



RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

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Fresh, Healthy And Home Cooked – Reimagining The Ideal Meal

Today's consumers are eating at home more often, and according to a new on-line survey, fresh and healthy ingredients from the produce department are among the most important characteristics of the ideal home meal.

The study focused on shoppers who frequently dine in casual restaurants to get their perspectives on cooking at home compared to their dining experiences away from home; 221 consumers were surveyed about what inspires and satisfies them when they cook at home.

Consumers are also learning that cooking is not really that difficult, thanks to food television and a growing food culture to demystify the art, techniques and satisfaction of cooking. Value systems are shifting and the experience of a meal at home is winning out more and more over the perceived indulgence of dining out.

The Motivation to Cook At Home

Saving money is the driving force behind much consumer behavior in today's marketplace and it's no different when it comes to cooking. The top reason for cooking at home was to save money (81 percent). However, 72 percent said they are cooking at home to get their meals exactly the way they like them. The more frequently respondents cooked at home, the more important they rated characteristics like "getting good ingredients," and "to get just what you want."

Consumers talked about how easy it was to have it all when dining at home, and one comment captured it perfectly. Healthful foods and lots of fresh vegetables were a major plus for home meals. Study respondents also reported that they like the nutritional integrity

of cooking at home.

Convenience was another positive factor consumers attributed to home cooking. Consumers reported that making home cooked meals often took less time to prepare and cook than restaurant take-out that required driving to a restaurant, waiting and then reheating and serving at home.

The Home Dining Experience

Restaurants have long held the enviable position as the destination for dining experiences, yet consumers are talking about their home-dining experiences with the same passionate vocabulary that was once reserved for special occasion dining out. In this study, consumers talked about wine and candlelight with their home-cooked meals. They also talked about not being rushed and the joy of eating with real silverware instead of disposables.

The majority of respondents in all age groups reported they were cooking more meals at home. Overall, 63 percent reported cooking the meal themselves; 12 percent said cooking was a family experience and only 4 percent admitted to bringing the meal home from a restaurant to reheat and serve. There were far more comments from consumers about the desire for someone else to clean up after the meal than there were requests for others to do the actual cooking.

The joy of sharing the meal with others was a subject of many comments from consumers. Older consumers talked of the re-emergence of childhood traditions, yet all talked of the simple pleasure of a shared dining experience, "eating good food and enjoying each other's company."

Fresh Satisfaction

Fresh ingredients were considered important or very important to 94 percent of consumers when asked to describe their ideal dining experience at home. Healthful ingredi-

ents were noted by 90 percent, local fruits and/or vegetables were noted by 74 percent. Although organic fruits and vegetables have positive characteristics for consumers, 75 percent of respondents to the survey did not see them as important in creating an ideal home-dining experience.

The desire for a balanced life related directly to opportunities for produce. Consumers identified healthful foods as synonymous with fresh vegetables. Seasonal items were standout ingredients in the ideal meal experience defined by survey respondents. There was a resounding desire for well-balanced and healthful meals.

Luxuries such as home-delivered restaurant meals or an in-home chef preparing a meal were actually chosen by very few respondents (4 percent and 2 percent, respectively). These choices speak to an emergence of consumer preferences for a new simplicity that delivers an authentic experience over a fancy dining experience.

Cooking Styles

When asked about cooking styles, more than three-fourths of respondents reported cooking from scratch and reheating leftovers for another meal at least once a week. Thirty percent of respondents say they are cooking more from scratch than they were a year ago.

Making the Fresh Connection

Consumers in this study had some good advice for their local retailer. They asked for more access to local produce and the convenience of being able to find all the ingredients at one store. "Wow" packaging had no appeal when it came to produce where minimalism and freshness were the keys to desirability. The majority of consumers surveyed did not consider their home cooking fancy — just fresh, satisfying and just the way they like it.

Olson Communications Inc. is a Chicago, IL, based food marketing firm that specializes in trend spotting in the food business. Find them at www.olsoncom.com.