

20 YEARS 20 TRENDS in Food Culture

Thumbs up and thumbs down for the foods and beverages trends we've applauded and booed in our more than twenty years immersed in the exploration of mainstream and fringes of food culture.

1 Sweet

Remember roadside fruit and vegetable stands or when snacking was a taboo? Times they are a-changin'. What will supplant these notable trends in years to come?

1. Mealtime is Anytime. We're a snacking culture. Eating before, between and after meals is so prevalent it's rendered traditional daypart analysis obsolete.

2. Fresh Is the Real Thing. The trend toward fresh can be understood as a historical process that is continually (re)defining what quality means in the world of food. Fresh is the cultural shift toward all things healthy, real, pure and special. It is the real and symbolic practice of eating "healthy" and living "well."

3. Street Food. The new food trucks speak to our penchant for quality indulgence. These meals-on-wheels purveyors harness the power of local, up the ante on quality, fresh fare compared with the ubiquitous fast food joints, are fluent in the utilization of social media technology as their chief marketing tool and have nurtured a loyal cult-like fan base.

4. Celebrating Regionality. No longer do we seek Chinese, Mexican or Italian cuisine. Our awareness of food cultures has us seeking the more authentic, such as Szechuan, Oaxacan or food from the Piedmont region of Italy. Same goes for here in the U.S.: it's no longer just BBQ, it's Kansas City or Carolina-style.

5. Private Brands. As consumers' expectations of quality have evolved, so too have their notions of what it means to be a "brand." Consumers often misidentify private brands as national brands—and don't much care. Look for the competition to only heat up from here.

6. Starbucks Perfect Oatmeal. Who would have thought that consumers could get excited about oatmeal again? A little dose of healthy indulgence with your latte goes a long way.

7. Local. Local is about much more than farmers' markets. Consumers rely on narratives of people, places and locales to frame the emotional resonance around local.

8. Exclusivity of Scarcity. From "first of the season" to the "limited time only" offering of a McDonald's McRib sandwich, nothing stirs interest and excitement quite like limited time offers and nothing screams "quality!" like the first tender sweet summer corn of the season.

9. "Say No to Plumping." Foster Farms' chicken TV ad campaign is arguably the most amusing food advertisements made in the past decade. It turned a supposedly "taste-enhancing" water injection process into a sign of "evil" processed food and redefined quality in the category in line with emerging trends that are turning consumers against unnecessary industrial food processing techniques.

10. Greek Yogurt. While there are now many varieties of Greek yogurt trailing behind FAGE, the first on the scene, Greek-style yogurt symbolizes a growing demand for snacks or mini-meals that offer convenience and high-quality protein. Could hummus be next?

1 Sour

With the upside of innovation there is always a downside. Here are some we wish never happened while others should just fade away.

1. Artisanal. Artisan has been co-opted by the food industry and marketing to the point now that its distinction has been diluted. When Domino's Pizza called-out "artisan-style," it became very clear the original meaning was lost.

2. MyPlate, Food Pyramid. People do not eat according to scientific principles or government guidelines. These types of activities will not reduce obesity rates or alter future eating behavior.

3. The Real Hell's Kitchen. The endless wave of reality cooking shows (you know the ones), with the contrived contests and made-up drama, has become an obsession with the idea of food serving more as an escape from reality. Julia Child taught us how to cook and never once was she bleeped for profanity.

4. Fat-Free. Fat-free was a hot trend until we realized that it made us a whole lot, well, fatter. Despite years of anti-fat sentiment, it's becoming clear that the right kinds of fats can make you healthier, smarter, more muscular, and leaner. So long, fat-free cookies and cakes, and bring on the avocados and cashews!

5. Man vs. Food. There is something inherently wrong (if not just juvenile) with TV shows where food and beverage consumption is reduced to gluttony and sport. Cringe.

6. 100-Calorie Packs. What seemed like a great way to manage portion control has resulted in brands appearing overly processed and overly packaged. Not so great for the long term in this era of fresh and less processed.

7. Marketing to Mom. While we suspect that meeting June Cleaver today really is as likely as, say, meeting D.B. Cooper, marketers still like to portray and promote to stay-at-home moms and the traditional nuclear family. Today's family really is more like *Modern Family*: intergenerational, non-traditional, single-parent, unmarried, and multi-ethnic.

8. Gluten-free. This trend is more reminiscent of fad dieting such as low-carb. While there remains a permanent marketplace for gluten-free products, in the long term it challenges deep consumer trends toward real, fresh and less-processed foods in food culture.

9. Blame Game. It was silly to think that food manufacturers are the root cause of obesity. The vast majority of consumers have always believed that they are personally responsible for choosing the right foods to eat.

10. Better For You. The media and food industry fell in love with this term, but we know larger, cultural forces are at work here. Namely, what was once a paradigm of healthy eating habits and healthier food products is now a paradigm of high-quality experiences of which healthier eating is but one of many important sub-themes.