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What's in Store for 2024



Foodservice is an industry known for being feisty and innovative. Over the last few years, it has been forced to display an even higher level of resiliency and an ability to evolve quickly. Those efforts have paid off, as foodservice has returned to enjoying a greater share of the consumer's food dollar (versus retail) in 2023. But next year promises to bring its own challenges, with high prices and sagging consumer confidence impacting consumer behavior. Foodservice stakeholders once again need to tap into their reserves of creativity to thrive. They will need to be ready for hurdles and develop contingency plans. Operators must lean into technology, menu and service innovation that avoids disruption of the consumer experience and, when possible, takes advantage of existing ingredients or resources.

The Wild Ride Subsides

The foodservice industry's roller coaster of significant losses from the pandemic followed by substantial growth during recovery will start leveling out in 2024. Most restaurant segments should return to the low single-digit rates of real growth we saw in pre-crisis years. Watch for limited service to realize benefits from recent unit growth and consumers' ongoing trade-down from full service. Success for sit-down restaurants will

depend on the adoption of competitive price positions and availability of exceptional value and experiences that are different and engaging. The primary threat for all restaurants in 2024 and beyond: America's aging consumer base and slowing population growth, making organic growth harder to come by.

approach to stretching one's foodservice dollar will differ from prior economically challenging periods. In 2024, consumers will scale back their delivery spend in favor of more takeout and drive-thru. A breakfast boom during the work week will have guests treating themselves to foodservice in the morning—



The Great Consumer Occasion Shift

Diners have always sought value in one form or another yet, amid stubborn historical inflation, the

rather than lunch—as a satisfying yet more affordable restaurant occasion. And on the weekends, brunch will become the new dinner thanks to its equally appealing social aspects, large adult beverage selections and lower average checks.

Extreme Weather Takes Restaurants by Storm

The growing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, such as heat waves, storms and cold snaps, will continue to affect restaurant sales and traffic. These unpredictable happenings, exacerbated by El Nino in 2024, will require operators to increasingly factor weather scenarios into their budgets and planning across key business areas, as well as run more nimble operations that cater to conditions. Considerations will include kitchen reconfigurations, energy-saving equipment, misters and fans to combat high heat and humidity, and upgraded HVAC systems and windows to assist come snow, rain or shine. For the menu, preparations requiring little



to no heat will provide a more comfortable setting for back-of-house staff, while lighter dishes will better appeal to guests dining in sweltering temps. And changing climates will require operators to anticipate an impact on item availability, taste and quality, which will lead to diversifying sources and products.

Menus Go Granular

Vague menu descriptors are in the past as more transparent listings become vogue. Cocktails won't contain just any apple flavor, but rather that of a Granny Smith. Generic red wine vinegar will move aside for Barolo wine vinegar. And raw beef dishes will become more distinct as filet mignon carpaccio and tenderloin steak tartare. Not only will ingredient varietal types find momentum in menu descriptions, but so will callouts of



regions or countries of origin and influence, especially lesser-known ones, such as Haitian honey and Senegalese-style chicken. This in-depth menu detail will further push quality, premiumization and transparency in the consumer mindset.

Pandemonium on the Plate

This year's pickle palooza—from pickle pizzas to pickled fries—has opened the door for more off-the-wall, headscratcher fare to flourish. Sensory-seeking consumers inspired by TikTok recipes like chopped sandwiches and feta pasta will get their kicks at restaurants serving savory sweets and cocktails, such as fat-infused fried desserts and garlic or mole cocktails; bizarre beverages, like tahini coffee and spicy smoothies; and pungent ingredients and flavor combos, such as fermented honey and truffle horseradish. We even predict more skin (fruit, that is) and blood (literally) in the game.

Tech-Enabled Hospitality

The type of wow-factor restaurant technology launched over the pandemic will settle into more practical applications. In the coming year, we'll see technologies get implemented using the kitchen as the central hub for the purpose of freeing up staff time to enhance the customer and employee experience. Online ordering systems will be integrated with kitchen systems to ensure a seamless takeout experience and facilitate order-ahead drive-thru service. Sales data will combine with supply chain management and marketing software to better predict supply, demand and

proper staffing levels, as well as deliver data to drive loyalty. Kitchen equipment will automate dangerous and repetitive tasks that allow for staff to redeploy their efforts elsewhere. And each technology will be increasingly supported by artificial intelligence, some of it generative in the case of drive-thru chatbots and some of it predictive in the form of labor, supply and marketing-mix management.

You Say Tomato

2024 will be the year of the tomato. This not-so-rotten ingredient has vast applications, appeal and health benefits. Next year, expect more nontraditional uses of tomatoes, such as in desserts and as a meat

replacement, along with jam, fermented, frozen and clarified preparations. Global tomato-based sauces and dips such as Mayan sikil pak, Libyan chraimeh sauce and Japanese yum yum sauce, as well as dishes such as Philippine sarsiado and West African mafe stew will gain ground. And beyond bloody marys, tomato will blossom in adult beverages, like caprese-inspired vodka drinks and Chavela beer cocktails.





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