



Debunking healthy food myths.
And what foodservice
operators should really do.

Glance through any current foodservice trend report and you're likely to come across three key topics: dietary requirements with an emphasis on gluten-free options; plant-based food and the meteoric rise of the meat-free burger; and bowls of all kinds – poke, acai, Buddha, the list continues.

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Clearly, consumers want healthier, more customisable, more sustainable and more convenient food. But for operators to truly meet these demands – and keep their bottom lines under control – it’s important for them to go beyond the buzzwords. Here, we will examine all three trends to find out how.

Trend 1: Plant-based food

The move away from meat has accelerated rapidly in the last few years, but never faster than during the early months of the coronavirus pandemic. According to data released by the Plant Based Foods Association (PBFA) and wellness data and market analytics firm SPINS, sales of plant-based meat grew twice as fast as animal meat in spring 2020 (up 148% since 2019), while tofu and tempeh sales were 88% higher. Even after the peak panic buying period, sales of plant-based meat continued to grow faster than animal meat. Plant-based seafood is another emerging sector, although it still only accounts for 1% of total plant-based meat sales.

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A common misconception is that plant-based meat is healthier than its animal equivalent. In fact, that’s not necessarily the case. For example, while plant-based burgers are produced with a fraction of the negative environmental impact that comes from farming livestock, they are very similar in terms of calories, sodium and saturated fat due to the high degree of processing involved. This varies between brands; the Beyond Burger has less saturated fat than the Impossible Burger but a similar calorie count.

If a meat-like alternative is not the priority, but rather a healthy, cost-effective, eco-friendly dish, a plant-based burger may not be the way to go. Food sustainability expert Will Nicholson instead recommends considering a curry that’s packed full of veggies. It’s a winner on a macro and micro-nutrient level, there’s less salt, sugar and fat, it’s cheaper, it can be built from solely organic ingredients and it meets consumer demand for exotic flavours.

“If you are looking for a healthy, cost-effective, eco-friendly dish a curry that’s packed full of veggies might be a good alternative.”

Will Nicholson

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Trend 2: Gluten-free options

There's also a perception amongst many consumers that gluten-free equals healthy, but in many cases, that's simply not true. Gluten-free bread is often highly processed and packed full of sugar. It's a similar story with items commonly sold in cafes like gluten-free brownies.

Gluten-free is certainly a trend operators need to keep top of mind – the global market is expected to expand from \$5.6 billion to \$8.3 billion between 2020 and 2025 as more people are diagnosed with celiac disease, but also as more consumers pick gluten-free options to enhance their personal brand or make a statement about being health-conscious. In addition, more stringent regulations around ingredient labelling mean this trend is no longer something foodservice businesses can ignore.

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There are simple ways for caterers to provide gluten-free options that are healthy and cost-effective, without changing their menus – not using wheat flour to thicken soups or curries for example. Or marketing healthy bowls and salads as gluten-free.

It's also high time for businesses to invest in digital systems to keep on top of allergens and meet regulations. The best of these can show an audit trail of compliance right to the supplier, ensuring operators are staying within the law and at the same time reassuring customers that they will be safe eating at the venue. These systems can also be used to count the calories in dishes and put that information on the menu, something else consumers – and regulators – are increasingly interested in.

Trend 3: Bowl 2.0

Healthy bowls came in fifth out of 133 menu trends in the National Restaurant Association's What's Hot 2020 culinary forecast. It's no surprise, given that these 'build your own' meals meet consumers' demand for customisation, convenience and exotic foreign flavours, as well as being good for you.

For operators' part, bowls are appealing because they use lower-cost ingredients such as brown rice or lettuce, while high-priced proteins and other premium items can be added in small quantities. Restaurants and caterers can also use bowls to highlight seasonal ingredients and limited time offers, while allowing customers to create their own meal invariably results in lower food waste.

Bowls are also ideal for delivery and takeaway, another fast-growing trend.



British operator Vita Mojo, has taken customisation to the next level by allowing diners to use a touch screen to pick exactly the combination of proteins, vegetables, side dishes and sauces they want, depending on their likes, budget and nutritional needs. Menu items are flagged with either a green or a red Helix to indicate the health benefit or risk associated with them.

Bowls are also ideal for delivery and takeaway, another fast-growing trend, particularly during the current difficult trading conditions. For business caterers, this could be a real boon, with employees potentially taking a box home from the office canteen if they plan to work from home the next day.

How can RATIONAL help.

The flexibility of the iCookingSuite is ideal for an operator that wants to offer a variety of different ingredients and ensure they are all cooked to perfection.

Intelligent monitoring means the quantity, size and condition of the food is automatically detected and cooking parameters are adjusted accordingly. The system also saves energy, space and raw ingredients, and as much as 95% fat and oil.

The system combines the iCombi Pro, which cooks gently with 100% fresh steam and the iVario Pro, which has enough reserve power to preserve valuable nutrients and can be divided up into four zones.

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