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PROFITABLE PROTEINS

New trends drive menu innovation that can help brands attract diners.

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TYSON FOODSERVICE

Protein Proliferation

Americans like a big steak, but new protein trends are changing the industry.

Fad diets come and go, but high-protein regimens have been around for a while, and they are here to stay. Humans need proteins—often called the “building blocks” of life—for everything from making enzymes and hormones to repairing cells, tissues, and blood. Protein, especially when combined with some healthy fat, makes people feel full.

With nutrition information readily available on many restaurant menus today, Americans want to know the amount of protein a dish has and how they can easily add more protein into their diets. In recent years, interest in protein has merged with other trends like plant-based eating and sustainable farming practices to bring a bevy of new and exciting products, flavors, and even cooking techniques to market. As Americans’ obsession with protein continues, quick-service restaurants are meeting the demand with vigor.

“Consumers source the majority of their protein needs from animal proteins, but interest is growing in including more plant-based proteins into their diets,” says Angela Fox, senior brand manager of prepared innovation at **Tyson Foodservice**.

The USDA predicts Americans will consume record levels of meat in 2018—222 pounds per capita—after more than a decade of decline. To meet this demand, as well as address concerns for the environment, the industry is making strides to rebrand itself.

“When it comes to beef and pork, the industry has evolved to include whole-carass utilization,” says Christopher Hansen, assistant vice president of culinary and corporate executive chef for **OSI Group**. “The nose-to-tail approach involves more exploration and experimentation with non-traditional cuts; for the poul-



Tyson Foodservice

try segment, it is often called balancing the bird.” In fact, the National Restaurant Association’s “What’s Hot” Culinary Forecast named lesser-known cuts of meat, like shoulder tender, oyster steak, Vegas Strip Steak, and Merlot cut, as the top predicted trend in protein for 2018.

Datassential reports that pork increased menu penetration by more than 7 percent in the last four years. Top pork products include processed ham, breakfast sausage, ribs, and pepperoni, but 20 percent goes to bacon. “This comes as no surprise, since the bacon craze has taken the nation by storm with everything from bacon-flavored chapstick to bacon-inspired apparel,” says Jen Moyer Murphy, corporate chef for **Clemens Food Group**.

Pork products, such as thick-cut and hardwood smoked bacon, are a staple on many quick-service menus, particu-

larly as breakfast foods now span across all dayparts. “Most consumers enjoy eating breakfast at nontraditional times,” Fox says. “Menu instances of breakfast items are increasing with eggs and other proteins added to foods as consumers continue to view protein as beneficial in their food choices throughout the day.”

Phaedra Ruffalo, senior director at the **American Egg Board**, attributes the rise in breakfast sales in part to the high nutritional content of eggs. “Eggs are an all-natural source of high-quality protein and a number of other nutrients, all for 70 calories per large egg,” she says. “Egg proteins—like milk and beef proteins—are easily digested and contain all of the essential amino acids,” she says.

Plant-based proteins are also on the rise. Gone are the days when the only vegetarian option on the menu was a piece

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of bland tofu. Today, diners often have just as many delicious and creative plant-based options to choose from as they do meat. “At one time, soy protein ruled the landscape as a meat alternative,” Hansen says. “Now, new products are available that look, smell, cook, and taste like their traditional counterparts.” Products that mimic meat-based proteins in comfort foods, like in pizza, burgers, and breakfast sandwiches are more common in quick-service restaurants as operators look to attract customers who may have formerly eaten meat but now follow a vegetarian or vegan diet.

It’s not all bleeding burgers and faux chicken fingers, though. Rice bowls, legumes, and veggie wraps are all feasible quick-serve options that are quick, easy to eat, and high in protein. Jackfruit, the world’s largest tree-hanging fruit, is another great example of a crossover food that continues to grow in the U.S. Unripe jackfruit is described as tasting like everything from artichokes to mangoes, and when cooked, it has a stringy texture that makes it a popular vegan “barbecue” dish. “It’s popular due to its meat-like texture and the fact that it pairs well with other ingredients,” Hansen says. “It also works well with several different cooking techniques.” Also on the rise are ancient grains, pea proteins, and nut milk-based beverages that pack a protein punch.

Quinoa, for example, offers diners strong nutritional benefits while also offering restaurants an easy-to-use base for kitchens. “Quinoa is the ultimate superfood and the only plant-based protein to include all 9 essential amino acids that are the building blocks for protein and muscles,” says Lanita Isler, senior brand manager and business development at **MARS Foodservices**. “It’s very important for health but it’s also extremely versatile so a superstar in the kitchen, too. Quinoa-based burgers, wraps, and additions to salad and soups are easy and delicious.”

Another growing trend is “plant-forward” cuisine, in which plant and animal proteins are combined to create delicious, nutritious dishes. “I am seeing increased usage of whole muscle meats—beef, chicken, pork, and turkey—being blended with other holistic ingredients that offer additional health benefits, like grains, legumes, vegetables, seeds, and nuts,” Hansen says.

This is also apparent in the breakfast trend, with eggs being applied to multiple menu items. “Eggs are an extremely versatile source of protein,” Ruffalo says. “Whether it’s a fried egg on top of a burger, a poached egg on top of a salad, or a veggie wrap or omelet, eggs fit seamlessly into any daypart.”

Proteins are also making huge strides in the snacking industry. “Snacking throughout the day has become increasingly popular due to busy schedules,” says Chika Kanada, part of the sales food-service division for **House Foods**. “Consumers are looking for foods to keep them satisfied and fuel their active lifestyles.”

The snacking trend can be seen in the proliferation of dollar-menu items and smaller portion sizes, like sliders, on restaurant menus, and in grab-and-go protein boxes that often include hard-boiled eggs. “We expect demand for protein boxes to remain steady,” Ruffalo says. “Not only do they feed the protein demand, but they also align with the convenience trend.”

With so many new protein products appearing on menus, it’s no surprise that cooking techniques continue to evolve as well.

Pressure cooking and Insta Pot preparations are increasingly common. Slow cooking methods, like braising and smoking, are making a comeback, as are simple, unpretentious presentations, like meat lollipops served on a stick. “We’re also keeping an eye on charcuterie and how custom and craft meats tied in with small plates are picking up in popularity,” says Megan Speas, marketing director at **Cargill Protein Foodservice**.

The current darling technique is sous vide, which heats foods in vacuum-sealed bags to an exact temperature via a water bath. Once the desired temperature is reached, the dish can be quickly finished by hand. For example, a steak can be brought to temperature with sous vide and then seared or grilled before plating. Look for protein suppliers to offer more products that are suitable for sous-vide preparation. “Qualified labor continues to be a challenge for our operators,” Fox says. “Assisting our operators by limiting back-of-house preparation and ensuring our products are open to multiple recon methods adds value for our customers.”

Customers also want to know more about the food they consume. They want to know what the animal was fed, how it was raised, and in some cases, how it was slaughtered. “Companies are creating partnerships with industry leaders, trade associations, and other key influencers to provide information to consumers that helps them make informed decisions,” Speas says. In-store signage, expanded menu descriptions, and making sure staff is aware of product attributes all go a long way in educating guests.

Operators should also make available as much information about sourcing and ingredients as possible on their websites. “Consumers do their research before going out, and everything is available on their phones,” says Catherine Porter, director of food-service marketing for **Grecian Delight**. Restaurants have the opportunity with their websites and online menus to give much better descriptions, pictures, and options, as well as information about the unique protein cuts, preparation methods, rubs, marinades, or origins of their meats and other dishes.

“Consumers rarely want to try what they don’t know or understand,” Porter says. “The more information that can be provided on a restaurant’s website, the more consumers will feel confidence and excitement in trying these new foods.”

The last recession inspired a resurgence in “homestyle” meals and classic preparations, like smoked pastrami, ribs, hams, and slab bacon. As this back-to-basics trend continues, look for crafted protein items to permeate quick-service menus. “Restaurants that can call out preparations of these classics have the potential to be seen as more authentic by consumers,” Speas says.

Non-animal protein options will also continue to grow, with meat analogs that look, taste, and cook like meat becoming more common on menus. “Overall, I see plant-based items continuing to grow and becoming better and better at offering the desired sensory experience that people want,” Hansen says.

“To nourish two billion more people by 2050, we need to keep all options on the table: meat, poultry, seafood, cultured meat and more,” Speas says. “Everyone must work together to deliver the protein—traditional *and* alternative—needed to meet the growing demand.”



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Avoiding the Veto Vote

To attract today's foodie families, restaurants are expanding their protein offerings.

In a world where kids have their own televised cooking competitions, restaurants must cater to customers who not only want creative, global menu options, but also expect it. Offering both meat and plant-based menu options coupled with a variety of cooking techniques is a smart approach for an operation that seeks to appeal to a wide range of tastes, and can help prevent the dreaded “veto vote.”

Consumers are unique creatures, and what is of utmost importance to one may not matter much to another, so having a range of local, global, healthy, and eco-conscious options is becoming more critical to a quick-service restaurant's success. Some patrons want quick and healthy choices, while others view dining out as an indulgent social experience to be shared with friends, family, or coworkers. “More options drive more consumer traffic and opportunities for more frequent return visits,” says Catherine Porter, director of food-service marketing for **Grecian Delight**.

Today's consumers are educated and armed with smartphones. They are used to having access to fresh or atypical ingredients and flavor combinations. They know about different cuts and grades of meat, various breeds of animals, terroir, and complex flavor profiles, so promoting a specific type of protein—as well as how it is prepared—can be very important in a restaurant's marketing plan. Some questions that consumers ask and for operators to consider: Is the beef Angus? Is the pork from a heritage breed hog? Do vegans and vegetarians have options at the establishment? Are foods smoked, grilled, roasted, or braised? Are they made with locally-sourced or exotic, global ingredients?

“Understanding this level of increased consumer knowledge allows a restaurant



“More options drive more consumer traffic and opportunities for more frequent return visits.”

to offer a prime sirloin burger, an Angus roast beef sandwich, or a breakfast sandwich with applewood smoked bacon,” says Christopher Hansen, assistant vice president, culinary/corporate executive chef for **OSI Group**. Other callouts could include portion sizes or farming and feeding practices such as organic, hormone free, cage free, raised without antibiotics, grass fed, or non-GMO. Because today's consumers know more about food, these product

attributes become more meaningful, and the consumer is often willing to pay more for them.

Of course, the ultimate test is always taste. “Research shows that taste plays a huge part in the restaurant selection process,” says Jen Moyer Murphy, corporate chef for **Clemens Food Group**. “People want to know that an operation offers something uniquely satisfying.”

Another major trend driving protein offerings in the quick-serve segment: globalization. Technology and travel has exposed Americans to faraway cultures and led to more adventuresome and experimental eating—especially among younger consumers. Wider access to international cuisine has provided the opportunity to explore and use proteins in ways that many consumers haven't experienced before.



“Cuisines from other cultures rely less on meat consumption for protein,” says Chika Kanada, sales foodservice division for **House Foods**. For instance, a Mediterranean diet focuses on protein intake from foods such as whole grains, legumes, nuts, fruits, and vegetables, while many Asian dishes feature meat as a complement to noodles or rice rather than as the main ingredient.

“What’s key is the method of preparation and the story or history behind the cuisine,” Hansen says. “Proper ingredient selection and appropriate cooking techniques are key in recipe development to ensure authenticity.” Trends around culinary craftsmanship are helping to drive and

“The popularity of authentic ethnic street foods has yielded a great infusion of flavor excitement on menus today.”

expand consumers’ interest in trying many new protein items and dishes, whether in terms of new flavors, ingredient, or formats.

Pork in particular is experiencing a renaissance as the industry moves away

from traditional dishes like chops and loin and toward more global menu applications and flavors, like gochujang—a sweet and spicy red chili paste—Peruvian dishes, and international street food-inspired handhelds. “We’re also noticing that people are more open to alternative cuts,” Murphy says. “We’ve witnessed this through the growth of pork items like pork belly, chorizo, and shoulder bacon.”

While pork is the top gyro variety in Greece, U.S. markets have typically served the dish using beef or lamb. However, pork is starting to gain traction in the domestic Mediterranean foodservice market. Since authentic central Mexican al pastor shares the same preparation and assembly as shawarma, some restaurants are killing two birds with one stone by investing in a vertical broiler.

“I think the popularity of authentic ethnic street foods has yielded a great infusion of flavor excitement on menus today,” Porter says. “The portability of European street food with our American on-the-go lifestyle is such a natural fit—formats like gyro drive incremental traffic and renew consumer interest.”

Recent years have also brought a dramatic increase in focus on ethnic-inspired plant-based proteins. “Ethnic vegan items, like hummus and falafel, are really growing on menus,” Porter says. This can be seen in double protein combinations, like hummus as a burger or deli sandwich topping, and falafel as a snack, sandwich, salad, or side. In fact, menu penetration has increased on non-ethnic quick-service restaurant menus by 27.5 percent and 56.2 percent for hummus and falafel, respectively, over the last four years, according to Datassential. “While still relatively new items to the segment, they are definitely being accepted by consumers and continue to be integrated into more and more menus,” Porter says.

Consumer interest in lesser-known cuts and preparations and global flavors has resulted in opportunities for new energy and excitement surrounding food. As the world shrinks and consumers’ culinary interest expands, quick serves literally have a world of opportunities beyond burgers and sandwiches.

Striving for Sustainability

Market demands call for more socially and environmentally responsible protein production.

Consumers are feeling experimental, socially-conscious startups are entering the food space at break-neck speed, and every other day there's a new high-protein superfood that seems too good to be true. There's no denying Americans love their protein, but make no mistake—today's savvy diners also possess a healthy dose of skepticism.

“While people want to increase the amount of protein they eat, there's also a growing awareness that protein quality is not the same across the board,” says Phaedra Ruffalo, senior director at the **American Egg Board**. Consumers are increasingly interested in where their food comes from and how it is produced.

This starts with practices at the farm—looking at what an animal eats, its living conditions, and its ability to engage in natural species behavior—and extends all the way to how food is processed, transported, packaged, and sold. “Consumers want food that aligns with their values,” says Megan Speas, marketing director at **Cargill Protein Foodservice**.

For animal proteins in particular, transparency around sourcing makes a big difference to some consumers. Diners are especially interested in organic or “clean” proteins, nutrition and allergen information, and where the ingredients come from. “Affordability is still an important factor, but consumers are more focused on the quality of the food they eat,” says Chika Kanada, sales foodservice division for **House Foods**.

This is marked by an increase in pasture-raised and “Never Ever-3” meats, a USDA term for products that come from animals that are never administered hormones, antibiotics, or animal byproducts. Protein suppliers are also adopting



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more animal welfare and sustainability practices. “With the introduction of new farming technologies in the pork industry, trends like group housed are growing in popularity,” says Jen Moyer Murphy, corporate chef for **Clemens Food Group**. “Manufacturers are innovating around less-processed and cleaner-label products, especially all-natural and uncured products.”

Interestingly, consumers have also melded the definition of health with sustainability, perceiving that what is good for them is also good for the earth. For example the nose-to-tail movement leads directly to a decrease in food waste, but

also to new, delicious products for the consumer to enjoy. And the rise in plant-based protein options means chefs can get more creative, but also that growers can use land to grow food for humans instead of animals—a much more environmentally-friendly scenario. “Younger consumers want to do good in their choices and reduce their imprint on the world,” says Catherine Porter, director of foodservice marketing for **Grecian Delight**. “Plant-based proteins are often less expensive, better for the planet, and have the animal welfare benefit—all things appealing to millennials and Generation-Z patrons.”