

GOING SOLO

THE LATEST CULINARY TREND?



With almost all types of world cuisines having now been dissected, when it comes to finding a winning restaurant concept, less is sometimes proving to be more. **Toufic Akl**, partner at Hodema consulting services, highlights the wisdom of narrowing things down and introduces us to the mono-product

Many F&B concepts are embracing this trend, which sees the 'mono-product chefs' share their obsession for creating an impeccable dish with a star ingredient as a way of standing out from the crowd. As the name implies, mono-product F&B concepts focus on one food product or item, whether chicken, eggs, meat, burgers, shawarma or

lobster. However, adopting this principle does not mean that the menus in mono-product outlets are necessarily simple or short, as is often the case with burger brands; in fact, many are highly developed and offer a wide variety of dishes, while retaining a key product at their core.

How it all started

Having existed for centuries, the mono-product trend has recently caught on in many major cities as an alternative to mainstream, sometimes hackneyed, concepts. Mono-product dishes were a popular offering in modest street-food shacks back in the late 19th century. Originally, each region around the globe had its own local specialty. However, fast forward to today and these concepts have followed in the steps of world food, extending their reach outside of their place of origin, and can now be found worldwide. Some, viewed as perhaps too traditional or old fashioned, have been revamped to give them a trendier image, using a more professional approach, especially where they've been adopted by franchising businesses.

Star products, from breakfast to dinner

Let's start with breakfast! The International House of Pancakes (IHOP) leads the way in this category, having expanded outside of the US and around the globe, extending its reach to the Middle East (Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE),

Asia (Thailand and India) and North America (Canada, Guatemala, Mexico and Panama).

Working on the philosophy that eggs have long been a favorite morning ingredient, the Canadian brand Eggspectation launched its concept back in 1993. Serving over 30 dishes revolving around eggs, including hits such as 'Huevos Rancheros' and Lobster Benny, the brand currently has over 25 restaurants in Canada, the US, India, Qatar and UAE.

Other brands putting the humble egg at the heart of their menu include Eggs & Co, tucked away in a small street of Paris' Saint Germain neighborhood. Barcelona's L'EGGS, an egg-centric restaurant, meanwhile, has managed to elevate the egg to the status of culinary delicacy, thanks to the creativity of its chef Paco Pérez, who serves up dishes such as 'Quail eggs on grilled marrow bone with slice chili and tender onions'.

If you're considering opening a restaurant that serves only cereals, you're in good company! Cereals certainly have their devotees, with brands like Cereal Killer Café, which is present in the UK, Jordan, UAE and Kuwait, the Beirut-born concept, Crunchy Flakes, Cereality in Texas and Cereal Lovers Bar in Madrid, all garnering loyal customer bases.

Burgers, hot-dog shacks and the famous ice-cream trucks were born in the US and, unsurprisingly, remain the most famous mono-products in that part of the world.

The unchallenged winner of the mono-product trend is predictably the burger, boasting over 200 international franchised brands, championed by McDonalds and Burger King. McDonalds serves over 70 million customers daily in over 100 countries across approximately 37,000 outlets. Middle Eastern brands are also riding the burger trend, including the Lebanese-born Classic Burger Joint, which is already present in Kuwait, the UAE and Iraq, and Saudi Arabia's Hamburgini brand, which has 27 units in the country.

Hot on the burger's heels is the pizza, personified around the globe by Pizza Hut and Domino's Pizza. Regional favorites include Saudi Arabia's Maestro Pizza, which has opened over 120 branches in just a few years. Staying in the region, it would be a crime to overlook the shawarma, which is to the Middle East what the burger is to the US. Beirut's Joseph restaurant won 'World's Tastiest Sandwich Award 2015', competing against 4,000 candidates across 150 cities to clinch the coveted title. In Saudi Arabia, fans can choose from more than 20 specialized brands, such as Shawarma House, Shawarma Factory, Shawarma 360, Shawarma Plus, Shawarma Emperor and Shawarmer. Dubai-born Swich, meanwhile, has taken the shawarma to a whole new level, offering chicken and meat, but also duck and portobello fillings that are served with dozens of topping and sauce options, customized to suit your personal taste. Today, the shawarma is firmly established as a favorite outside of the Middle East, even bagging a part in the 2012 movie The Avengers, when the stars celebrated saving our planet by enjoying one of the iconic wrapped sandwiches.

In direct competition with the shawarma stands the falafel, which originates from Egypt, where it is known as the ta'amiya. Having risen to the status of global celebrity, the fried chickpea ball can be found on menus of almost every Middle Eastern concept around the world, alongside those of dedicated shops, from street vendors to higher-end outlets. In Lebanon, Falafel Aboulziz and Karim Sahyoun are the references, with multiple branches across the country. Falafel are becoming increasingly popular in North America and Western Europe, where vegetarian diets are a rising trend.

When we think of chicken, KFC is the name that usually springs to mind. Originally called Sanders Court & Café, KFC operates in 80 different countries and boasts over 20,000 outlets. Newer brands are putting down roots on the international stage, however, with Chick-fil-A gaining ground in the US, while regionally, Malak al Tawouk in Beirut and Chicken Republic in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, are both building up followings.

In parts of South America, including Venezuela and Colombia, arepas have been an essential part of the diet for over 2,000

years. This local staple, which is a white cornbread cake, can be eaten either plain or stuffed with cheese, beef, avocado or beans. Although arepa shops have yet to spread much beyond the borders of their countries of origin, there are signs that this food trend is about to take off. One trailblazer leading the way is chef Federico Tischler, who has just opened White Envelope in Baltimore, while Arepera in Montreal and Guamá Arepa in the French city of Lille, are also bringing this South American favorite to a wider audience.

Found in small street shops all over China, Peking duck is as popular among locals as the shawarma is in the Middle East. However, few international franchises have followed, save for Quanjude which has expanded from China to Melbourne, Australia and Toronto, Canada, which could be food for thought for savvy investors.

When it comes to sweet success, waffles have long been among the winners. The Belgian trademark snack, made from dough and instantly recognizable thanks to its patterned texture, can be found in food trucks, street kiosks and even dedicated shops. Usually served in sweet varieties, it can also be created in savory options. Popular brands include Go.fre in Belgium and Wafflemeister in the UK. However, dominating neighborhoods on a global scale, the undisputed king of desserts remains the ice cream. Some names, such as Baskin Robins, Pinkberry, Cold Stone and Amarino, have developed into world conquerors by becoming highly desirable franchised brands.

The latest trends in this long-established sweet treat are being driven by the search for new varieties and flavors. In Dubai M'oishi is causing a buzz as a brand expert in Japanese ice cream wrapped in rice dough, known as mochi, while another talking point, Sub Zero, makes its ice cream on the spot using liquid nitrogen.

Unfortunately, some concepts have inevitably not made it to the finishing line - Just Falafel and Shawarmanji to name just two - while others have diversified their offering away from the mono-product brand. Examples include the French luxury brand Ladurée, which was once a macaron flagship, but has now transformed into a fully-fledged restaurant with branches worldwide.

A number of brands, such as Nobu, the Cheesecake Factory and Dai Tin Fung, have opted to take a different direction and switched to offering extensive menus, while still successfully franchise around the world. The mono-product market remains wide open, with a diverse basket of goods to choose from. Investors eyeing this exciting field will need to consider a range of factors when making their choice of product, from available resources - both human and financial - to business objectives and expansion goals. If you do decide to put all your eggs in one basket, dedicating yourself to your product and mastering it will play a key part in future success. Customers expect perfection from a mono-product shop.

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Mono versus vario

Advantages of a mono-product concept	Disadvantages of a mono-product concept
Sense of 'specialization' which reassures the customer	Deciding which product or specialty will attract the crowds can be a challenge
Convenient for customers since deciding what to order is quick and simple	Risk that an on-trend product chosen might go out of fashion, as happened in some markets with cupcakes
Less waste which is <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good for the business and • good for the environment 	Usually requires locations with high traffic, hence a high rent
Production line is smaller, thus <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reducing required investment in equipment • fewer recipes required, meaning greater consistency in the final product 	Requires a very solid and standardized system for the entire operation
Smaller outlets required, so <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less investment • less rent 	Bets on one attraction factor only, the product itself, where the ambiance (service, design, entertainment, etc) carry less weight
Easy to franchise, since the operation system is brief and straightforward	Only a few options are presented on the menu, thus the concept is not always suitable for groups of people with diverse tastes
Control is easier, since there are fewer variables for monitoring, in terms of ingredients and production costs (labor, utilities, etc)	