

Tracking the Trends

Top 12 Need-to-Know Menu Trends for 2012

With the New Year's arrival comes a sharper focus on menu trends. What will rise to the top in 2012? Which trends are worth trying? While it's no exact science, we've handpicked the trends we think have the most potential to bring profit – and position your restaurant as an “in the know” establishment. Not sure where to start? We've made it easy with a trend to try each month...

January:

Start Off with a Rustic Stew

Leading consultancy and research firm Technomic predicts rustic foods will impress — and for less — in 2012. And Northeast winters were made for stews. Plus, customers perceive value in the long hours of prepping and simmering of handmade dishes like stews, hearty soups, and roasts. Remember, “rustic” doesn't mean “rudimentary.” Instead of putting “beef stew” on your menu, offer Le Daube De Boeuf Provencale, a classic stew from French Wine Country consisting of red wine, vegetables, and beef. The fact that lower-cost beef shanks are used won't deter customers from paying upscale entrée prices. Also, consider pork stews and roasts, as Technomic notes pork is appearing seven percent more frequently on menus now than last year.



February:

Bite Size Is a Big Trend

The staying power of small plates and tapas prove that what's bigger isn't always better. But now, even smaller servings are the big deal! Just look to desserts: one-bite cake pops are showing up on menus everywhere from catered weddings to Starbucks. The secret is to pack serious flavor, texture, and indulgence into a bite-size serving. Offer a trio of house-made cake pops on your VALENTINE'S Day menu.



March:

Fresh Catch of the Year

Tuna, salmon, and whitefish will always have a place on the table, but nontraditional fish such as Arctic char and barramundi are making a big splash according to the chefs surveyed in the 2012 National Restaurant Association's What's Hot Chef Survey. They ranked exotic fish in the top five center-of-plate trends. During the Lenten season, introduce your customers to one or two eclectic types of fish. Just ask your Maines Account Manager about available species – they may be more affordable than you think!



April:

Local on a New Level

You've sourced regional and local produce through Produce Express. Now take local sourcing to the next level with a few choice items sourced straight from YOUR garden. If you have the space, plant a small herb or produce garden this spring to capitalize on the fourth most popular trend for 2012 according to the NRA What's Hot Chef Survey: hyper-local sourcing. Guests will take notice when you mention on your menu that the rosemary used in your house-made mashed potatoes came from the "restaurant garden."

May:

Foraged Fare

Capitalizing on the sustainability and local eating trends, foraged food is peaking in popularity and is topping all the trend lists, from NPR to the James Beard Foundation. Foraging simply means finding food that grows naturally in the wild: fiddlehead ferns, morel mushrooms, and ramps, for example. Spring is the ideal time to integrate these foraged items into your menu as they're in season in the Northeast. But before you run out to your nearest forest, ask your Maines Account Manager to source them for you.

June:

House-Made Beverages

As the weather warms in 2012, customers will look to cool down with special, house-made drinks. According to the NRA What's Hot Chef Survey, the top three beverages will be "house-made soda; specialty iced tea; and gourmet, house-made lemonade." Notice a pattern here? Drinks need to be doctored up to appeal to today's customer. Experiment with different flavor syrups to create special house sodas, like a lavender vanilla soda with a dash of locally sourced honey and a fresh lemon wedge. Tap into the American regionalism trend and offer a traditional Southern sweet iced tea. And give fresh-squeezed lemonade upscale flair with freshly mashed berries, and garnish with a mint and tarragon sprig.

Tracking the Trends

Top 12 Need-to-Know Menu Trends for 2012

July:

"Produce" Desserts That Surprise

House-made carrot and ginger ice cream? Cucumber and mint sorbet? Yes. Restaurant Consultants Andrew Freeman & Company cite vegetable desserts that hang in the balance between sweet and savory as a leading 2012 trend in their annual Passion Collection Trend Report. This trend meshes nicely with another "cool" trend: artisan and house-made ice cream. According to the 2012 NRA What's Hot Chef Survey, these types of ice cream are the New Year's number-one dessert trend.



August:

Fried Dough

It's no coincidence that fried dough in some variation is a culinary tradition in almost every culture from Spain (rosquillas) to Hungary (fánk): It's a satisfyingly sweet treat, and now it's going to be a top dessert item in 2012, according to Epicurious.com and the James Beard Foundation. Even though summer is fair time, we're not suggesting that funnel cakes and elephant ears grace your menu. Instead, serve an ethnic variation for an upscale, unexpected twist on the typical doughnut.

September:

Grown-Up Kids

This September, take your kids' menu back to school and revamp it to include smaller, healthier portions of what the grown-ups eat. Healthful kids' meals is the third most important trend of 2012 according to the NRA What's Hot Chef Survey, with 78 percent of the chefs surveyed calling it a very hot trend. This trend is no doubt a response to the child obesity crisis. But both kids and their parents want to see more than just oven-baked chicken tenders and fries. Instead, try an oven-baked chicken parmesan dish with a side of steamed spinach topped with low-fat mozzarella.

October:

Rethinking Offal

Offal isn't an awful thing to serve customers. In fact, such leading experts as Baum+Whiteman International Food and Restaurant Consultants are calling out offal as "moving up from ethnic neighborhoods onto menus of upscale restaurants" in 2012. If you're feeling tentative about tripe and tongue, start by using it in familiar, classic dishes. An example would be chicken (liver) marsala over pasta or a beef (cheek) and barley soup. This trend ties into the sustainability ethos that using the entire animal is more ethical and eco-conscious.



November:

Broaden Beyond Bread

Baum+Whiteman International Food and Restaurant Consultants predict building sandwiches on a non-bread foundation will be a serious trend in 2012. Expand the limits of your sandwich making, and substituting more inventive options for straight bread: sourdough flatbreads, tostados, Indian naan, house-made pitas, and even waffles or doughnuts. By bookending your sandwiches with a more exotic starch, you can also keep up with another trend: the upscale sandwich. According to 58 percent of the 1,000+ chefs surveyed by the NRA, gourmet sandwiches will be very popular in the coming year!



December:

Pining for Something New?

You may not want to wait until December to try this wild trend of using pine needles as an ingredient in everything from a marinade for steak to a syrup for a very unconventional cocktail! Restaurant Consultants Andrew Freeman & Company predict that flavor infusions from trees – eucalyptus, pine, and fir, for example – will be a prominent trend in 2012.

