

Foodservice Updates

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Embracing cultural and generational food preferences in seniors

Staff training strategies that improve safety without increasing turnover

AI-driven menu planning is reducing waste and allowing earlier health interventions

New year, new strategy



Embracing cultural and generational food preferences in seniors

Today's senior living residents are more diverse — culturally, ethnically, and generationally — than ever before, and foodservice programs are under growing pressure to reflect that reality. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, adults over 65 are the fastest-growing age group in the U.S., and that population includes increasing numbers of older adults from Hispanic, Asian, and multiracial backgrounds. Dining programs that embrace these cultures can create both emotional and nutritional opportunities for residents. The Academy of Nutrition and

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Honoring cultural and generational food preferences is a strategic way to boost resident satisfaction in senior living and adult care facilities, support nutrition goals, and position dining as a core part of a person's quality of life.

culture

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Dietetics emphasizes that culturally familiar foods can improve intake and satisfaction, particularly for residents with cognitive decline.

Generational influence matters just as much as cultural background. Many older Baby Boomers came of age during the rise of global cuisine and casual dining, and they often expect bolder flavors, menu choice, and customization. Research from the National Restaurant Association has found that global flavors from Latin American, Mediterranean, and Asian cuisines continue to gain traction across all age groups, including seniors.

Senior living operators are responding by rotating culturally inspired menus, offering customizable spice levels, and engaging residents through food-focused events tied to heritage or travel themes. Global flavors can support a range of resident needs: Spanish tapas can encourage residents to sample new foods (and help operators manage waste while accommodating reduced appetites). Indian curries can support the need for soft textures. Consider a seven-countries-in-seven-days menu rotation, or occasional theme nights that incorporate the music, decorations and attire of a culture to encourage sensory connections to the menu.



By pairing AI menu planning with complementary technology, operators can create a feedback loop that enhances their accuracy and efficiency over time — whether it be in managing inventory and waste, or in identifying health risks early in care facilities.

AI-driven menu planning is reducing waste and allowing earlier health interventions

Artificial intelligence (AI) is moving beyond buzzword status to deliver measurable results in foodservice operations, including menu planning that improves nutrition, cuts waste, and streamlines costs. The USDA estimates that food waste costs the industry an estimated \$160 billion annually, largely due to overproduction and inaccurate forecasting. AI-based demand forecasting tools analyze historical sales, seasonal patterns, and consumption trends to predict exactly how much of each dish will be needed. A number of studies have found that on average, kitchens using these tools are reducing waste by 40 percent or more when compared with traditional methods.

At the same time, using AI for menu optimization can tailor offerings to resident preferences and dietary needs. These systems examine past meal popularity and resident feedback to highlight the dishes that drive satisfaction while suggesting portion adjustments or substitutions for less popular items. As a result, they can more closely align their food preparation and consumption, which supports nutrition goals and reduces leftover food.

AI systems have the potential to deliver even more benefits in senior living contexts. When combined with care records, AI dining data can help flag nutrition risks like weight loss, low intake, or missed meals. This can be especially valuable in memory care, helping dietitians intervene proactively and identify residents at risk of malnutrition earlier.

New year, new strategy



Reevaluating labor, menu strategy and technology adoption for the year ahead can help businesses operate with greater confidence amid tight margins and shifting consumer demand.

The start of each year offers a chance to refresh — to review what went well and where improvements are possible. This year, planning with precision is more critical than ever amid evolving consumer behavior and economic pressures. Datassential forecasts predict that overall consumer spending at foodservice operations will reach nearly \$979 billion in 2026, though much of the growth reflects inflation rather than real traffic increases, with traffic expected to remain modest.

Successfully competing for that traffic while managing costs calls for leaders to reexamine their strategies in a few key areas. It's a good time to review labor strategies, given persistent shortages and rising wages that have squeezed margins industry-wide. Practical labor forecasting and cross-training can help maintain service quality without ballooning costs.

Menu strategy also demands fresh scrutiny. Value and affordability are top of mind for consumers. Blending comfort with innovation — with lower-cost chicken-centric dishes, health-forward items, and premium items at appealing price points — will continue to be important to attracting cost-sensitive diners.

Finally, technology adoption should be grounded in measurable ROI. Smart forecasting tools, digital ordering systems, and analytics can all help drive greater efficiencies and revenue growth when paired with clear objectives and staff training.



Being strategic about safety can improve both compliance and retention. For example, tying safety training to career pathways — such as ServSafe certification or lead cook roles — can help employees see training as an investment, not a burden.

Staff training strategies that improve safety without increasing turnover

Foodservice leaders are rethinking safety training as a retention tool — not just a compliance requirement. High turnover remains a challenge: The U.S. foodservice industry saw turnover rates of 75 percent in recent years, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Yet research shows that how employees are trained can directly influence whether they stay.

One effective strategy is microlearning — short, task-specific training delivered in brief modules. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have said frequent, focused food safety refreshers improve rule adherence more than infrequent, lengthy sessions. Operators using mobile-friendly microtraining report fewer violations and less training fatigue.

Another proven approach is peer-led safety coaching. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration emphasizes worker participation — including having experienced employees serving as trainers or safety champions — as a best practice for improving engagement and effectiveness in workplace safety programs. This builds accountability while reinforcing team culture.

When the training happens has an impact too. The Society for Human Resource Management found that employees are more engaged and less likely to quit when training is embedded into normal shifts rather than added as unpaid or off-hour requirements. When that training is delivered “just in time” — via short safety prompts near equipment or prep areas through QR-code videos or visual cues — the lessons more effectively reinforce correct behaviors at the moment they are needed.