

Study provides insight into Gen Z preferences

Keep an eye on the post-Millennials, the next important consumer demographic.



July 23, 2015 — As we reported earlier this year, Generation Z is the next demographic restaurant operators should be targeting. Millennials have apparently had their moment in the spotlight, but recent figures from Technomic suggest these 21- to 36-year-olds are visiting restaurants less frequently and trimming their spending—probably a reflection of settling down and raising families.

The 20-and under members of Gen Z, on the other hand, represent a larger chunk of the U.S. population and dine out at about the same frequency as their more mature Millennial counterparts.

In a recent survey and leadership discussion by Y-Pulse, a research and consulting firm, foodservice professionals shared their observations about the eating habits and preferences of Gen Z. The survey delved into the similarities and differences between elementary, middle and high school students regarding favorite foods and where they enjoy eating away from home.

Regardless of age, these categories are trending up:

- Fruit and veggie smoothies
- Mexican foods
- Fresh, fast and made from scratch
- More choices

Like their adult counterparts, young customers like to see foods made to order or prepared on the spot. Similarly, handheld foods for on-the-go eating have broad appeal; older kids prefer larger portion sizes.

As kids progress from elementary through high school, the survey found, their preferred dining venue evolves from home and school to fast food to casual dining and convenience stores to fast-casual restaurants.

It's also no surprise that maturity is accompanied by more food smarts and a willingness to experiment.

"We were heartened to see that more than half of our professionals said tweens and teens have a greater understanding of nutrition than the previous year," observes Y-Pulse executive director Sharon Olson. "As kids grow up their sense of culinary adventure increases with more interest in ethnic foods, fresh and local offerings."

Other findings:

- Children of all ages like pizza, chicken, sandwiches, salads and fruit.
- Younger kids tend to like simpler foods rather than combinations.
- As youngsters go through middle school, their tastes broaden to include more flavors and combinations, including many ethnic foods.
- High school teens begin to follow eating patterns very similar to college students and young adults as they become more aware of food, nutrition and ethical values associated with food production and delivery. Their experiences with and interest in ethnic foods continue to grow.

The Y-Pulse survey combined interviews and discussions with chefs, dietitians, culinary educators and school foodservice directors.