TRENDS IN THE FOOD AND BEVERAGE INDUSTRY

New items are always appearing on menus to intrigue and invite customers. It is important to understand the difference between a food fad and a food trend. Fads have a short life. They may be in the marketplace for just six months or they may last as long as a couple of years, but fads come and go. Trends, on the other hand, stay on the menu in one form or another for a period of five to ten years; if they remain popular, they become "mainstream items," those items consistently found on menus. An example of a fad (circa 2000) was the "tasting menu." Started in New York City, customers would come to a well-known restaurant. For a fixed price, the chefs would choose and present samplings of their most exotic, tempting menu items. Instead of one appetizer, the client might receive small portions of carpaccio of fresh sturgeon, a tiny heart-shaped pastry full of wild exotic mushrooms, and a serving of Mexican shrimp with a confit of tomatillo. Although an interesting concept and fun when it first started, it was time-consuming for the kitchen to prepare, the cost was high, and not all guests enjoyed the choices. Wraps, on the other hand, are examples of fads that became trends and are now mainstream items on most menus because their flavour and low carbohydrate/caloric content have kept them popular with clients.

Concern for the environment has meant changes in the food service industry. Coffee cups are now biodegradable, as are the napkins and paper wraps. Newer products made from sugar cane are appearing as takeout/take-home food containers. These new containers are replacing plastic ones, reducing decomposition time from over fifty years to just under a year. Knowing the clientele is even more important today. If you are located in a region that strongly supports recycling of all types, adding a few cents to the cost of a product because you are using new biodegradable containers could be a strategic marketing tool. People in other areas who are less concerned may balk at higher prices even when the item is proven to be "green."

One of the newer trends is purchasing local foods, sometimes called the 200 km menu (the distance can change depending on where you are located). These 200 km menus use products raised and grown in the local area. Chefs realize the value of having fresh, local food products whenever possible, and a menu item identified as "200 km" indicates that all the major ingredients have been grown within 200 km of the restaurant. Canadian seasonal changes make this more difficult in December, but it is still possible to create some dishes that meet these criteria in the dead of winter by buying from local beef, poultry and dairy farms. Many consumers today are also looking for organically grown food—foods raised without the use of chemicals or foreign substances. These customers prefer meat and poultry to be raised "free range" in local pastures with pesticide-free vegetables.
and fruits. First, it provides customers with the freshest possible foods, and second, it brings the tourist dollar directly into the hands of community farmers. The 200 km menu meets two criteria at once.

With the influx of new Canadians, more and more cultural diversity is being developed beyond the ethnic restaurant. New spices are on the market and there is a growing desire to use pure spices over the blended types found in a grocery store. These “vintage” spices are far superior with truer flavours and scents. Blending these herbs and spices with the wide variety of global cooking methods provides chefs with new ideas with which to design their signature items, those menu items that have been carefully created just for that particular restaurant by the chef.

Service The most important reason for consumers to return to a particular restaurant remains service. In the past, there has been a large discrepancy between management’s perceptions of customer satisfaction and the actual level of satisfaction customers express. This gap indicates that restaurants need to look more closely at their customers’ expectations and satisfaction. Restaurant surveys and customer contact are the easiest ways to appraise customer satisfaction, but these methods require extra time and money and are often overlooked until the restaurant is desperate to find out what is wrong. By that time, it may be too late for the restaurant to recover its losses. Hiring people certified as food and beverage handlers helps to ensure the quality of table service, and giving them the ability to make quick decisions if a customer is dissatisfied allows for smooth handling of situations before they get out of control.

Takeout Delivery and takeout are an important driving force behind the restaurant industry’s growth, with takeaway traffic representing nearly 50% of the industry’s total. This is expected to increase by 9% over the next several years. As lives become busier and more stressful, with both parents in a household often working, takeout food offers a family the chance to sit and eat together in the comfort of their home. Grocery stores are finding significant portions of the food dollar budgeted by a family for groceries is being spent on takeout or prepared foods.

To recapture this lost revenue, grocery stores are offering more ready-to-eat foods. Fried or roasted chicken, chicken wings, ready-made pastas, salads, and even sushi are all part of their product lines. To meet this challenge from grocery stores, smart restaurateurs have made their own menu items readily available as takeout. For example, delivery is one of Swiss Chalet’s meal purchase options and the chain has recently added drive-through windows. While non-traditional for family food service, they serve a growing need—fast meals with no waiting in line.

Casual Dining As more people stretch their financial resources to make ends meet, the luxury of fine dining is being replaced by a more casual dining atmosphere. Plants, natural woods, and earth tones have replaced the formal look of cut-glass chandeliers, crystal goblets, and sterling silverware. Restaurants are becoming smaller and more intimate. Menu choices have an ethnic flair, and unless a restaurant is using frozen food products, there are fewer menu items from which to choose. Value-driven consumers are setting the trend for restaurants to provide
lower-priced menu items. Pasta, pizza, and bistro fare are still popular with a focus on whole grains and fresh, lower-fat sauces. Larger franchise restaurants focus on family dining with children’s menus and props like crayons (with paper or a picture to colour) or a toy of some sort.

Nutrition For more than a decade, nutrition and health have been national issues, reflecting both governmental and consumer desire to reduce intake of foods high in saturated fat and cholesterol in an effort to stem the quickly rising obesity rate among citizens. Fat-free, low-carb, and low-fat foods are proliferating on grocery store shelves and restaurant menus. Fast-food and family restaurants have responded by using all-vegetable oil or shortening for frying, and have expanded their menus to include pita sandwiches, wraps, and interesting salads. Fast-food establishments are also giving customers choices for side dishes—for example, a salad instead of fries. However, research shows that less than 5% of sales are derived from these nutritionally sound choices. Although good nutrition remains a top concern for diners, it does not entirely translate into menu choices. Many people who watch their diets at home choose to “treat themselves” when dining out. People who are dieting are likely to choose what they want and return to their diet the next day. This behaviour changes, however, if they (for example, business people) eat out on a regular basis.

In Ontario, a private members bill provided little concern in the industry as it passed its first reading in parliament. Bill C-283 would have forced restaurants with annual sales of over $10 million to list, alongside every menu item, its calorie count, sodium level, and sum of saturated and trans fat as a percentage of the recommended daily intake. Bill C-283 was defeated. But other states, provinces, and cities are also looking at methods to trim down their constituents.

New York City passed legislation in July 2008 that bans foods containing trans fat. Trans fats are not highly prevalent in most foods, but they are in the oils commonly used for deep frying. This is an inconvenience for New York restaurateurs (KFC has already eliminated trans fat from its chicken and Taco Bell units), but it is not a devastating decision. Many other cities are watching to see how much success New York has with similar legislation waiting to be passed. Along with this ban, however, comes an addendum that requires restaurants to label foods on menus with their caloric content, sodium, and fat content. The theory behind this legislation follows the labelling of packaged foods in a grocery store. New York politicians note that many consumers now check the information posted on foods purchased in a grocery store, helping them to make healthier choices. Oddly, this information is already available in most restaurants, and fast food units hang a large poster with this information on it, but few people make their restaurant food choices based on this information.

Allergy Awareness The issue of allergy awareness continues to concern the food and beverage industry. The growing use of ready-to-cook and ready-to-eat foods means that, because kitchen staff do not prepare these foods from raw ingredients, they often do not know the ingredients. However, consumers have begun asking for a list of the ingredients that have gone into creating the dishes they order, and they have a legal right to know. Monosodium glutamate (MSG), peanuts, nut oils, preservatives—all of these products must be identified for a customer on request, and it is the responsibility of restaurant staff to identify all ingredients.