

Foodservice Updates

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Predicting post-lockdown preferences

Tip the scales in your favor when consumers are considering where to order their next meal.

In recent months, your business may have offered more bulk meals or meal kits to customers looking to enjoy restaurant-quality food during the lockdown. Are these options worth carrying over as people begin to return to dining at restaurants and gathering with more people? Simon-Kucher & Partners, a global strategy and marketing consulting firm that works with a range of major restaurant brands, addressed this question in a recent study they conducted about consumer behavior after COVID-19. The findings, as reported by QSR Magazine, indicate that the answer is a probable yes. Prior to the pandemic, it found that 33 percent of consumers favored home-cooked meals, while 67 preferred food prepared away from home. Contrast that with preferences during the pandemic (55 percent vs. 45 percent) and preferences projected between six and 12 months post-lockdown (37 percent to 63 percent). In many areas, it will likely take a number of months before consumer routines return to what they were like prior to the pandemic. Providing some core menu items that can be offered as family-style meals, or packaging up ingredients that can be combined and cooked at home, can offer some additional freedom to guests – and perhaps tip the scales in your favor when consumers are considering where to order their next meal.



Sticker shock? Rethink your proteins

Even before the lockdown, plant-based foods were in increasing demand among consumers. The National Restaurant Association included plant-based among their top trends of the year. As we emerge from lockdown, consumer preferences for healthy, plant-forward options remain – and are worth serious consideration as operators try to manage price spikes on animal proteins ranging from beef to pork to chicken. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that in April, grocery prices were the highest they had been in 50 years, with the sharpest increases recorded for meat, poultry, fish and eggs. If you are given the choice between raising the menu price of a burger and removing that item from your menu until prices fall to more manageable levels, could you choose? Or might it be possible to offer a plant-forward option as a third alternative? If your guest base likes to do its part to protect the environment, promote the benefits of substituting a meal of animal protein with a plant-based option. The Environmental Working Group suggests integrating such protein alternatives as lentils, beans, chickpeas, tofu, nuts, peanut butter and brown rice into recipes to shrink environmental impact. Doing so can help you keep a lid on costs too.



Take a look at your top tech needs



If your restaurant hadn't been adopting technology to help manage business prior to the pandemic, it is surely heading in that direction now. As you prepare your business for the future, how can you best use technology to empower your restaurant – and not overwhelm or sidetrack it? Senior technology leaders who comprise the Forbes Technology Council recently weighed in on the tech functions that are ripe for an upgrade right now. When it comes to restaurants, expect improvements to logistics automation in an effort to protect the supply chain, cybersecurity and digital privacy protections as more data moves online, and tech offerings that enable a contact-free restaurant experience. As you look at your operation, which of these areas do you anticipate needing a boost from technology in the months ahead? The vast array of options coming to market will create opportunity for restaurant operators needing solutions.

Take care in the kitchen

As restaurants reopen their dining rooms, there has been much focus on maintaining distance between tables. But don't neglect your kitchen. While a few months ago, it might have been workable to have your back-of-house team working side by side and shouting across the room in a space with passable ventilation, that won't work now. If your staff prepared each dish in a line, can you adjust your procedures so one person is responsible for preparing and plating each dish – or better stagger staff to allow greater distance between them? In the interest of limiting the spread of the virus should one of your staff be infected, can you create teams of employees that rotate on and off shifts together? While the National Restaurant Association and your local authorities have offered reopening guidelines, you know your kitchen best – and what safety precautions are most likely to fall by the wayside during a rush. What weak points can you address to protect your employees and business?



Understand the air around you

Local governments have been focusing on outdoor dining for good reason: As the weather warms and we need air conditioning to keep spaces cool, the risk of spreading virus particles can increase indoors. Recent research from the University of Oregon and the University of California, Davis, found that the path of air circulation within a restaurant plays an important role limiting the spread of the virus, particularly because the air stream in a restaurant can carry virus particles beyond the six-foot social distancing guideline. However, risks improve in situations with a window and an exhaust fan helping to manage air flow. The research team created a visual model to show the differences in transmission in a closed room where indoor air is recirculated and in a room that circulates some outdoor air through a window. While circulating outdoor air isn't workable in every restaurant or every part of the country, Boston 25 News reports that Kevin Van Den Wymelenberg, one of the authors of the research, said you can test a building for the presence of the virus and then take steps to adjust air circulation patterns to minimize risk in your facility.



Satisfying salad

Texture, crunch and color all elevate the experience of a dish. Add some hearty starch to the mix and you have a recipe for serious satisfaction. A nutrient-dense orzo and wild rice salad can be filled with colorful, fresh vegetables, topped with pomegranate seeds and mixed in a light dressing of olive oil and lemon juice. The wide range of textures and flavors make for a memorable salad and a colorful addition to a meal.



The benefits of a mobile menu

Your restaurant has no doubt been making adjustments to its menu – both in terms of dishes and the physical list you present to customers. Have you thought about moving your menu to phones and mobile devices? A report from The Spoon predicts the shift toward digital ordering will make this inevitable. The approach has its benefits, be-

yond the germ-related. Customization is a critical one. Consider a guest who wants to know the origins of the fresh produce on your menu, access reviews prior to ordering, or even request special portion sizes or ingredients. Digital hand-held menus can build in that functionality, all while allowing you the flexibility

to make prompt changes to pricing, ingredients and limited-time offers.



Orzo and Wild rice salad with crunchy vegetables



Ingredients:

- 1 ¼ box orzo
- 3 cups cooked wild rice
- 1 ½ cups, celery, small diced
- 1 ½ cups, carrots, small diced
- 1 ¼ cups, Vidalia onion, diced
- 5 Tbsp, lemon Juice
- 6 Tbsp, extra virgin olive oil
- ½ Cup, pomegranate seeds
- ¾ cup Micro greens
- Salt and pepper to taste

Instructions:

1. Cook the orzo and wild rice separately according to the directions, drain and cool down.
2. Meanwhile saute the onion over medium-high heat for two minutes, add carrots, saute one more minute, season with salt and pepper and cool down as quick as possible.
3. Toss all veggies with rice, pasta, olive oil and lemon.
4. Top with pomegranate and micro greens before serving.

Recipe and photo courtesy of Barilla

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