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Food, Joe Crea, Recipes »

Food forecasters predict taste trends for 2010

By Joe Crea, The Plain Dealer
January 05, 2010, 3:55PM

Who isn't curious for a glimpse into the future?

For foodies, that means trends in taste -- everything from the latest flavor du jour to consumer habits that foretell shifts in restaurant menus and new product development.

Some forecasts are slam dunks. Food-safety concerns won't go away, nor will our perennial yearning for a tasty diet that ensures vitality (with half the calories and none of the guilt). Other surprises await.

While everyone has an opinion about what's on the horizon, some well-connected sources are plugged into the pulse. We turned to a half-dozen people, pollsters and organizations that make it their business to watch the trends and forecast how they'll turn up in our everyday lives:

Tanya Wenman Steel, editor in chief of [Epicurious.com](#), a Web site that compiles recipes from Bon Appetit, Gourmet, Self and other Conde Nast publications, as well as food and restaurant news and trends from a variety of authors, reporters and publishers. Steel is author of "Real Foods for Healthy Kids" (HarperCollins).

Phil Lempert, writer/editor for [Supermarketguru.com](#), with more than 90,000 readers nationwide. Lempert also serves as food trends editor and correspondent for NBC's "Today" show.

Bonnie Tandy Leblang, a registered dietitian and chief writer/editor for

[BiteoftheBest.com](#), a Web site dedicated to reporting and assessing new food and food-related products. The site has more than 40,000 users nationwide. Tandy Leblang also co-writes the popular syndicated column Supermarket Sampler with Carolyn Wyman.

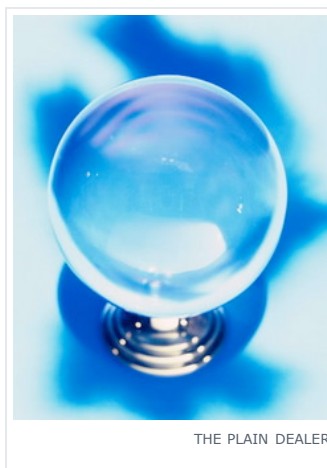
The McCormick Flavor Forecast 2010, now in its 10th year, an annual report produced by the nation's largest packager of herbs, spices and flavorings.

Hunter Public Relations, one of the leading firms serving the food media. Through an independent polling agency, Hunter surveys 1,000 Americans ages 18 and older regarding consumption trends.

Technomics, a national consulting firm that conducts surveys on all aspects of the food industry.

The prognosticators' national perspectives mean that you may not see all of these trends turn up in your local store or favorite restaurant. Consider them harbingers of things to come . . . soon, or sometime down the road.

10 food trends for 2010



THE PLAIN DEALER

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Health and safety continue to rule

Though it sounds like a broken record, American consumers show a tireless demand for safe food products with a decidedly healthful profile. Much of that is based on a simple yet massive statistic: The baby boomers, more than 76 million strong, start to turn 65 next year. "Healthful food is one of the most prevalent consumer demands, and convenience is a big, big part of that," says Bonnie Tandy Leblang. "The food industry is responding to it from just about every angle, with products geared to just about every kind of taste, ethnicity, pocketbook -- you name it."

Safety is the predominant concern. Respondents to a survey conducted for Hunter Public Relations call food safety concerns "the biggest story of 2009" - from E. coli in ground beef to salmonella poisoning in nuts. Concern is fueled by a reported 76 million cases of food-borne illness each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. With an endless procession of food recalls and reports of hospitalizations and deaths related to tainted food products, don't expect that anxiety to go away anytime soon.

Back to the kitchen

"We are seeing less going out to eat, less takeout, even less frozen pizza," says Tanya Wenman Steel. What we're seeing more? "A lot more cooking over the weekend, preparing a roast that you can serve again on Monday or Tuesday," Steel says.

McCormick's Flavor Forecast 2010 spins it slightly: "In is the new out." We want sophisticated restaurant flavors ("big" flavors, in spice-company parlance), but economically challenged consumers want to make them affordable -- read, "home cooking."

There's a corollary trend to that. People who became "obsessed" with food several years ago may no longer be seeking out white truffles or fresh kefir leaves -- "but they want to know the most basic techniques to making really good food: how to make everything themselves -- butter, bread, their own beer, grow their own vegetables," Steel says.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Food forecasters predict more Americans will be cooking classics like pot roast at home this year, instead of dining out.

Back to the garden

Just as home cooks are turning more to farmers markets for fresh, locally grown produce requiring fewer agricultural chemicals and less environmentally damaging transportation, restaurateurs are awakening to sustainable farming. Technomics forecasts more specialty farming-to-order sought by chefs. "With the first lady now tending an official White House garden, look for more chefs to follow suit with proprietary herb or vegetable gardens," Technomics 2010 study says. "The emphasis on local and seasonal ingredients will grow and flower. Fascination with heirloom farm products -- from tomatoes to pork -- will continue; by the 2010 holiday season, look for a [flurry] of interest in heirloom poultry breeds."

Less is more -- and more appealing

Phil Lempert and Tandy Leblang rank "real food products" as one of their top trends for the decade ahead. Embracing the local-foods movement and farmers market is the tip of the iceberg: Health-minded consumers, led by those aging boomers, are returning to foods with fewer ingredients -- especially chemical enhancers, artificial flavorings, and preservatives. Both point to the success of the recently introduced Haagen Dazs Five line of ice cream products, consisting of five simple, natural ingredients.

Sodium targeted

Dietary health has come of age -- and products with high sodium content have a bull's-eye painted on their backs. "Some of the country's top food manufacturers, like [soup manufacturer] Campbell's are publicly committing to reduce the amount of sodium in their products, and several like Kraft have been making low-sodium versions of their main brands," says Tandy Leblang. "Sara Lee [maker of brands including Ball Park, Hillshire Farms, Jimmy Dean and its signature brand], announced it will gradually cut back on salt in most of its products over the next five years; the goal is to reduce sodium by an average of 20 percent in products including hot dogs, deli meats, breakfast foods, cooked sausages and breads. That's huge. As one company does it, the others always follow. Great news for all of us!"

"Immunity cuisine"

Inhabiting the Internet world gives Steel special insight into the unspoken trends -- namely, topics that users search when no one's looking. "If I'd done a story this time last year about how to build your immunity with food, that would have been a joke," she says. "But this year, it's one of the highest-trafficked [topics] sites on Epicurious.com." Items ranging from chicken soup and green-tea drinks, to ingredients like pomegranate seeds (high in antioxidants), to live active-culture yogurt, acidophilus (rich in probiotics, which appear to aid digestive health and absorption of nutrients), vitamin C-packed chiles (said to have antiviral properties) and salmon, tuna and sardines (heavy in vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acids) are among the most highly searched topics on the site she edits.

Rebirth of the butcher

The procession of food-borne illnesses linked to meat products has shoppers on edge. Throw in new country-of-origin labeling, and "people are looking at ground beef and chicken packages a lot more carefully; they're concerned about food safety, E coli and related issues," says Lempert. Shoppers like the sense of care associated with a dedicated professional helping to select and handle meat. Increasing numbers of consumers are choosing a cut of meat and having the butcher grind it on the spot.

As for the cost? Lempert surveyed the 90,000 users of his Supermarket Guru Web site: Just less than 50 percent said they would be willing to pay 25 cents more per pound for ground beef if it was guaranteed to be safe from E. coli.

"Forgive me for being tacky," Lempert says, "but what's the cost of dying?"

Back to Mediterranean comfort foods

Putting your money on comfort foods is usually a safe bet -- though not just on mac-and-cheese or BLT sandwiches. Steel takes it a step further.

"I'm a big believer in the fact that we're returning to the cuisines that were big when Americans first discovered them: French and Italian regional cuisines," Steel says. Having spent the past three decades globe-trotting through the cuisines of Asia, North Africa, and Latin and South America, "now we're returning to flavors we came to find comfortable and yet somehow a little bit 'exotic' -- not your everyday food, but comforting and familiar, things that you could make at home as easily as order in a restaurant."

The McCormick company forecasters take a broader perspective on what constitutes comfort food. Americans have developed "a renewed appreciation of the integrity of ingredients and cooking techniques," the 2010 report says. Whatever floats your boat comfortwise, dishes should be well-prepared and the flavors should be clean and authentic.

Technomics melds the "comfort" and "less is more" trends. "Expect to see a fresh, premium or high-quality spin on familiar, humble foods, such as artisan cheeses used in macaroni and cheese" on restaurant menus, the firm's trend-spotters predict.

Fried chicken and anything lamb

Two major ingredients are changing the face of the so-called center-of-the-plate proteins. "Fried chicken is going to be the dish you see on restaurant menus across the country [this] year, whether it's a mom-and-pop place, a street cart or even at Thomas Keller's Ad Hoc restaurants," says Steel. "Real chefs are taking a new look at it, making it really interesting and delicious. It's also great for the home cook."

Meanwhile, lamb may finally come into its own. Consumers of Middle Eastern, Asian, Mediterranean and European backgrounds enjoy lamb, but the average American consumes less than 2 pounds annually. Racks and rib chops will continue to have their fans, but affordability will play a big role. "Lamb shoulder, loin and stew will become a very common dish," Steel predicts. "It's one of those meats that can be really inexpensive, can fit into every cuisine in the world -- and you'll never get tired of it. For a lot of Americans, it's a new and undiscovered flavor. If you didn't grow up with it, it's a meat that can take on a million different flavors, and it's usually more wholesome than other meats -- not filled with hormones and these things we worry about with beef."

The power of social media

Forward-thinking food retailers recognize just how loud a Tweet can be. Lempert says that manufacturers and grocers are using Twitter, Facebook and other networks to push products -- through recipes, educational opportunities (say, store tours conducted by registered dietitians) and special sales. "What they might do is announce a five-hour-only sale of a truckload of Hunt's tomato sauce," Lempert says. "This could be the end of the sales circular; with all the new technologies available, that's a game-changer."

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