

Mintel Menu Insights forecasts restaurant trends for 2009

Economic downturn expected to increase the popularity of comfort food, classy cocktails, fresh ingredients and authentic Mediterranean

The financial turmoil of 2008 hurt restaurants as many people dined out less to save money*. But from fast food to fine dining, the restaurant industry is determined to get people in the door in 2009. Mintel Menu Insights, which tracks US restaurant menus, **expects five trends to influence foodservice in 2009**. Restaurants will re-invent comfort food, mix up their cocktails, focus on fresh ingredients, take Mediterranean food to the next level, and tell stories.

Maria Caranfa, Director of Mintel Menu Insights, believes next year will be telling for the restaurant industry: "This recession will persist into early 2009—and potentially much longer—so restaurants need to be ready for customers who feel tired, overwhelmed and tapped out financially. Foodservice leaders need to find innovative methods, enticing entrees and fun, new preparations to keep people excited about going out to eat."

Caranfa points to Mintel research that shows nearly half of Americans say they spend their extra money dining out. "There are plenty willing diners out there. Restaurateurs just need to focus on the key elements of food and experience that resonate." In 2009, Mintel Menu Insights expects the following five trends:

1 Comfort food reinvented

Often connected to times of economic recession, comfort food is what people crave when they're feeling down. Expect this phenomenon to hold true in 2009 as people look for warm, familiar favorites on the menu. Restaurants will make comfort food new by increasing their use of slow-cooking. Slow-baked, slow-grilled, braised and poached will become "it" preparation methods as chefs find ways to provide maximum flavor affordably.

2 Cocktails that rock

Mintel Menu Insights forecasted a rise in classic, creative and even alcohol-free cocktails for 2008. And though bartenders stayed busy, Caranfa thinks 2009 will feature an explosion of exciting new cocktails. Next year, expect interesting new ingredients to add flavor and texture to cocktails. Ginger, cucumber, chile pepper and even beer could gain a strong presence paired with gin, tequila, pisco or framboise.

3 Fresher food

Scientific food experiments, step aside. Fresh, natural and pure are taking your place on the menu. Mintel Menu Insights has already seen "fresh" labeling increase by 22% since early 2006, and the company expects 2009 menus to abound in fresh foods and artisan ingredients. "I think we'll see a strong increase in the presence of local farm names on menus, as restaurants attempt to convey the fresh, inherently good nature of their food," comments Caranfa.



4 More Mediterranean

Encompassing the flavors of Spain, Italy, Greece and the Middle East, Mediterranean food is already relatively popular in the US. But in 2009, restaurants will stretch beyond familiar items like tapas, gyros and hummus. Menus will begin to call out the specific country of origin for “Mediterranean foods” like Spanish olives, Greek cheese and Middle Eastern yogurt sauce. Also, more authentic Mediterranean dishes may appear in fast casual restaurants.

5 Storytelling

Surrounded by negative news about the economy and obesity rates, restaurants will try to make diners happy next year. By telling stories on the menu—about a food’s preparation, health benefits or origin—restaurants can help people feel good about what they’re eating. “We’ve already seen an increase in positive messaging on the menu,” states Caranfa. “Next year, we expect a further move away from yesterday’s ‘low’s’ and ‘no’s’ of eating well.”



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*Consumer research conducted by Mintel in January 2008 showed 54% of people who dined out regularly were cutting back on restaurant spending because of the economy.