

The Changing Face of Health

What defines “healthy” today varies widely among consumers

HEALTHY FOOD AND DRINK have always been a focus of attention for consumers, even if not always in practice. But the term “healthy” can mean many different things to consumers depending on their age, gender and individual health goals.

Gone are the days when people would stock up on grapefruit or cabbage soup as a key to diet success. We’ve also moved past the Zone/South Beach/Atkins diets of more recent years.

In fact, many consumers say they’ve moved past diets altogether toward more holistic goals. That leaves foodservice operators scrambling to stay ahead of what consumers want — particularly those focused on convenience foods.

What Healthy Means Today

While a large portion set weight goals, more consumers than ever eat with an eye toward managing risk for chronic illness; achieving better sleep, stress or mental health; or targeting specific nutrients and functional benefits, according to the “New Foundations in Health” report from Datassential. Health innovation is now about touting beneficial nutrients, functional attributes and production methods to draw consumers’ eyes.

Consumers today are most focused on bettering their heart and gut health, building up immunity and lowering blood pressure, cholesterol and inflammation. And in large part, they’re looking for foods to do that, according to Datassential. The hyperfocus on immunity didn’t change after the pandemic, possibly because the move toward immunity-boosting and other functional foods had already begun before the beginning of COVID-19.

Immunity Across Genders & Generations

What defines “healthy” today varies widely among consumers, and their methods do as well.

Perhaps surprisingly, men are more likely to identify as strict dieters and “foodies,” which correlates with an openness to new eating styles or diets, consumption of “next-level” health foods, and an interest in cell cultured proteins or fortified foods and drinks.

Women’s diets don’t tend to involve the same kind of intense monitoring, Datassential revealed. Women are most often omnivores or flexitarians, and are significantly less likely to pursue other specific diets or eating styles. Still, women are more likely to gravitate toward specific functional benefits in foods compared to men. So, touting the functional benefits of a food may be the key to attracting a wide swath of both male and female consumers.

Just as male and female consumers think of health differently, so do consumers in different age groups. For instance, Boomers, like women, are less likely to hold to a strict diet or call themselves “foodies,” and they are also more likely to opt for better-for-you options when they dine out, rather than vegan substitutes to which younger generations tend to gravitate.

And while Gen Z and millennial consumers have the same level of awareness and interest in functional foods as their older counterparts, younger consumers are more likely to go out of their way to find those items in foodservice or retail. Popular functional foods include pickled vegetables, ginger, chamomile and cayenne. Those in the “adoption” stage of Datassential’s Menu Adoption Cycle include fermented foods, bone broth, turmeric and CBD.

Plant-Based Innovation

Consumers are more willing than ever to explore plant-based substitutes as a way to eat healthier. Popular plant-based swaps include jackfruit, which can be used to replace pulled pork or beef; zucchini or other veggie noodles as a swap for pasta; and cauliflower as a go-to substitute for pizza crusts, rice and even chicken wings. And interest is starting to grow in plant-based meat substitutes for charcuterie and jerky. These options may appeal primarily to customers who avoid meat altogether, and more adventurous flexitarians.

When consumers do opt for meat, higher-quality sourcing is of the utmost importance. Many consumers are willing to pay more for it, so it’s important that sustainable or ethical sourcing methods — organic, free-range, pasture raised, non-GMO, antibiotic free, etc. — are featured prominently on packaging.

The Keto Diet Wins the Day

Even though consumers today are generally more focused on a holistic pathway to health, there are still diet trends that hold a great deal of attention. After intermittent fasting, which involves restricting food for a certain number of hours in the day, the ketogenic (keto) diet is the fastest growing in terms of awareness or practice since 2019.

The keto diet is a low-carb, high-fat diet similar to Atkins, and foodservice has been responding by offering protein-rich pizza crusts (i.e., Blaze Pizza’s Protein Pizza) and more vitamin-packed veggies and salad mixes (i.e., Chipotle’s Supergreens mix, replacing romaine).

The term “keto” grew a whopping 63 percent on menus this year, and it’s poised for further growth across foodservice as consumers begin to refocus on healthier eating. **CSN**

Datassential, a Chicago-based food and beverage industry research and consulting firm, brings clients real-world insights on flavor trends, foodservice and consumer packaged goods, globally. Learn more at datassential.com.