



When Cotton Candy Tastes Like Bacon and Eggs

Messages from the Research Chefs Association's
2008 conference in Seattle in March.

Courtesy of Olson Communications

This conference is where Culinologists, the behind-the-scenes professionals, gather to explore how to deliver great-tasting, healthful food to restaurateurs and consumers who are seeking fresh, authentic flavors and convenience that takes labor out of their kitchens. Walking the trade-show floor is part culinary adventure and part laboratory experiment.

Manufacturers committed to this market displayed their products and their expertise simultaneously with a chef or technical expert in virtually every booth. Many exhibitors promoted ways to create signature flavors—it was impossible to miss bacon-and-egg cotton candy from one flavor company making the point that anything can have authentic flavor if you know the right Culinologist.

Making Bigger Better

Chefs and food scientists shared the stage and recommended ideas on how to offer great-tasting, healthful foods to consumers in restaurants and for take-home. Classics such as Chinese egg rolls were “re-engineered” with a soft spring-roll wrap, more vegetables and a low-sugar sauce to enhance satisfaction and portion size. Even though small plates are all the rage, there is a large mainstream American audience that just is not ready to give up super-size portions.

Crafting healthy foods that sell is about more than the absence of guilt; it is about the presence of pleasure, which is a larger story than just tasting good.

Marketing to Tomorrow's Tastemakers

Baby Boomers and Generation Y are expected to have the greatest impact on food-product development in the coming decade. Look to younger consumers for heightened awareness on many of the key issues related to food with integrity that will border on evangelism. Their Baby Boom grandparents may be joining them with more available leisure time and no intention of retiring in the traditional way.

Generation Y is becoming known as the “gourmet everyday” generation among food professionals. They are the No. 1 buyer of specialty foods, prepared ethnic foods and functional foods. Boomers, on the other hand, are not strong ethnic-food buyers; they opt for table service and are the least likely to trade down their restaurant experience.

From Vanity to Vitality

As the quest for life in balance becomes a driving force for consumers of all ages, there is expected

to be a shift from products that feed superficial needs for vanity to those designed to enhance vitality. This trend is clearly driven by Baby Boomers, as the first consumers in this wave recently turned 60, and are embracing a new perspective on aging.

Flavor Balancing

It was only a few years ago that “fusion confusion” got a bad culinary rep, and attention switched to more authentic flavors and ethnic preparation. Yet, culinary professionals have always been well aware of the limits of offering truly authentic cuisines without the terroir and the cooking methods of the mother country readily available. Even the most devoted nuevo Latino chef in the United States has to admit that digging a pit out back to roast cochinita pibil with banana leaves for days is just not practical.

Even consumers are gaining a new appreciation for authentic ethnic and ethnically inspired foods. In a recent survey by Olson Communications, 53% of consumers said they want both true and authentic recipes as well as ethnic-inspired recipes when they purchase prepared ethnic foods in a restaurant or for take-out from retail.



The experimentation and acceptance of ethnic fusion continues to escalate as consumers gain more positive experiences with it. Tandoori-chicken pizza is a perfect example of this mainstream fusion experience—two mainstream favorites, chicken and pizza, with a hint of the exotic for an enticing, yet safe, culinary adventure.

Food Culture

In reviewing the show floor, it was just as much about food culture as it was about food science. Much of the talk was about the environment and the treatment of everyone in the food chain who touches the product across many different categories. Sourcing and verification were hot topics. As awareness grows, third-party certifications are becoming less mandatory if suppliers have a reputation for trustworthiness.

A keynote presentation by Denny Marie Post, the former Burger King executive who found food religion and moved to Starbucks, shared Starbucks' mission: "To nurture and inspire the spirit." It's a very Zen-like statement from a global food company, and somewhat different than the statement on the company's Web site: "Establish Starbucks as the premier purveyor of the finest coffee in the world while maintaining our uncompromising principles as we grow."

Starbucks was, however, able to share its passion for coffee as the company flawlessly served 600 samples of French-press coffee with three food pairings to the audience during the presentation. It was an impressive demonstration of how craftsmanship and preparation don't have to be compromised to serve up high volume.

Imperatives for the food manufacturer:

Some advice taken from presentations at the conference for successful new products:

Make healthy eating easier—portion size, customize, disguise; do whatever it takes to offer convenient stealth health.

Avoid information overload—too much information causes concern with consumers. Simple, straightforward language is better than spin with today's marketing-averse consumers.

Make it real—simple ingredients and minimally processed are the big winners.

Consumers want to see food on ingredient statements.

Make it delicious—don't even dream that today's consumers will sacrifice one scintilla of taste for healthfulness.