

Y-Pulse survey: What does Gen Z want to eat?

Research asked college foodservice professionals about the trends they see among their youngest students.



An increased desire for healthy and fresh items is one of the highlights of Y-Pulse's research into Gen Z dining trends.

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An increased desire for healthy and fresh items highlighted the findings of the latest Y-Pulse survey of college and university foodservice professionals about the trends they see the new class of Gen Z students inspiring on their campuses. The research involved an online survey conducted in July followed by interviews with 56 industry leaders prior to the National Association of College and University Food Services (NACUFS) National Conference in Indianapolis.

When asked about up and coming menu items, the foodservice professionals in this survey noted the following:

- Breakfast comfort foods from a wide range of ethnicities and all day availability
- More authentic and varied international offerings – popular global cuisines include: Mediterranean, Southeast Asia, Korea and the Middle East
- Fresh, local and farm-to-table offerings
- Sustainable seafood
- Hot, spicy and more adventurous flavors
- Healthier grab-and-go and healthier late night offerings
- Plant based menus

Fast casual restaurants like Panera and Chipotle were noted by 91 percent of those surveyed as a favorite place to eat for college consumers. Also among the top choices were campus dining (80 percent) and home/campus residence (59 percent).

In the interviews, campus foodservice directors talked about feeding the need to facilitate cooking for the growing number of students who wish to do their own cooking. Among these choices were meal ingredient kits sold in campus retail stores.

“Campus foodservice professionals are on the cutting edge of new trends and they have a unique understanding of what’s on the minds of next generation consumers because they serve these young adults every day, and they get new customers every year,” said Y-Pulse Executive Director Sharon Olson in a press release announcing the survey results. “Most people think of residential dining operations when they think of college campuses, yet the scope of campus foodservice often includes everything from elegant catered events to food trucks.”

Study participants also talked about their biggest challenges in menu planning, with their comments focusing on the following areas:

- Staying competitive with local foodservice and retail outlets
- Rising protein prices and sourcing alternative proteins
- Maintaining a skilled professional work force
- Balancing variety and service efficiency
- Satisfying high volume peak demand for a freshly prepared experience that delights customers
- Managing local and seasonal demands in areas with shorter growing seasons
- Balancing the desire for comfort and culinary adventure
- Understanding the moving target of students’ definitions of healthy and delicious
- Vendor trust and misleading marketing claims

Finally, vendor trust has become a major concern among foodservice professionals with one noting, “Too much positioning with vendors in regards to antibiotics, organics, grass fed...they may be truthful but they aren't being honest.”

Responsibilities among those surveyed included catering, retail/convenience stores, residential dining, on campus restaurants, food trucks, vending, concessions and training tables. Topics included in the full study are up and coming menu items, service styles, favorite places to eat, influences on menu planning and communication to students.