

LIFTING THE LID ON FOOD AND BEVERAGE TRENDS



While restaurants were still reeling from the pandemic in 2021, this year has witnessed fresh flavors and renewed energy on the food scene. **Nagi Morkos**, founder and managing partner at Hodema consulting services, explores several key trends that are shaping the future of food and beverage.

It's official: restaurants, cafes and bars have reopened and are experimenting with a broad range of concepts. Some are new, while others are not. Many of them have been tried and tested yet haven't aged a day. This can be seen in the case of several organic venues that focus on traceable and locally grown ingredients. Countless consumers are placing sustainability and social responsibility high on their list of priorities. Food lovers are shunning standardized meals and restaurant chains; instead, they seek tailored experiences where they feel special and can support local food brands and their community. The pandemic accelerated this trend, as lockdowns led to the creation of stronger bonds with local businesses.

Why local food trends matter

So the main not-so-new culinary trend today centers on celebrating local dishes, whether these are found around the corner or in a far-flung part of the world. Middle Eastern countries have witnessed a growing interest in traditional dishes after years of enthusiasm for Western concepts. Many people are now revisiting family recipes, especially in the Gulf where European and American cuisines had been restaurant favorites for a long time. For example, Saudis were already eating "kabsa" in fancy restaurants, but it has now become

mainstream. The same goes for "machboos" in Kuwait, as well as the Emirates' "khuzi".

Whereas in Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey traditional dishes have always remained highly popular, fashionable homegrown concepts that pay tribute to much-loved recipes have been trending for a couple of years now.

"Local" food can refer to cuisine from a specific area, but the phrase is also associated with food that's traditional and authentic. We are already familiar with Chinese, Italian, French and Spanish cuisine. Nowadays, however, the lens is more focused, with restaurant owners specializing in dishes from a specific area, where local cooking techniques differ from those found in neighboring regions. Szechuan or Cantonese eateries are lifting the lid on their ancestral recipes, revealing that what we commonly think of as Chinese food is actually not authentic. The same goes for Japanese culinary traditions. After years of eating sushi, new dishes that are staple items for locals are finally appearing on the menus of our go-to restaurants.

The sando, a sandwich made from sliced white bread and filled with sweet or savory ingredients, is the latest trend in Western eateries, although it actually dates back to the 16th century. The same goes for Italian

and French meals and cooking techniques, which vary drastically from north to south. That is where the local food trend meets the regional food trend to reveal the ethnic variety. These concepts differ depending on whether you are referring to the culinary traditions of your own country or an exotic and foreign one. However, they all celebrate cultural diversity and heritage.

The free-from trend is here to stay

Another trend worth mentioning is, yet again, not new. It all started with the crusade against gluten a few years ago and then expanded to dairy, eggs and nuts. The realization that food allergies and intolerances could affect our lives on a daily basis led to a whole new market of free-from products, whereby people can control what's on their plate. While the trend began in niche organic shops, it snowballed and reached supermarket shelves within a few years. Now, high-profile chefs are including some of these ingredients in their menus, and the free-from trend is moving beyond allergens. The classic fat-free option has evolved, with the result that the range of choices has widened to incorporate preservative-free or palm-oil-free products. Some menus even indicate the calorie count of individual items.

Minimizing the environmental impact

A careful selection of ingredients is not only a matter of health anymore. Greater awareness on climate change has also had an impact on our food choices. A large number of consumers want to know how their food is harvested and produced — much like the traceability worries that emerged about meat a few years ago. Sustainability and a green philosophy has become a criterion for the environmentally conscious when it comes to picking a restaurant or a dish, and some establishments have now taken it into account in their branding strategy, making sure their efforts are clearly advertised.

New ingredients are also appearing, such as kelp, which is a large brown seaweed that's traditionally used in Chinese salads. The

algae absorb carbon dioxide and excessive nutrients. Up until recently, most dishes served in restaurants included animal-derived products. Nowadays, vegetarian options are slowly but surely becoming the norm in many establishments — shifting from a trend to a classic culinary habit.

Fruit and vegetable-based options are also reaching the street food and snack industry, with a wider variety of fresh fruit juices and salads available on offer.

Food lovers are seeking tailored experiences where they can support local food brands and their communities.

Meals just a click away

This quest for sustainability and environmentally friendly options is not getting in the way of another tidal wave, which is the virtualization of our culinary habits. Apps and click-and-collect options have mirrored the local eateries of the 90s.

Aggregators such as UberEats, Deliveroo, Toters, Talabat and Zomato are running the show, with millions of hungry customers now ordering their meals online. These platforms have enabled new businesses to emerge, such as cloud kitchens. The pandemic gave a massive boost to the sector, and the return to a more normal life has done nothing to slow down the trend. Some restaurants are now following suit by launching their own apps to try to compete with these powerful behemoths.

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