

## The New Frugality



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Americans are getting creative about enjoying a great dining experience in the new economy, and a new survey points to lots of opportunities for delis to step up and once again exceed their customers' expectations.

A new survey from the Culinary Visions Panel, a program led by Chicago, IL-based Olson Communications, shows the "new frugality" mindset

is more about alternatives than deprivation. In an on-line survey of over 200 consumers, 53 percent of consumers indicated they have changed their dining habits in the last year as a result of the economy.

### Redefining Home Meals:

Forty-two percent of respondents to the survey said they are buying prepared foods from their supermarket deli instead of dining out more often. Almost half (49 percent) of consumers who continue to frequent restaurants indicated they were picking up carryout more often and supplementing it with beverages and sides at home.

Many consumers talked about value shopping and getting the most for their money rather than simply the lowest price. An unexpected side effect of the new frugality for some families was a return to the family dining table. Sharable portions and family meals were generally considered great values. Consumers also said they noticed more specials and more creative flavor choices.

Many of the consumers in this study considered the resurgence in home cooking a positive lifestyle choice emerging from the economy. One respondent said she will order "the less expensive meals while dining out, but purchase seafood and steaks and try to learn more new recipes to cook at home."

**Do-It-Yourself Catering:** Among the evolving behaviors, consumers were more often looking to their local deli for party trays and upscale appetizers to create their celebrations at home rather than in a restaurant.

Sixty-five percent of consumers reported celebrating at home instead of dining out. In verbatim comments, consumers said they were not hiring caterers but relying on the local deli or supermarket for deli trays and party snacks. For consumers who had not previously considered this an option, there was some pleasant surprise at the high quality and variety of offerings available to them.

**The Emerging Combination Dining Experience:** A smaller number of consumers talked about creative ways of combining at-home and away-from-home dining. One of the positive lifestyle alternatives beginning to emerge is before and after home dining. Twenty-two percent of respondents said they were having appetizers at home and

approximately one-fourth said they are having cocktails at home before dining out. Forty-two percent of respondents said they were serving dessert at home after dining out more often than they were a year ago.

**Snack Savings:** Sixty percent of the survey respondents said that they were packing their own snacks instead of buying prepared snacks more often than a year ago. Forty percent of consumers said they were purchasing a

snack to replace a meal more often than a year ago. Some said their snack behavior had changed to save money and others noted it changed to a more healthful portion.

Offering healthful, convenient snacking alternatives that consumers can customize and assemble themselves to save money can capture a big bite of this growing day-part. Since consumers are brown bagging more often, appropriate snack-size offerings from the deli could enhance sales and cus-

tomers satisfaction.

**Generation Gap:** The study showed a significant difference in the way younger respondents (18-24) are dealing with the new frugality versus older consumers (55-plus). Older consumers were far less likely to report cutting back in their dining out and current food purchasing patterns. In fact, 76 percent of these consumers reported they had not changed their eating habits as a result of the economy in the past year.

Younger consumers reported the highest incidence of changes related to the economy, with 68 percent reporting changes in their behavior in the last year related to the economy. These consumers tended to be the most responsive to coupons, discounts and value-priced offerings.

**The New Frugality Emerges As The New Normal:** The survey asked what cost-conscious behaviors consumers are likely to continue doing when the economy picks up. Many said they will keep doing everything they are doing now. The most common themes included: being generally more frugal with money, using coupons, cooking more at home and going out less and sharing food.

The precarious economy has been a learning experience that has often been incredibly painful. But when it comes to consumers' relationships with food, there may be a slow return to "dining as usual" as many of the respondents to the survey indicated a new awareness of value and how and where they choose to dine.

**About the Culinary Visions Panel:** The Culinary Visions Panel includes an annual roundtable discussion with food-industry leaders from retail, foodservice and culinary education disciplines. Their insights are used to craft a series of consumer surveys on emerging issues throughout the year.

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