



# ACF 2026 *Trends* REPORT

**The Top 10  
Foodservice Trends  
for 2026**



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American Culinary Federation



# THE TOP 10 FOODSERVICE TRENDS FOR 2026

In the year ahead, consumers will be on the lookout for dishes that are authentic and connect with them emotionally. Whether this is achieved through the ingredients you select, flavor profiles drawn from local, regional or global cuisines, presentations that are crafted to stimulate the senses, or stories that engage and capture the imagination—there are numerous opportunities to consider. The trends outlined in this report will give you perspectives and ideas that can support you as you develop or update your menus or adjust service guidelines. Together, they offer a useful starting point as you plan for the year ahead.

# Enhanced Nutrition

Based on multiple sources, forecasts agree that consumers will consistently show a preference for foods that deliver nutritional balance with an emphasis on gut health, mental well-being, sustainable energy and holistic wellness. This includes protein and fiber rich dishes, healthy fats (found in olive oil, nuts, seeds and avocados), minimally processed foods, including whole fruits, vegetables and grains, as well as functional beverages that deliver healthful benefits from the use of mushrooms (nootropics), herbs, roots and other plant-based ingredients (adaptogens).

**Additionally, statistics presented by Glanbia Nutritionals indicate that 42 percent of consumers are reducing portion sizes while 43 percent are cutting back on sugar, carbohydrates and calories.** Coupled with

the rising popularity of GLP-1 medications, there is greater interest in smaller portions and nutrient-dense dishes that offset the nutritional deficiencies this medication creates.

For chefs and restaurateurs, opportunities to engage with guests and respond to these dynamics are considerable. With a little culinary innovation, this can be achieved through expanded menus that emphasize wellness (including ways to vary portion size) and an increased number of dishes that feature plant-based and other “good for you” ingredients. Think chickpea pasta with Greek yogurt-based sauces or dishes that incorporate nutrient-rich ingredients. This could include tofu, beans, watercress, kale, konjac or quinoa, each presented in distinctive, flavorful applications.

It's also important to remember that, while your menu may offer dishes that support healthy living, the ambience, level of service and hospitality your guests' experience should complement this agenda and contribute to their overall sense of well-being.

**Healthy fats trend as diners prioritize wellness.**



**42%**  
**of consumers**  
**are reducing**  
**portion sizes**



# Retro-Innovation

With so much stress and turmoil in the world, people are leaning towards foods and flavors that remind them of simpler times - dishes that are familiar, rooted in tradition and reduce feelings of vulnerability and anxiety. **According to Mintel, a leading market intelligence and research agency, a growing number of chefs and restaurateurs are responding with 'newstalgia' - updated versions of iconic comfort foods, blending the appeal of nostalgia with modern culinary techniques.** Recognizing that newstalgia is not limited to any one audience, these dishes will be equally well received by guests of all ages and backgrounds. As a result, familiar, iconic dishes are returning to menus with contemporary twists that incorporate modern techniques, improved ingredients and global influences.

One of the most widely recognized newstalgic foods is Spam, an ingredient that has evolved from its simple island origins into a mainland favorite. Whether it appears in sliders, tacos, egg rolls or ramen, this singular ingredient contributes effectively to retro mashups.

In other applications, newfound appeal is achieved through relatively simple updates - as easy as piping a little whipped ricotta and a drizzle of hot honey onto a pepperoni pizza; creating an updated version of mac and cheese with artisan cheeses, pesto, chili peppers and flavorful sprinkles; or preparing deviled eggs with upgraded toppings such as caviar, pork belly,



**Newstalgia  
reinvents comfort  
food classics.**

fermented vegetables, flavor pearls or spicy aioli. Similarly, meatloaf is being refreshed, utilizing Wagyu beef alongside truffle-infused mashed potatoes, while tuna noodle casserole finds new life with shellfish and a more sophisticated wine sauce.

What's clear is that by exploring dishes rooted in tradition, elevating them with more refined ingredients and artful culinary skills, there are endless opportunities to deliver both comfort and engaging customer experiences.

**Quiet luxury calls for premium ingredients, subtle flavors and refined textures.**



# Quiet Luxury

While many high end restaurants offer experiences that embrace impeccable service and exquisite cuisine, they are frequently perceived as ostentatious and flashy. Today, a growing number of diners, while prioritizing fine dining, are looking for restaurants that offer luxury and indulgence in a more tranquil setting. What's more, the idea of large portions and sinful excess is giving way to healthier ingredients and smaller servings, all savored slowly. Even bar menus have been modified to better align with these preferences, relying on simply conceived cocktails accompanied by a selection of caviars and upscale small bites. In effect, these conditions create experiences that emphasize flavor, texture, sophistication and comfort

with an appreciation of the present moment, eliminating the fanfare that typifies more extravagant, boisterous, fast paced and socially vibrant settings.

**According to the 2026 Tastewise Trend Forecast, quiet luxury is part of a movement towards refinement through authenticity and craft rather than flash.** Consumers are increasingly growing tired of marketing hype and social media driven trends, preferring simpler, cleaner and more refined high-quality experiences.

Creating moments that are meant to be savored calls for premium ingredients, subtle flavors and refined textures. While there's a lot to explore, teardrop peas ("green caviar"), conservas (premium tinned seafoods), white asparagus, and rich dark chocolates are just a few to consider. It also requires a soothing and somewhat understated décor that embraces soft, neutral colors, natural materials and timeless furnishings. In addition, finding ways to reduce noise and introduce soft lighting is equally important. Ultimately, promoting quiet luxury, serenity, relaxation and impeccable culinary experiences that delight and inspire your guests should be a top priority.



# Snackable Seafoods

Seafood—especially tuna, salmon and shrimp—has been a mainstay in American diets for years. **With growing awareness of its health benefits including high protein, omega-3 fatty acids and low saturated fat, along with increased availability of less familiar albeit flavorful species (including by-catch), demand is on the rise.** At the same time, multiple surveys indicate that more than half of all Americans are snacking or eating smaller meals throughout the day, with many embracing better-for-you products. Considering that seafood snacks are both familiar and nutrient-dense, effectively blending comfort and health, chefs and restaurateurs can bring new vitality to their menus with snackable seafood applications.

While crudo, ceviche and sushi have been popular for a while, poke is gaining popularity and can be easily configured for small plate presentations. Meanwhile, both imported and domestically produced tinned fish, now embracing bold and spicy flavors, is enjoying a resurgence and becoming a mainstay on seacuterie boards alongside smoked fish, pickled shrimp and other such delicacies. Additionally, there are countless opportunities for casual seafood preparations such as dried fish jerky,



Japanese  
Takoyaki

fried fish croquettes, spicy grilled shrimp kabobs and smoked fish dip, many easily made from excess inventory and trimmings. Along international lines, Japanese takoyaki (made with octopus), Thai fish cakes, Peruvian causa rellena (filled with tuna, shrimp or crab) and/or Chinese dumplings such as shrimp and scallop siu mai or lobster roll bao buns, provide opportunities to introduce global flavors.

Using a little imagination while tracking seafood inventories, all with an eye toward sustainability, makes it relatively easy to add healthy, flavorful and snackable seafood dishes to your menu. In turn, these dishes can improve margins and delight your guests.



Fried Cod  
Croquettes

**Snackable  
seafood offers  
comfort with a  
healthy edge.**

# Filled Dough

**Whether you call them dumplings, pierogies, gyoza, mandu, poppers, empanadas, panipuri or something else entirely, the idea of a pocket, purse or other type of stuffed dough filled with a mixture of meats, vegetables and/or fruits is a global culinary phenomenon.** In America, these bite-sized delights are craveable, comforting and convenient. They can be deep fried, steamed, boiled, baked or pan fried; embrace myriad flavors and ingredients; and adapt easily to a wide range of preferences, regardless of age or background.

In restaurants, dumplings (filled dough) are being configured for service throughout the day, perfect as bar snacks, appetizers, center-of-plate presentations and even desserts. Some of the more innovative formats utilize brightly hued doughs, creative folds and shapes that, on these merits alone, are stunning presentations. Plus, there's an amazing variety of unconventional and

unexpected fillings. Some of the more intriguing savory options include curried sweet potato, buffalo chicken, eggs and roasted peppers, kimchi mac and cheese, asparagus and spring pea, butternut squash and goat cheese, Philly cheesesteak, and duck confit with Fuji apples. If you're eager to introduce dumplings as something special at the end of the meal, sweeter variations include guava cheesecake, white chocolate, Nutella and banana, caramel apple, and blueberry and goat cheese.

The remarkable thing about all of these is that they can be presented traditionally as an homage to one specific country of origin and its cuisine, or, given a chef's creative touch, designed to align with your restaurant's own culinary concept. No matter the configuration, dumplings are making lasting impact and are here to stay.

**Panipuri**



**Gyoza**



# Teatime

More consumers than ever are gravitating toward foods and beverages that support healthier living, with Gen Z and Millennials leading the way. In particular, they've shown a keen interest in tea, especially green, matcha, herbal blends, single-origin and niche specialties. Combined with the growing popularity of low/no alcohol beverages, a noteworthy shift in beverage consumption is underway.

**According to Datassential, the industry's leading food research and insights firm, teatime is the new happy hour.** Seen as a modern resurgence of the traditional "afternoon tea," service begins earlier (think 2-4 p.m.), with menus featuring special offers on tea, mocktails and small plates. In short: the concept of happy hour is being transformed.

Restaurateurs understand that consumers will spend more on unique dining experiences and are capitalizing on these emerging, off-peak service opportunities. Instead of a late afternoon or evening happy hour, they're offering a relaxing stress-free break from everyday pressures with an indulgent afternoon tea. Described as immersive, somewhat elaborate affairs, they are known to embrace creative themes such as "garden party," "afternoon brunch," "wellness escape," or "bohemian." Additionally, tea drinks are becoming imaginative, featuring niche and specialty teas such as hojicha (roasted Japanese green tea) and Genmaicha (Japanese green tea mixed with roasted, popped brown rice), occasionally combined with flavorful additions such as fruit purées, oat milk and caffeine infusions. When served, presentations rely on more elegant constructions and garnishes typically associated with craft cocktails. While traditionally accompanied by classic scones with clotted cream and jam, macarons and petit fours, guests are also enjoying creatively inspired finger foods and bite-sized sandwiches that feature more adventurous, globally inspired flavors.

**Teatime is surging as wellness-focused diners seek mindful breaks.**



**Mediterranean  
Shakshuka**

### **Breakfast is evolving with global flavors and inventive twists.**

In some cases, traditional breakfast dishes are being elevated with tangy and zesty ingredients such as coffee-candied bacon, hot honey and chorizo, all adding complex flavor and creating perceptions of more premium options. At the same time, breakfast bowls are benefitting from the addition of functional ingredients and superfoods including chia seeds and quinoa. Dishes such as sour cherry oatmeal, spiced grain bowls, breakfast pizza and lavender waffles are equally distinctive, catering to a growing interest in bolder flavor experiences as part of the morning meal.

When it comes to global flavors and fusion formats, traditional Vietnamese beef or chicken pho, as well as various iterations of Japanese ramen (i.e. bacon-egg-cheese ramen, steak with soy egg), are making tremendous inroads. Other Asian inspired dishes such as kimchi egg bowls and Korean egg sandwiches are becoming increasingly popular, as is Mediterranean shakshuka and dishes featuring Middle Eastern ingredients including za'atar and labneh.

An obvious departure from traditional breakfast staples is clearly underway. Morning meals are being transformed by culinary creativity as well as greater demand from younger consumers for both healthier options and bolder flavors.

# **Bolder Breakfasts**

Consumer preferences for breakfast, especially among younger individuals, are moving away from sweet cereals and pastries, indicating a measurable shift toward new alternatives.

**According to the 2026 Tastewise Trend Forecast, bold umami, aromatic herbs and spiced notes are gaining traction in breakfast formats, as are globally inspired flavors and preparations. Similarly, Circana reports that indulgent flavors, unique textures, upscale ingredients and novel formats appeal to individuals who enjoy experimenting with different kinds of foods and beverages in the morning.**

# Emerging Flavors

Today's consumers are craving imaginative and unexpected flavor combinations and playful sensory experiences. To deliver them, chefs are embracing distinctive tastes from around the world.

**According to the Morgan Myers 2026 Flavor Trends report, 85 percent of consumers are somewhat open to new flavors.** From a demographic perspective, Baby Boomers are loyal to familiar tastes, while Gen X and Millennials seek flavors that offer both indulgence and health benefits. Gen Z, on the other hand, is trend driven and eager for the variety that surprising new flavors, textures and mashups can provide.

The report also identifies flavors that are "next" for 2026. Among them is hojicha, a Japanese roasted green tea known for its smooth, nutty taste; macadamia nuts, nutrient-dense with a rich, buttery texture and light sweetness; floral infusions, contributing subtle complexity and a touch of whimsy; and black cocoa, a dark, intensely flavored and indulgent ingredient.

It goes without saying that, with the obvious and ongoing interest in global cuisines, there are a few more flavors that are attracting attention. Pandan (fragrant leaves, often likened to

**85%  
of consumers  
are open to  
new flavors**

vanilla, also earthy, grassy, nutty) and sudachi (a citrus fruit known for its tart, aromatic flavor) from Asian cuisines; pomegranate molasses, za'atar, sumac, baharat and berbere from Middle Eastern cuisines; tropical fruits including mango, guava, dragon fruit and yuzu (especially when combined with complex heat); and unique vinegars from around the world.

Using these ingredients in creatively inspired presentations, including beverages, sauces, baked goods, ice creams, glazes, sprinkles and spreads, will keep your menu fresh and exciting. Whether you prefer sweet, savory, globally inspired, flavor crossovers or embellished everyday meals, there's plenty to consider.

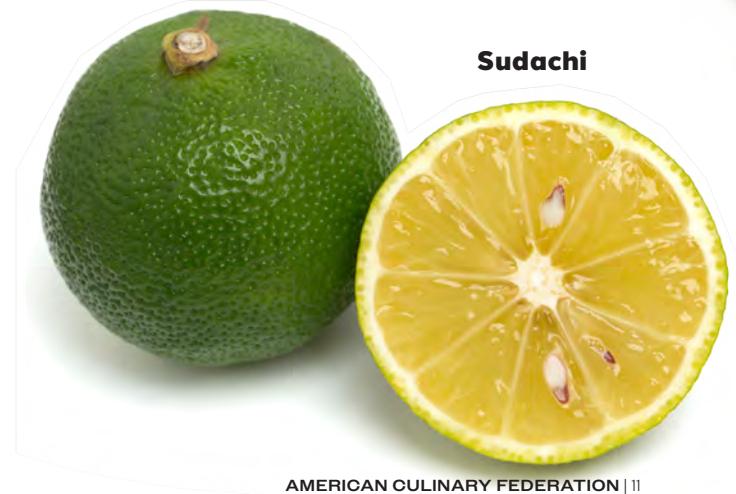
**Pandan  
Leaves**



**Sumac**



**Sudachi**



# Meat Resurgence

Demand for protein has reached an all-time high in US markets. While younger generations (Gen Z, Millennials) are more adventurous with their protein choices, older consumers (Gen X, Baby Boomers) prefer more conventional, animal proteins. Based on its highly regarded nutritional value, flavor and longstanding role in traditional meals, many consumers are simply returning to eating meat.

**Mintel reports that 90 percent of consumers enjoy meals centered around animal proteins on a regular basis, while 40 percent include plant-based equivalents. Similarly, findings from Datassential reveal that 72 percent of consumers say animal meat is more satisfying, natural and craveable - preferring the comfort, texture and taste it provides. At the same time, two-thirds of operators say animal protein is more versatile than plant-based equivalents.**

The growing popularity of animal proteins is also being supported by concerns for authenticity, a measure of value that has become synonymous with quality, as well as a desire

to avoid ultra processed foods. **According to the Tastewise 2026 Food & Beverage Trend Forecast, consumer interest in authenticity, including craftsmanship and premium cuts, is up across all cuisines, with the greatest emphasis on meat.**

In response, several meat-centric dishes have been appearing on menus with greater frequency, including Singapore noodles, birria tacos, chicken tom kha, smashburgers and chicken taco salad. In addition, two of the fastest-growing proteins are pepperoni cups and jalapeño cheddar sausage.

Given rising demand for high-quality proteins and a preference for authentic foods, menus showcasing meat-based proteins in a variety of globally and domestically inspired cuisines will be well suited for the year ahead.



# Multisensory

Consumers are embracing multi-sensory, emotionally resonant and immersive food experiences. By exploring texture, aroma and flavor in inventive ways, chefs are producing playful ingredient mashups that feel both fresh and memorable.

**Menus are putting greater emphasis on texture to enhance overall appeal. Whether crispy and gooey, melty and chewy, hard and soft or crunchy and creamy, these layered, texture-rich applications influence how a dish feels and sounds. They elevate ordinary meals, spark delight, boost craveability and transform small moments into shareable experiences.**

A few examples embracing this approach include smoke-filled cocktails, crispy rice for garnish on rice bowls, foamy and creamy toppings on drinks, and crunchy taco shells repurposed for everyday sandwiches. Other options include innovative culinary techniques such as specification (encapsulating bold flavors in a solid, caviar-like sphere),

ingredients with unusual mouthfeel such as chips, gummies or toasted nuts (adding both texture and flavor), striking natural colors (i.e. turmeric-yellow, paprika-orange, beet-red), global flavor combinations (i.e. Mexican birria ramen), visually appealing, architecturally-styled presentations, and distinctive aromas that anticipate and enhance the perception of flavor.

As with other food trends, younger consumers are driving the demand for more adventurous mashups, textures and unexpected culinary experiences. The good news is that, through careful consideration of ingredients, pairings and presentation, dining experiences can be tailored to accommodate all times of day, embrace seasonal offerings, and appeal to a wide range of audiences.

**Multisensory dining is transforming everyday meals into extraordinary moments through layered textures, striking aromas and inventive flavor mashups.**

