

Connecting the dots

Flavor Radar

Mintel's Menu Insights tracks what we're eating and drinking

Indulgence, portion control, pomegranate, perceived health benefits, floral flavors, mojito burritos—these are just a few of the buzzwords in today's restaurant world, and it's consumer research firm Mintel's job to keep on top of them. Through its Menu Insights program, the company tracks menus from 350 chain restaurants, 150 independent restaurants, 50 top-chef-owned eateries such as Jean-Georges, 15 beverage-centric restaurants—think Starbucks and Jamba Juice, and 10 bars. Monitoring these menus each quarter, Mintel assembles a composite snapshot of what we're eating and where our palettes might lead us in the future. As these foods move from the menu to store shelves, the implications for the creative flavorist are clear.

"We use the data to connect the dots between what people say might be a trend and actually quantifying that trend," says Mintel Menu Insights director Maria Caranfa.

So what do the connected dots tell us?

Pomegranate Power

"I think there was one extremely large flavor trend going on in 2006," says Caranfa, "and that was pomegranate." Caranfa describes the evolution of pomegranate on restaurant menus as a trickle-down effect, traveling from fine dining to all manner of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, cheesecake, and even barbecue sauce. "The applications for pomegranate," she says, "are just limitless. It's almost a buzz word now for 'sweet and tangy.'" And now this antioxidant-rich fruit, or at least its flavor, has leapt off the plate and is turning up in lip glosses and other beauty products. "The color is very appealing," says Caranfa, "and it has related health effects."

Perception of Health Benefits

But do consumers really think that they're getting health benefits such as antioxidants, folic acid and vitamin C from ordering a piece of pomegranate cheesecake? Are consumers making the connection between anything that says "pomegranate" and the perceived health benefits?

"Definitely," says Caranfa. And not just with pomegranate. She points out that green tea and dark chocolate are linked with antioxidants in the popular consciousness,



Maria Caranfa

and so consumers will seek products containing those ingredients/flavors in an attempt to do something good for themselves as they eat something they enjoy. But the questions Caranfa continually faces are, "Do [consumers] want healthy? Or do they want perceived healthy?"

The perception of health probably explains the emergence of green tea flavors in ice creams, crème brûlée, flans, sorbets and bases for cocktails. "You're seeing cocktails made with green tea and green tea liqueur," says Caranfa, "so you're getting a perceived antioxidant benefit." Of course consumers are not getting the recommended antioxidant dosage (most experts recommend at least a pint of green tea a day) from these products, but Caranfa explains that the appeal is it seems healthier.

This phenomenon, she says, explains why the popularity of fruit flavors will continue. Stating that something is flavored with fruit as opposed to merely sweetened lends the perception of health or at least gives "a different feel to something very common; we saw it a lot in barbecue sauces [in 2006]: pineapple barbecue sauces, peach barbecue sauce." And as this trend continues, flavors will incorporate increasingly exotic and health-benefit-loaded tastes, including yuzu, Kaffir limes, acerola cherry and the acai berry.

Edible Beverages: the Leap from Glass to Plate

Another health-packed ingredient—wine—is making the transition from beverage list to entrée menu in the form of wine-flavored sauces and desserts such as wine and chocolate pairings. Again, the health appeal is the perceived benefit of antioxidants.

Other drinks are getting in on the act. Caranfa points out such novel menu items as Guinness-glazed ribs or stout cakes, margarita marinades, piña colada-flavored sauces and even a mojito burrito, essentially a burrito with a lime sauce.

Focus on Fresh

Restaurant menus have been “leaning toward fresher flavors,” says Caranfa. The result is an increased popularity of fish, which she explains is directly related to the perceived health benefits of sushi. “It’s very fresh and it’s healthy for you,” she says. “In the same vein as sushi,” she continues, “there were different ceviches and ceviches flavored with Caribbean or Latin flavors [on restaurant menus], and sashimi-style products such as seared ahi tuna.”

The idea of “fresh” extends well beyond the sea. “We’re seeing more and more fruit and herb combinations in cocktails and desserts,” says Caranfa, “in sorbets, flans and sauces.” Menu Insights has even tracked 124 floral flavors, including jasmine, orange blossom and rose, which have appeared in cakes, gelatos and sorbets, and foie gras. (For examples, see T-1 through T-3). Florals, explains Caranfa, “add a very ‘garden’ feel to the dessert menu.”

On the Horizon

So what is going to shape the culinary landscape throughout the next few years? Caranfa has a few insights.

Spice, not spicy: “Menus look like they’re moving away from spicy and going toward spice,” says Caranfa. “We’re seeing Indian flavors, Moroccan flavors, more Latin flavors and a broad category of Mediterranean—using spices to flavor the food and cooking preparations rather than heat.”

Grains: Caranfa sees more hearty flavors coming to the fore, particularly grains, and especially more unusual grains that are higher in fiber.

Portion control: “Small plates are going to get more and more popular,” Caranfa explains. “I think it’s the whole social aspect of sharing your food and not completely overindulging. So, if you have small plates you can try different things—you can try Indian, Moroccan, Latin and Mediterranean all in one night.”

Banishing sodium and trans fats: With the American Medical Association calling for a reduction in sodium on restaurant menus and growing alarm against trans fats, the food industry is in a rough spot. After all, if food doesn’t taste good, consumers don’t

care if it’s healthy. “It’ll be interesting to see if restaurants actually adapt their menus,” says Caranfa, “because salt is such an important part of food—flavor and preservation.”

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Popular floral flavors, Q2 and Q3 2006 (source: Mintel)

T-1

Flavor of ingredient	Number of menu items
Lavender	26
Jasmine	23
Rose	15
Hibiscus	15
Orange blossom	10
Rose petals	6
Rose hips	6
Jasmine blossom	4
Osmanthus flower	4
Blossom	3
Geranium	2
French lavender	2
Total sample	116

Dishes using floral flavors, Q2 and Q3 2006 (source: Mintel)

T-2

Menu item dish	Number of menu items
Sorbet	8
Gelato	4
Cheese	2
Salmon	2
Chocolate cake	2
Cheese plate	2
Foie gras	2
Crisp	2
Dessert	2
Bread	2
Crème brûlée	2
Olive oil cake	1

Menu examples of floral flavors, Q2 and Q3 2006 (source: Mintel)

T-3

Restaurant Name	Menu Item Name	Description
Candelas	Sorbet of the Day	Hibiscus
The Rattlesnake Club	Amazon Rainforest Artisan Sorbets	Acai, mango, red chile, etc.
Le Bec-Fin	Salmon Confit in Olive Oil	Red radish and tomatillo fricassee, tomato and lavender sauce
Bayona Restaurant	Dark Chocolate Strawberry Ganache Cake	With rose petal jam
Rialto Restaurant	Mascarpone Cheesecake	Mascarpone cheesecake with rhubarb compote, almond streusel and rose cream