

Snack size set to dethrone super size

Written by Kelly Thurman
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SFBJ-Food Trends

Top 20 trends

1. Locally sourced meats and seafood
2. Locally grown produce
3. Healthy kids' meals
4. Environmental sustainability
5. Children's nutrition
6. New cuts of meat (e.g. Denver steak, pork flat iron, teres major)
7. Hyper-local sourcing (e.g. restaurant gardens)
8. Gluten-free cuisine
9. Sustainable seafood
10. Whole grain items in kids' meals
11. Farm/estate branded items
12. Nonwheat noodles/pasta (e.g. quinoa, rice, buckwheat)
13. Nontraditional fish (e.g. branzino,

Arctic

char, barramundi)

14. Ethnic-inspired breakfast items (e.g. Asian-flavored syrups, chorizo scrambled eggs, coconut milk pancakes)

15. Fruit/vegetable children's side items

16. Health/nutrition

17. Half-portions/smaller portions for a smaller price

18. House-made/artisan ice cream

19. Black/forbidden rice

20. Food trucks

Source: National Restaurant Association

We've become a nation of snackers.

Whether it's a quick trip through a fast food drive-through or a stop at the supermarket, diners are eating more often and choosing smaller-sized portions.

"We're seeing people, say, having two or three mini plates to reduce (cost) and also create

more variety,” said Phil Lempert, an industry analyst who calls himself the Supermarket Guru. “It’s a healthier way to eat, having mini meals throughout the day versus sitting down to three humongous meals.”

In response, businesses are “right-sizing” their products.

At Wendy’s, there’s a menu branded “Right Price Right Size” with items starting at 99 cents, including a junior bacon cheeseburger, Caesar side salad and small chili. At Burger King, there’s a new coffee blend and Minibon cinnamon rolls. McDonald’s recently announced it will test an egg-white McMuffin, and all three chains offer snack-sized chicken wraps.

A survey by the Symphony IRI Group found that people ate more snacks in 2012 than in 2009. Many, 49 percent, still have one or two snacks daily, but the amount of people who have three or four daily doubled to 43 percent. Those in the range of five to six snacks a day also doubled to 6 percent.

The savory and sweet snack market was expected to increase 4 percent in 2012 to \$34 billion in sales, driven largely by the fact that people, particularly younger generations, are eating more between meals, according to Euromonitor International, a market research firm.

The company expects healthy products to be at the forefront of growth. Nut sales, for instance, continued to see rapid growth in 2012.

Gary Stibel, chief executive of the New England Consulting Group, said in a MarketWatch report last year that snacking is “a long-term trend and the future of eating. You and I will continue to snack more and sit down to a meal less.”

Packaged food companies are increasingly looking to the snack food segment as an avenue for growth as society becomes more mobile, according to the MarketWatch report.

That’s playing out with several companies. Frito-Lay last year focused on adding more premium and lower priced chips to its portfolio while ConAgra introduced its already popped Orville Reddenbacher’s popcorn. Meanwhile, Kellogg Co. purchased Pringles last year for \$2.7 million.

An expected increase in commodity prices – 3 percent to 4 percent according the American Farm Bureau Federation – also could affect what people see on their plates this coming year.

Beef prices already have increased, and some food experts say other options such as fish, chicken and even eggs and tofu dishes likely will become more popular this year as consumers try to save money. Portion sizes also could see a small reduction as restaurants work to stem costs without raising prices, another reason mini plates likely will continue to be popular this year, according to Lempert.

“One thing that we’ve seen really change for the better in restaurants are happy hours,” he said. “The focus is less on cheaper drinks these days and more on cheaper mini plates like quesadillas and sliders.”

While tapas, or small plates, have been a trend in metro areas, Todd Porter, who owns the franchise rights to Applebee's, Johnny Carino's, Chevys Fresh Mex and Papa John's Pizza, said it's not a huge trend driving sales in Sioux Falls.

"We still sell a lot of steaks, a lot of burgers, a lot of red meat. ... It's still meat-and-potatoes country," Porter said.

Healthy trend continues

The trend toward healthier meals is expected to continue this year.

The National Restaurant Association ranked sustainable and locally grown foods among the top projected trends for the year.

Steve Johnson, a food consultant called the Grocerant Guru, said the shift toward healthier, lower calorie options has been happening slowly but steadily for years. He expects new food-labeling regulations tied to the Affordable Care Act will further the shift. The labeling regulations will mandate that chain restaurants with 20 or more locations post nutritional information on in-store menus and menu boards.

But he also said certain foods might be perceived as healthier even though they might not necessarily be. Chicken nuggets are an example of that, he said, as is oatmeal that's sometimes offered as a breakfast option.

At Burger King restaurants in Sioux Falls, customers might start noticing menu items that combine the food trend toward healthier eating with the growing habit of snacking.

The company recently announced a new kind of chicken tenders. It's also added real fruit smoothies, revamped the coffee menu and started offering a variety of salads that can be made into a wrap for the consumer on the go, said Tom Walsh Jr., president of Dakota King, the local franchise owner.

"We're looking at those off hours of how we can create more traffic and take care of our guests," Walsh said. "When you look at real fruit smoothies, salads, wraps, those type of products are for snack-focused periods but also healthier eating. ... We've got a lot of options for those that want to have the healthy lifestyle. We've got it at a great price."

Bundling or providing healthy side options is another big trend, Johnson said, mentioning McDonald's and many other quick-serve options that now offer apples or another fruit as a side option instead of fries.

"They have offered them for a long time. Now, the consumer is buying into it," Johnson said.

Applebee's has been focusing on healthy meals for several years with its Weight Watchers options and entrees with fewer than 550 calories.

"I wouldn't say the increase in demand is double digits every year, but it's been a nice

positive increase all the time,” Porter said.

For Applebee’s, the trend this year will be new and innovative menu items to differentiate it from other national chain restaurants, Porter said. New to the appetizer menu are brew pub pretzels with beer cheese dip and fried green beans.

“It’s not always chicken wings and quesadillas anymore,” he said. “People are looking for some new and different items.”

WR Hospitality, which owns several local brands including the Phillips Avenue Diner, Grille 26, RedRossa Italian Grille and Minervas, increasingly is trying to use more local, sustainable products that provide healthier options, said Chad Olsen, the company’s corporate chef. The Diner, for instance, uses eggs from Dakota Farm Fresh Eggs.

“I don’t believe that individuals are burning as many calories as they once did in the past,” he said. “Menu portion size has been getting smaller because people aren’t eating as heavy of meals anymore ... plus, I believe that a lot of chefs are getting more creative with the ingredients that they’re using.”

Items such as squash, fingerling potatoes and root vegetables are showing up on the menu along with the fries and mashed potatoes. Gluten-free options are being incorporated to keep up with growing demand.

Restaurants used to always have a starch, vegetable and protein on the plate, he said. “Now you’re seeing things like vegetables and protein.”

Commodity prices also play a part in the menu. Reducing portions a bit allows prices to remain steady, Olsen said. Plus, particularly because beef prices increased in 2012, they’re looking to offer more frugal options, even at Minervas, which is known as a steakhouse.

“We’re starting to offer a lot more fresh fish and chicken and pork options that we are excited to take people away from spending all the money on beef,” he said.

Focus on kids’ menus

Children’s menu items in general are expected to be a focus this year, said Joy Dubost, director of nutrition and healthy living for the National Restaurant Association. Many restaurants say they’ll be adding more whole grains, fruits and vegetables.

“Everybody is just really trying to create more options for children that are consistent with good nutrition,” she said.

McDonald’s announced late last year it would expand healthy options for Happy Meals by offering other seasonal fruits and vegetables such as blueberries and cucumbers as well as a grilled chicken sandwich option.

At Applebee’s, kids’ items have healthier side options including fruit and broccoli.

The kids' menus at WR Hospitality restaurants also are offering more whole grain pastas, fruits and vegetables.

The snacking theme carries over here, too, as smaller plates and portion sizes are becoming more common as well as vegetables, Johnson said.

"Five years ago vegetables used to be a decoration. ... Now, the portion of the meat might be smaller, and the portion of the vegetables is going to be larger," he said. "One, because it's cheaper, and two, because it's healthier."