



FROM POSSIBILITY TO PLATE

Seven tips for healthy foodservice innovation

By Lucia Weiler

“Innovation” is a word often used in restaurant circles, but what does it really mean, and how can you put it to use to grow your business and boost your bottom line?

According to a recent report by consulting firm AlixPartners, “Innovation means re-engineering menus to better target today’s new consumer segments, re-engineering promotions and marketing to engage those consumers, and re-engineering restaurant operations to further reduce complexity.”

Fortunately, innovation and healthy dining can go hand-in-hand. Here are seven ways to make wholesome menu items a part of a new and improved experience for your customers.

1. Be transparent

Canadians are looking for “clean” labels with ingredients they can understand and pronounce – and industry leaders and regulators are responding to this trend. In July 2015, the Institute of Food Technologists flagged transparency as a hot topic at their annual conference. Health Canada is also revising nutrition labels and the ingredient list. For restaurants, sharing information in a way that helps people understand food products, nutrition science and food safety is key. Registered dietitians are experts at this kind of communication, so engage their services in your innovation plans.

2. Embrace health and dietary guidelines

“Heathy” menu options are important to many consumers and can influence their choice of restaurants. Millennials are particularly health- and value-conscious. That leaves lots of room for innovation in the nutrition and wellness space for foodservice operators. Look to dietary guidelines to improve the health profile of your menu offerings. Serve more vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds and lower-fat cheese and yogurt. Incorporate fish, lean cuts of meat and meat alternatives such as beans, lentils and tofu into your menus more often.

3. Include all things fresh and local

If you're looking for new menu ideas, take your cue from the seasons. Seasonal and fresh foods attract all types of consumers. To find out what's harvested seasonally in your area, visit a farmer's market near you or check out seasonal produce guides online. Health Canada recognizes as "local" food that is produced and sold within a province or territory, or within 50 km of the originating provincial borders. As an innovative food service provider, consider highlighting your responsible sourcing practices.

4. Let customers customize

Today's consumers love customizing their restaurant choices to their individual preferences and health needs. To maximize the health benefits of a meal, they may opt for nutrient-dense menu items, high-quality foods and smaller portion sizes. Innovative operators can respond to this trend by limiting the number of main offerings but allowing for greater individual customization. Foodservice researchers recommend consolidating menus and seeking products that stand out.

5. Update beverage offerings

When it comes to innovation, revamping food menus is an obvious place to start – but don't forget about beverages. Consumers want choices, especially those who are counting liquid calories. Healthiest options include plain water, carbonated water, citrus-flavoured water, or water flavoured with 100-per-cent fruit juice. Fruit and veggie smoothies and black or green teas offer health benefits as well. Herbal teas are great alternatives for those seeking caffeine-free drinks.

6. Embrace digital technology

Use digital technologies to engage with consumers and run your business better. Many customers "pre-visit" your restaurant by checking out your menus online, while others follow up on their dining experiences with a review on social media. Innovative restaurants have their digital strategies in order and leverage social media opportunities.

7. Emphasize food enjoyment!

However you choose to innovate, remember that for customers, nothing is more important than having an enjoyable experience. This doesn't have to be limited to traditional meals! Consider themed promotions and limited-time offers to encourage customers to try new tastes, or host educational events or hands-on workshops in partnership with chefs and dietitians. Make wholesome food offerings a central part of your menu, and see how popular they prove to be with your guests.

Lucia Weiler is a registered dietitian and nutrition communications professional who specializes in strategic marketing, education and regulatory affairs related to food and beverages. As Principal of Weiler Nutrition Communications Inc., Lucia provides expert services on nutrition trends, food science and labelling compliance. As the co-founder of Nutrition for NON-Nutritionists TM, and a faculty member at Humber College School of Hospitality, Recreation and Tourism, she teaches nutrition, food safety and professional development. Contact Lucia at lucia@weilernutrition.com, or follow her on Twitter @LuciaWeilerRD.

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