

# SMARTCHAIN

NOVEMBER 2018

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# BUILDING A BETTER BREAKFAST

As consumer demand shifts, breakfast becomes a prime driver of sales and industry trends. **BY DAVINA VAN BUREN**

# Reinventing Breakfast

This important daypart continues changing as the American way of life adapts.

For decades, the quintessential image of the nuclear family gathered around the breakfast table was deeply ingrained in American psyches from television, movies, and pop culture references. These days, however, that picture has changed dramatically. With an ever-changing food system, a redesigned food pyramid, and growing awareness of the environmental and social justice issues surrounding food, breakfast certainly isn't the same as it used to be—particularly in the quick-service industry.

Even with all these changes, though, Americans still retain an emotional connection to breakfast. Students are taught that it's the most important meal of the day, and studies have indeed shown that children who eat breakfast perform better in school. “The emotional connection that Americans have to breakfast stems from two possible sources, the first being for the love of all things bigger and better,” says James Bickmore-Hutt, corporate chef at **Dole Packaged Foods**. “There aren't many other countries that represent the big breakfast quite like America can, whether it is the amazing towers of sweet pancakes served with savory bacon all doused in syrup or the cast iron skillets laden with eggs and a myriad of fillings to make a bigger and better frittata.”

The second connection originates from the familiar feeling of home, and memories of friends and family. Whether it be mom serving up scrambled eggs straight from the skillet, sneaking a pancake to the family dog, eating cereal in front of the television on Saturday mornings, or even crashing the local greasy spoon after a night out with friends, the scents and visuals associated with breakfast can conjure powerful, positive reflections. “These



**“We’ve really seen breakfast evolve as a meal that people eat more on the go.”**





memories anchor a deep emotional connection to the possibilities that breakfast holds,” Bickmore-Hutt says.

Consumers’ perspectives on breakfast are changing, however, primarily due to hectic schedules and on-the-go lifestyles. Many millennials don’t even have a dining table—nor do they want one. “Today’s fast-paced lifestyles and this genera-

**“With such busy, on-the-go lifestyles, consumers need quick, portable options.”**

tion’s adjusted views of daily habits have altered or moved away from developing those emotional connections,” says Mike Leccese, director of culinary and R&D for **Haliburton**. “Breakfast today seems to be based more off the specialty beverage in your hand rather than the meal on your plate.”

While the majority of breakfast occasions still occur at home, there has been tremendous growth in dining out for breakfast as people look for solutions that fit today’s lifestyle. “We’ve really seen breakfast evolve as a meal that people eat more on the go,” says Phaedra Ruffalo, senior director at the **American Egg Board**. Just as the breakfast routine was once centered around the family table, today’s morning ritual is often stopping to get coffee or breakfast on the way into work. Being short on time, consumers’ desire for a hot meal as opposed to sugary pastries and cereals, their cult-like perception of coffee as a productivity booster, and their propensity to post meals on social media are just some of the reasons that compel them to enjoy breakfast outside the home. “That is why we see so much competition in the quick-serve breakfast and to-go coffee space,” Ruffalo says.

According to Datassential, breakfast on quick-serve menus has seen 12.5 percent four-year growth. While eggs, bacon, hash browns, and pancakes are still beloved mainstays, the breakfast industry has

# Leading food brands make excellent decisions.

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## SMARTCHAIN BREAKFAST

evolved over the years—not only to keep up with changing palates and diet demands, but also to match the growth of the all-day breakfast offering. As such, today’s breakfast menus reflect the same food trends as other dayparts. “Operators are inspired by ethnic flavors, savory takes on sweet dishes, and trendy ingredients like avocados to create new items and fresh takes on classic breakfast items,” says Stephanie Browder, associate director of foodservice for **Avocados From Mexico**.

The resurgence of scratch, high-quality ingredients has also made a significant impact on breakfast foods and reshaped the mindset of consumers. “There was a time when breakfast was associated with frozen pre-made foods, eggs from cartons, dry mixes from boxes, and artificially-flavored sauces,” Leccese says. Now, consumers expect higher-quality ingredients, better flavors, and more aesthetically pleasing presentations that titillate the senses—even in the drive thru.

**“Breakfast items should be easy to consume without the mess, since they are often purchased at the drive-thru window and eaten in the car.”**

Today, it’s common to see phrases like “farm fresh eggs,” “scratch-baked bread,” “artisan batter,” and “locally-grown” used to promote quick-service breakfast menus. Elevated combinations of higher-end ingredients—as well as unique protein combinations like pork belly or braised beef—on a breakfast sandwich are increasingly common. In addition, innovation in the form of cooking methods, such as sous vide, allows operators to serve poached eggs easily—an instant upgrade to many classic breakfast dishes.

Sandwiches continue to be the preferred form for on-the-go morning meals and drive the majority of growth in the quick-service sector. “More emphasis is being shown in breakfast sandwiches with artisanal breads or wraps used to highlight the builds,” Leccese says.

Breakfast bowls are another trend where seasonal, healthy, and unique ingredients can be used while maintaining the idea of portability. This represents a vast financial opportunity for operators that also serves increasing customer demand.

With ethnic flavors also on the rise, restaurant chains are working to translate these trends for the average consumer. “We are seeing more international alternatives to the classics, such as shakshuka [a North African/Middle Eastern dish of poached eggs in a tomato, pepper, and onion sauce] playing in the space of the omelet or eggs benedict, or regional fare such as fried chicken and waffles being served from coast to coast,” Bickmore-Hutt says. Datassential reports that lighter, healthier breakfast meals and indulgent Southern dishes have seen major growth on menus. Riding the wave of this experimental attitude, hot sauces, tapenades, salsas, and other condiments are making their way



onto breakfast menus to complement these new flavors. “There is a definite courage being developed by the consumer to try and experiment with new levels of heat and regional styles of condiments,” he says.

Consumers have shown they’re open to expanding their breakfast horizons, but whether one prefers a healthy, indulgent, spicy, or even drinkable morning meal, one thing is clear: breakfast dining must be convenient. “Convenience is a huge factor when it comes to breakfast,” says Lauren Sandore, senior category marketing manager, breakfast sausage at **Tyson Foodservice**. “With such busy, on-the-go lifestyles, consumers need quick, portable options.”

Handheld applications like sandwiches, wraps, and burritos are popular choices for consumers grabbing breakfast on the go, and many chains now offer digital ordering so customers can order ahead of time and have their breakfast waiting at the counter or drive thru when they arrive. For some consumers, the ease and speed with which they can purchase and receive their meal is more of a consideration than the food itself—but quick-serve operators should strive to offer both a quick and easy transaction and fresh, easy-to-handle dishes.

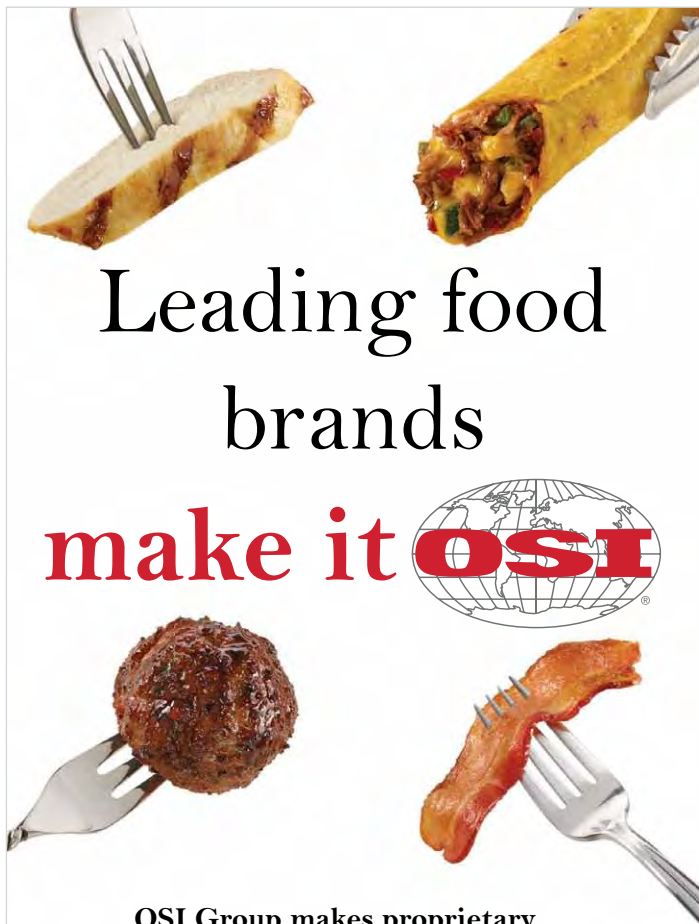
“Convenience is very important, but operators have to also deliver on a great-tasting product, without the fuss,” says Christopher Hansen, assistant vice president of culinary and corporate executive chef for **OSI Group**. “Breakfast items should be easy to consume without the mess, since they are often purchased at the drive-thru window and eaten in the car.” Packaging and portion size are also important, and options such as bowls, cups, and wraps can make items more convenient and easy to eat for the consumer. “For the operators themselves, it’s best for these items to be operation-friendly; ease of execution is key to providing a consistent prepared item that can become a customer favorite,” Hansen says.

The desire for healthier, more convenient breakfast offerings extends to the drink menu. Options such as fresh fruit smoothies, sustainably-sourced coffee, plant-based milks, and natural sweeteners can make loyal fans of health-conscious diners.

With an increase in breakfast deliveries with services like Grubhub and Uber Eats, operators must also consider how dishes hold up during transit time, and a myriad of ever-changing diets and allergens means that breakfast offerings must be customizable. “The easiest way to make all these factors work in your favor is to keep the offerings simple,” Bickmore-Hutt says. “Don’t have 20–30 possible toppings for an omelet build—help to guide the consumer to make the most delicious and memorable decision.” The use of fewer SKUs also helps decrease wait times and increases operational efficiency, resulting in quicker turnover.

So, how many times can we reinvent breakfast? At the moment, it seems the options are limitless. Leccese predicts an increase in more units and chains that will solely serve breakfast items in an all-day setting in the near future. “The ever-changing complexity of breakfast menus and the additions of newer proteins, high-value healthy ingredients, mash ups, international cross over, convenience, and availability will help this portion of the industry’s growth,” he says.

The health and wellness macro-trend seems poised to con-



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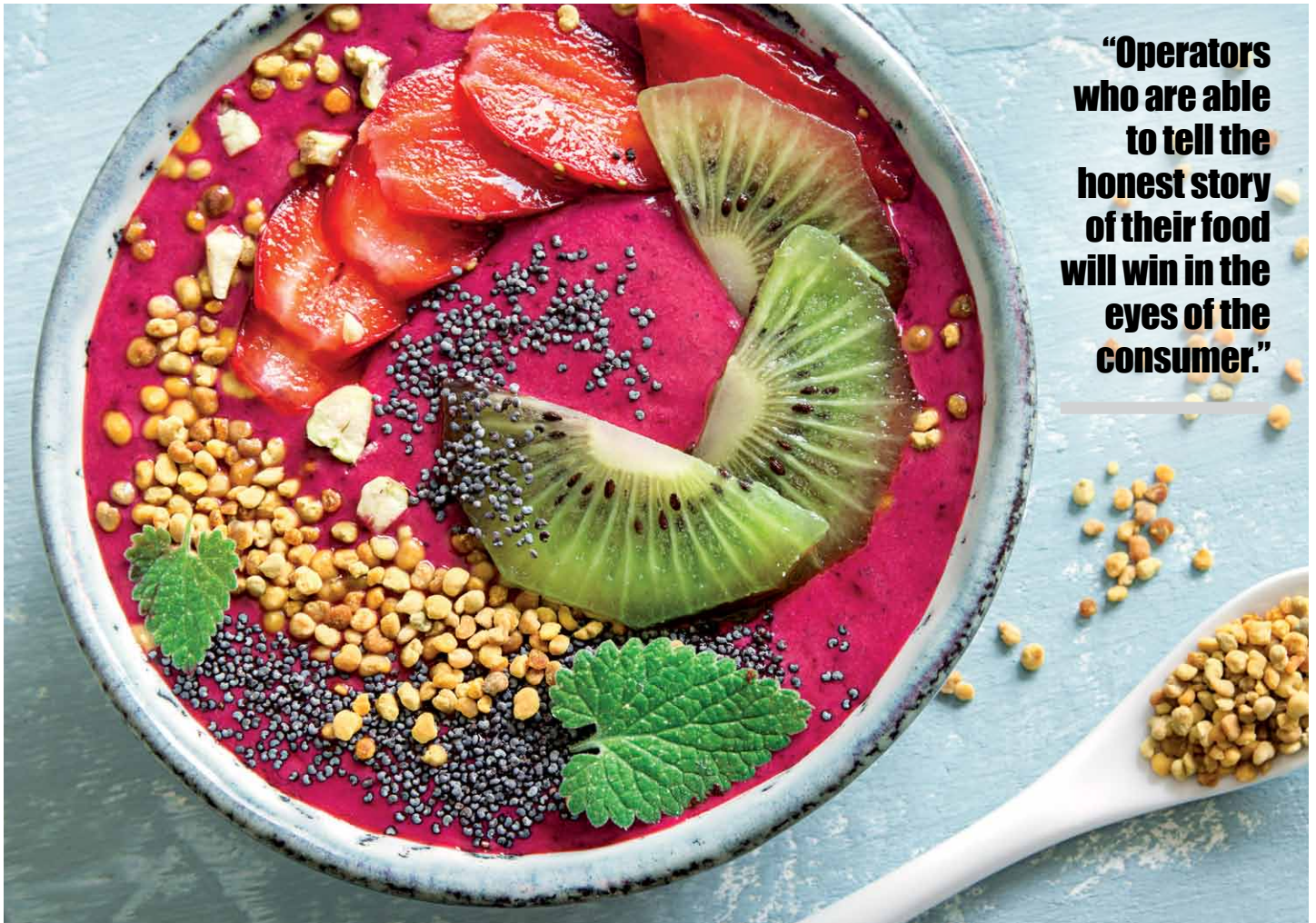
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**“Operators who are able to tell the honest story of their food will win in the eyes of the consumer.”**

tinue, with breakfast options expanding to include plant-based and functional foods. But Ruffalo says the desire for healthy foods doesn't negate the desire for flavor and new taste experiences. “Health and wellness marries well with global flavor trends,” she says. “We'll see healthy ingredients combining with unique ethnic flavors to create indulgent, yet better-for-you items that are ultimately craveable.” Eggs—which are ubiquitous at breakfast in American culture—are extremely well positioned to be a part of those growing consumer trends.

Hand-in-hand with health and wellness concerns among consumers is an interest in knowing where their food comes from. Consumers are more knowledgeable today than ever before, and they have mobile phones on the ready to investigate and verify marketing claims. More

diners are demanding traceability in the food they consume, so they can be confident that what they are eating has a solid history from farm to plate. “They want to know that the ingredients are sustainable, and with meat products, they want to know that the best animal welfare practices were used to raise and harvest the animal,” Hansen says. “Operators who are able to tell the honest story of their food will win in the eyes of the consumer.”

One way quick-service concepts can connect with consumers is to tell these stories with limited-time offers. As digital media grows, offering more options for consumers just makes sense. “LTOs are becoming more popular and will be the way the industry can continue to grow and capture a new audience while also serving its loyal customers,” Hansen says. “They give the restaurant opportunities to

test ideas, create a buzz about the chain, and drive customers into the restaurant.” LTOs can also help capitalize on items like trendy fruits and vegetables, ingredients that are in peak season, or components that have a limited window of availability.

Moving forward, dayparting will continue to blur the lines between breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and meal delivery options are expected to increase as well. Concepts that allow patrons to personalize their orders are also taking off—a monumental opportunity to build customer loyalty. “Customization expands an operation's appeal by catering to the tastes and dietary preferences of consumers on a vast spectrum, from indulgent to health conscious and everyone in between,” Browder says. In other words, it just may be possible to please everyone—at least when it comes to breakfast.



# Breakfast Goes Global

Ethnic and plant-based trends reflect America's diversity on the plate.

**T**raditional American breakfast fare isn't always the healthiest thing in the world. Skillets of cheesy eggs, pork, waffles, and pancakes served with margarine and sugary syrup have dominated Americans' breakfast preferences for decades.

In recent years, however, Americans have begun to demand more choices. Driven by millennial and Gen Z consumers who are always looking for unique and different experiences through food, some quick-service concepts are turning to other cultures for breakfast inspiration.

"For decades, huevos rancheros was the most exotic dish on the brunch menu," says Stephanie Browder, associate director of foodservice for **Avocados From Mexico**. "Today, regional American and international flavors are spicing up breakfast and brunch menus nationwide." Innovative applications like breakfast pizzas; global egg dishes, such as shakshuka; and global handhelds like empanadas are adding interest and excitement.

Adding more diverse flavors to classic offerings can also create the perception of greater value and uniqueness and create a gateway experience for customers who aren't typically very adventurous with food. For example, breakfast burritos are ubiquitous, but some concepts now offer elevated protein options, such as Spanish chorizo, Mexican birria, or plant-based meat alternatives.

The availability of more ethnically-inspired ingredients, as well as the popularity of food shows that educate the consumer on these cuisines, has only driven the demand for more creative and authentic menu offerings. "In general, consumers crave authenticity and expect greater exposure to international flavors as cultural

awareness continues to increase," says Lauren Sandore, senior category marketing manager of breakfast sausage at **Tyson Foodservice**.

Customers are also looking for fresher, healthier food, which often coincides nicely with ethnic flavor and customization trends. "Younger consumers are driving the desire for healthier breakfast options, such as protein or protein alternatives," says Jennifer Maxwell, associate director consumer insights and strategy at Tyson Foodservice. Options to customize breakfast with special add-ons is also important. Allowing patrons to build their own sandwich, bowl, or burrito can be a huge competitive advantage for quick serves looking to up their breakfast game.

As more restaurants experiment with global flavors, operators should keep in mind that even though these global fla-

vors are new to many Americans, they have been mainstays in other cultures for generations. Careful attention should be paid to marketing, staff education, and presentation. "Chawanmushi, roti, and even ancient grains, are all featuring more and more on menus," says James Bickmore-Hutt, corporate chef at **Dole Packaged Foods**. "The true test is how well operators educate their kitchen staff on what these new styles of food should actually look like, lest they run the risk of embarrassing themselves on the ever-influential social media stage."

For the time being, ethnic breakfast options are here to stay, and there is no doubt more global mashups are on the horizon. As we eat a bit healthier, a fringe benefit may be that we get a little worldlier, too. After all, the best way to learn about a new culture is through the food. **SC**



# Boosting Breakfast Sales

No longer relegated to morning menus, quick serves can capitalize on breakfast all day.

Not long ago, breakfast for dinner was still a novelty in the quick-service industry. If you craved a breakfast sandwich or a hot stack of pancakes after 10:30 A.M., options were limited to a handful of chains. Even then, breakfast items often seemed like an afterthought—a few obvious choices tucked between burgers, tacos, doughnuts, and \$6 specialty coffees.

Thankfully for breakfast fans, times are changing, and many quick-serve restaurant concepts are expanding their breakfast offerings, not only time-wise but in the creativity arena as well. High-quality ingredients, ethnic and regional influences, and healthy choices are increasingly common on restaurant menus.

Savvy operators can cash in on this trend.

“Breakfast is the only growing daypart in foodservice,” says Phaedra Ruffalo, senior director at the **American Egg Board**. “Therefore, quick serves have ample opportunity to differentiate themselves in this space.” Brand differentiation is a key part of any restaurant’s marketing strategy, and successful concepts are managing this task by combining more adventurous tastes and flavors with familiar items, like eggs, in an attempt to make some dishes and ingredients more approachable to consumers.

“Operators have the opportunity to increase revenue with all-day breakfast,” says Stephanie Browder, associate director of foodservice for **Avocados From Mexico**. “Consumers crave breakfast items during all dayparts, especially when they include versatile, beloved ingredients.”

By adding more breakfast dishes beyond the meal’s traditional daypart, restaurants offer more opportunities to capture guests who might not normally visit. “It’s another offering that steers consumers



**“Breakfast is the only growing daypart in foodservice.”**

away from their normal eating habits later in the day,” says Mike Leccese, director of culinary and R&D for **Haliburton**. “The idea that lunch or dinner could be comfort food, such as pancakes or French toast, instead of a burger or sandwich is appealing to a large market of consumers.”

Restaurant operators can take this idea even further by catering to a few meg-trends, including incorporating specialty menu items that meet certain dietary restrictions and offering add-ons and upgrades that improve a dish’s nutritional profile or elevate the dining experience. Fresh produce at breakfast is a perfect example: think colorful berries on pancakes, spinach in an omelet, or fruit cups as a side. More and more customers are looking for fresh, healthy options—or even just something slightly different—so meeting this need can be a big step in gain-



ing a new or existing customer's loyalty. "Incorporating a single healthy ingredient can cast a fresh, healthy halo on a basic breakfast sandwich or wrap," Browder says. "For example, more than half of consumers are willing to pay more for a breakfast sandwich featuring fresh avocados."

Catering to popular diet trends is another way restaurants can attract new customers. "Diets such as keto and Mediterranean are building more and more of a social media following," says James Bickmore-Hutt, corporate chef at **Dole Packaged Foods**. "Capitalizing on that popularity might not be the worst thing in the world right now." Developing a menu that provides the keto rating or that has roots in Mediterranean cuisine are great ways to attract new, health-conscious, and social-media savvy customers.

Allowing patrons to customize their orders with premium add-ons—fresh veggies, smoked salmon, or plant-based proteins, for example—is another revenue-boosting tactic. Signature sauces, condiments, hot sauces, cream cheeses, salsas, jams, and syrups are just some of the choices that can help personalize basic breakfast offerings.

When it comes to breakfast, limited-time offers are a great way to attract new customers. LTOs allow a concept to experiment with new flavors, presentations, and cooking techniques and are fun for customers, too. "LTOs could include American fare favorites that have been mashed up with international breakfast trends to create an updated twist on a favorite," Leccese says. "For instance, waffles could be made of a masa batter and topped with a poached egg, pickled Fresno peppers, and a roasted poblano hollandaise sauce."

LTOs are also a chance to call out attributes of certain ingredients that highlight a brand's commitment to ethical sourcing, sustainability, or good old-fashioned convenience. Customers want to know where their eggs and meat come from, if there is a gluten-free or plant-based option, and if they can order breakfast items at 3 P.M. "There are plenty of questions flying around from the consumer that all revolve around either social responsibility

or convenience," Bickmore-Hutt says. "It's up to the operator to figure out which of those questions are best represented and answered by their menu offerings."

Lastly, quick serves can keep customers interest and attract new patrons via the power and influence of social media. "It is the easiest way to step out in front of the herd and be remembered in a truly overwhelming market," says Bickmore-Hutt. "It is both a blessing and a curse, but what it ultimately represents is free publicity." In action, this theory can be seen in Instagram crazes, like the Unicorn Frappuccino and activated-charcoal ice cream.

Stepping up a restaurant's social media game doesn't have to be intimidating. Find a dish that can be prepared easily with the ingredients and kitchen staff that are available and prepare it in a way that inspires a photograph moment. Creative ideas can come from the simplest of places: ask your waitstaff, who can offer important insight on what they notice people drooling over; ask younger patrons what they would like to see if given total creative freedom; or simply take a look on Instagram. "There is so much delicious and photogenic food out there," Bickmore-Hutt says. "Don't fight the social media craze—join it."

SC

