



NUTRI-BYTES

Restaurants: Cashing In On Consumer Trends

Did you know that Americans spend 47% of their food dollars away from home, according to the National Restaurant Association? Did you ever wonder what accounts for the popularity of some restaurants, while others go out of business? The success of restaurants heavily depends on their ability to predict the shifting demographics and ever-changing demands of consumers.

Appealing to the demographics

Ethnic cuisine is one of the most popular trends in the restaurant industry. With the growing diversity of the U.S. population, more restaurants are offering multi-cultural choices, with spicier and more exotically seasoned foods that reflect Hispanic and Asian cultures.

With the “graying” of America, the restaurant industry is focusing on a comfortable ambience with flavorful, affordable foods. Some restaurants now are offering special discounts to diners over age 50, while others such as Cracker Barrel offer lower priced and smaller portions to older adults.

Did you know that the educational level of the area influences restaurant trends? For example, highly educated communities have more gourmet coffee shops and bagel restaurants than less educated communities. But the most popular choices of both non-college and college-educated Americans are still the fast-service hamburger and pizza restaurants that can be found in every neighborhood!

Appealing to diners’ preferences

A change in today’s market is the “affluent attitude” or entitlement felt by diners. So restaurants such as T.G.I.Friday’s are catering to consumers’ sense of privilege and individualization by allowing diners to mix and match menu options. To meet customers’ demand for quick and convenient service, casual dining restaurants such Outback Steakhouse and Applebee’s are now offering curbside take-out as an option to dining in.

Restaurants try to appeal to the mixed messages of consumers who say they want new, healthier fare but also want to indulge in familiar, inexpensive foods. So it’s not surprising that we have seen the recent introduction of nutritious menu items such as McDonald’s fruit and walnut salad, as well as those familiar, “more-for-the-buck” burgers such as the 1400 calorie Hardee’s Monster Thickburger!

The bottom line is that consumers’ desires and needs drive the type of foods and services offered by restaurants. **Hopefully, Americans will demand healthier foods** and will frequent those restaurants that offer menu items that are higher in nutrients and fiber, lower in calories and fats, and smaller in portion size.

More details about consumer trends may be found in Restaurant News, 39(21); May 2005.