



“Healthy” Gains Steam as Major Food Trend

While many Americans have long talked the talk when it comes to healthy eating, more and more consumers are finally beginning to walk the walk, putting their money (and more good-for-you foods) where their mouths are. That's good news for foodservice operators, who, after years of trying to second-guess patrons' dietary schizophrenia, have some clear direction and impetus for making wellness-driven menu changes.

In its new Trend Tracker report, Technomic Information Services, Inc., Chicago, lists “healthy menu items” as one of several significant menu shifts among 100 leading independents, 150 emerging chains, and the larger Top 250 restaurant chains. Healthy items experienced “strong activity” over the six-month reporting period, particularly among emerging chains, where this menu category grew by 50 percent over the first half of 2005, the report said. Not surprisingly--and nagging avian flu concerns aside--grilled chicken was a common ingredient in many of the new, more healthful offerings. Somewhat surprisingly, however, was the fact that independent restaurants are putting more focus on offering slimmed down versions of decadent desserts, according to Technomic. Restaurant patrons, after all, love the opportunity to have their cake and eat it, too—with a minimum of guilt.

Released in the same week as the Technomic report, is the Natural Marketing Institute's annual Top Ten Health & Wellness Trends report. Based on input from a database of more than 300,000 consumers, the report lists on-the-go healthy eating opportunities as among the top 10 trends. “Whether it's grab-and-go healthy snacking or healthy foodservice and menu options, opportunities abound for the integration of health and wellness into away-from-home foods and beverages,” says NMI. Other trends in the NMI report with implications for foodservice operators:

- **Changing Demographics Create Health and Wellness Opportunities.** Shifting demographics, such as household size, age, gender, life stage and ethnicity present new opportunities across many health and wellness products. Generational shifts among Matures, Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y and Millenials will dictate changes in marketing and product offerings.
- **Organic vs. Natural: The Balance of Price and Benefits.** Demand for organic products at retail is growing exponentially, and foodservice concepts from white tablecloth to casual to college dining are touting organic selections, as well. For consumers and operators alike, however, the price tag associated with organic products vs. lower-priced natural products can create sticker shock. According to NMI, “Finding the optimal

balance of price, benefits and consumer understanding levels will be the determining factor in consumer choice between natural and organic products.”

- **Ingredient/Nutrient Drivers.** This year, NMI predicts that we’ll see continued propagation of specific ingredient/nutrient “platform drivers” across food, beverage and supplement categories. Examples include omega-3, protein, gluten-free, low-sodium and probiotics. In foodservice, focus already is sharpening on providing accurate information on ingredients that can cause patron concern, often due to potentially dangerous food allergies. Bonfish Grill, the Tampa, FL-based casual dining chain, for example, offers a separate menu flagging items that are gluten-free. Denny’s, the family-dining behemoth, offers guests a pamphlet containing detailed information on common allergens and sulfites that appear in its menu items.
- **Individualism Crosses Categories.** According to NMI, consumers are compartmentalizing information and taking the pieces that apply to their beliefs and lifestyles to formulate individualized, personalized health plans. Marketers, the report suggests, must make note of this very strong trend. That’s good advice for operators, too. Already snagging more than 50 percent of consumers’ food dollars, foodservice stands to gain significantly from tuning in and responding to the growing demand for more healthful foods away from home.