

Food + Thought



As the calendar flipped over into 2015, we saw some food trends deepening, some new ones appearing and a few disappearing (your days are numbered, cronut!). New definitions of “healthy” are being merged with a new frugality in the food world — and producing dishes reminiscent of your grandma’s kitchen. American’s palates are continuing to evolve, with savory flavors taking center stage and new, exotic tastes gaining a foothold.

VEGETABLE OBSESSION!!!!



VEGGIE OF THE YEAR: CAULIFLOWER

High in vitamin C and fiber, cauliflower is the latest vegetable to become farm-to-table trendy. More versatile than 2014’s trendy vegetable, kale, cauliflower is mildly flavored and can be roasted, mashed, baked, fried, and even used to make gluten-free pizza crust. Try it “steaked” — cook a thick filet made from the center of the cauliflower and top it with gravy or other sauce.



RETURN OF THE ROOT VEGETABLE

Old-fashioned roots like turnips, rutabagas and radishes — As chefs continue to embrace local and seasonal ingredients, in much of the country that means winter root vegetables. Menu penetration of root vegetables has gone up 40% since 2009 ('13 vs. '09; Datassential MenuTrends). Now, we’ve moved past beets and squash to seeing radishes, turnips, and rutabagas on the menu, puréed into soups and pickled as well as the more common method of roasting. And waste not! Root vegetables’ once-discarded greens are now finding their way onto the plate as well.

INNOVATIONS IN VEGETABLES: HYBRIDS AND MINIATURES

Traditional vegetables aren’t getting all the love — new innovations like hybrids and miniatures are also hot. Miniature vegetables (and no, we’re not talking about those “baby carrots” that you eat with your hummus) are sometimes actually baby vegetables and sometimes distinct or hybrid vegetables that are smaller when mature. Hybrids are bred to deliver a mega-nutritional punch in a super-palatable form. Broccolini is a hybrid of broccoli and Chinese cabbage that’s sweeter and easier to prepare than broccoli. Lollipop kale, or BrusselKale, is a brussels sprout/kale hybrid that is said to deliver the best of both vegetables



PLANT PROTEINS: FREEKEH AND SPELT AND A FUTURE PLANT BASED “EGG”

Move over, quinoa! Freekeh is the new high-protein plant. Freekeh is wheat that has been harvested young (green) and roasted. Its flavor is similar to that of bulgur and barley, and it cooks in 20 minutes and offers a higher protein content than mature wheat and more than twice the fiber of other grains and quinoa. Next on the plant-based protein horizon: a plant-based egg substitute, currently in development, that offers the cooking flexibility and mouthfeel of the real thing.



National Restaurant Association’s “What’s Hot 2015”

1. Reducing Food Waste

Driven by both social responsibility and costs, restaurants are looking to reduce food waste. Tactics include composting, recycling and donating.



1. House-made

The ultimate in local — from ice cream to cheese, pickles to bacon, lemonade to beer — restaurants are producing their own signature menu items from scratch.

3. Pickles Restaurants are exploring house-made pickles, ethnic flavors, specialty vinegars, small-batch producers with less traditional vegetable varieties and fermented flavor profiles in a variety of dishes.



4. Ethnic Cuisine

Ethnic cuisine continues to make inroads into mainstream menus. Ethnic ingredients, including cheeses, flour and condiments, are increasingly finding their way into non-ethnic dishes. Specific dishes, such as ramen, ethnic street food and kids’ entrees are also gaining momentum.



5. Kid Gourmet

Gourmet kids’ dishes are being adapted from adult menu items. Growing in parallel are healthy versions of those gourmet kids’ items, featuring whole grains, vegetables, oven-baked items and entrée salads.



Nitro Coffee

Forget iced coffee — the next big thing for coffee drinkers to keep an eye on is the nitro brew. Packed with caffeine, this drink is pulled from a tap and infused with nitrogen to give it a smoother, creamier flavor (think Guinness without the alcohol). Pioneered by Stumptown Coffee Roasters it’s predicted to crop up at more and more coffeehouses this year.

Sterling-Rice Group's Top 10 Culinary Trends for 2015

1. Regional Grains

Farmers are raising small-scale alternative grain varieties and selling them to local bakers, brewers, chefs, and consumers, who are in turn using DIY mills to grind fresh flour for bread, pizza, and pastries.



2. Advanced Asian

More complex and true-to-region Asian foods, like Northern (Isaan) Thai cuisine, Japanese okonomiyaki pancakes, and the tangy flavors of Filipino foods.



3. Cannabis Cuisine

Going beyond pot brownies, today's edibles come in many forms, including confections, bars, simple syrups and even bottled cold-brewed coffee. Cookbooks, cooking classes and online reviewers have legitimized the industry.



4. Ancient Charcoal

Japanese charcoal, or binchotan, is kilned oak that burns at 1,652° to 2,192°F in a clean, odorless, and smokeless way that allows food to cook quickly and retain its natural flavors. Thai charcoal performs a similar feat.



5. Hop-Free Beer

Brewers are taking a cue from their medieval predecessors and using herbs, spices, and other bitter plants to provide flavor balance and aroma to beer instead of hops. These seasonings, or gruits, include mushrooms, saffras, rosemary, tea, hemp and even reindeer lichen.

6. Matcha Madness

A nutrient powerhouse, green tea is hitting the market in a variety of convenient formats. Made from crushed green tea leaves, matcha is brimming with antioxidants, L-theanine and beta-carotene.



7. Farm-to-Table Kosher

Seeking to eat in a more sustainable, conscious, and cultural way, Millennial Jews are starting to keep kosher, supported by a rise in small businesses offering better-tasting, better-sourced, and more varied kosher fare.

8. Coconut Sugar

Made from coconut blossom nectar, coconut sugar has a lower glycemic index than cane sugar and more nutrients, adding a sweet halo to granolas, confections and spreads in the natural channel.



9. Restaurant Incubators

These incubators support aspiring chefs with kitchens, dining spaces and marketing power. Diners vote with their forks.

10. Ugly Fruits / Veggies

In line with growing concerns over food waste, this French-born trend gives misshapen and funny-looking produce a place at the table in recipes where looks don't matter.



Restaurant Delivery Beyond Seamless



While pizza and Chinese food delivery have long been staples around the country — and Seamless and GrubHub have leveraged the Internet to expand delivery options — we're now seeing a new wave of restaurant delivery brands. Some brands, like Munchery and Momofuku chef David Chang's Maple, deliver "chef-inspired" meals from their own kitchens, while Caviar offers food from high-end restaurants not seen on GrubHub. Peachd offers a "lunch of the day" with no delivery fee. All of these brands leverage smartphone apps for seamless, on-demand service. Amazon is currently testing a similar service in its home market of Seattle.



The New Starbucks: Matcha Cafes

Matcha is a finely ground green tea powder that is whisked with liquid to create a frothy, creamy beverage that claims to provide a sustained energy boost, an increased metabolism and a caffeine hit without the jitters. While matcha and matcha lattes have long been available at coffee-focused cafés, including Starbucks, now new specialty matcha cafés are popping up in hip neighborhoods in places like San Francisco, Portland and New York. The traditional matcha preparation process is highly ritualized, and pre-mixed matcha simply won't do for those in the know — MatchaBar founders Graham and Max Fortgang say that they are "fixated on the idea of sharing this ancient tradition with the modern metropolis around them."



Artisanal Candy

Perhaps the final frontier of small batch and local: artisanal candy. Pinterest is full of DIY candy recipes and how-to's, as people try to replicate their favorites with healthier or better quality ingredients. Subscription service Treatsie will send you a monthly treat box of artisanal candy from around the country. And the truly committed can create their own chocolate at home from raw cacao, following instruction on chocolatealchemy.com

* Sources: NYT

Back To Fat:

The Return of Whole Milk, Dairy, Butter, and Chicken Thighs

With the rejection of processed foods — and the processed fats that go into them — natural, animal-derived fat is experiencing a major comeback. Butter sales are at a 40-year high, and recent studies have indicated that whole-milk dairy products might actually help people lose weight. Organic Valley has seen a 10% increase in sales of whole milk and a decline in lower-fat varieties. *The New York Times* recently romanced schmaltz — a.k.a. rendered chicken fat. And the fattier chicken thigh is the darling of food bloggers everywhere, who praise its richer taste, forgiving nature and lower price tag versus the leaner chicken breast. The price of chicken thighs rose by 15% in 2012.

* Sources: The Huffington Post, WSJ, NPR



Tacos

Fueled by both the popularity of Chipotle and innovation at the high end, (i.e. Michelin-starred chef Rene Redzepi's taco shop, called Hija de Sanchez, in Copenhagen), a new crop of taco fast-food chains and mini-chains are cropping up around the country. Featuring local and natural meats and ingredients and creative fillings, brands you might start to see soon include Chronic Tacos, Velvet Taco, and The Little Chihuahua.

* Sources: Forbes, Andrew Freeman & Co.

Savory in Unexpected Places: Yogurts and Ice Cream

Savory flavors are popping up in some traditionally sweet products. Blue Hill Farm has developed a line of vegetable-flavored yogurts now available in limited distribution in the NYC area. The yogurts come in six flavors and can be eaten alone or used as either a condiment or an ingredient, like sour cream, Blue Hill provides recipes online. Ice cream is also being given the savory treatment, with meat and fish ice creams appearing on menus. Scaramouche, one of TripAdvisor's top 10 ice cream shops in France, makes beet sorbet, rosemary and olive oil ice cream, and fennel seed ice cream. Owner Gwendal Auffret admits that these are not among his most popular flavors, but "some people love them... and in general even people who do not eat them talk about them, so this is good advertising."

