’s. While McDonald’s never rolled out a $5 meal in 2016, its McPick 2 Menu—two items for $5—certainly had some influence. “When someone goes low, the whole market responds to that to make sure they all get a portion of those stomachs,” Mann says. What’s more, she says, once consumers get a taste of these cheap eats, they come to expect them. “It’s why Subway is still having such a hard time getting away from the $5 sub,” she adds.

**Poke is no joke.** If someone had told you that raw, marinated fish salad was going to be one of fast casual’s hottest trends in 2016, you’d probably thought he was loony. But poke is here to stay. In Los Angeles alone, at least 50 poke restaurants have opened in the past year. “I call 2016 the year of poke,” Mann says, adding that some chains are thinking outside the box and substituting other proteins for the raw tuna that’s usually in poke.

**Customization goes viral.** It’s one thing to customize your burger. But in 2016, it seems, consumers got a taste of customizing just about anything they can stuff into their mouths. “Consumers are determining exactly how they want something,” Mann says. For example, Potbelly is offering customized macaroni and cheese, and Baskin-Robbins is selling customized ice cream sandwiches.

**Clean menus rule.** Panera probably got the ball rolling on this when it announced to the world that it was nixing artificial everything from its menu. But everyone has latched on to this national menu cleanup. Even McDonald’s rolled out the first-ever preservative-free Chicken McNuggets. “Cleaner menus are here to stay,” says Melissa Abbott, vice president of culinary insights at The Hartman Group.

**Veggies get mojo.** It may be an exaggeration to state that vegetables moved to the center of the plate in 2016, but they’re no longer being pushed to the side. “We’ve reached a tipping point for vegetables,” says restaurant consultant Michael Whiteman of Baum + Whiteman. What’s more, it’s no longer just vegetarians or vegans who are demanding vegetables. This may explain why even Chick-fil-A added a Superfood Side (with a kale base) to its menu.