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Pork products gaining new ground on menus

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By Krissa Welshans

Leading restaurants are expanding the protein selection on their menus by offering more pork dishes, according to foodservice consultant Technomic.

With a 7% increase in menu mentions over the past year, pork is now being showcased in appetizers, entrees and side dishes.

According to Technomic, pork fits the trend of using rustic, natural ingredients, from Chipotle's use of pork for its carnitas to Cooper's Hawk Winery & Restaurants' new all-natural Iowa pork tenderloin medallions with a maple, mustard and pretzel crust. The fast-food sector also has been showcasing pork as McDonald's recently brought back the McRib and Subway's BBQ pulled pork sub made its debut this past summer.

The findings are part of Technomic's ongoing examination of menu additions to leading independent and chain restaurant menus, which are collected quarterly and are available on Technomic's searchable online MenuMonitor database.

"Restaurants are using pork more often in main dishes and as an accompanying ingredient in menu items for various reasons," said Bernadette Noone, director of Technomic MenuMonitor. "First, the higher cost of beef has made pork a nice substitute in combo dishes. Where customers were once seeing chicken and beef on the menu, they may now see more affordable chicken and pork dishes."

Noone also said bacon is another reason why pork's popularity has continued to increase.

"The popularity of bacon is another key factor. For the last few years, we've seen bacon-related menu items increase by more than 7% annually," Noone said.

A look at recent pork dishes reveals that bacon, sausage and ham are the most common pork ingredients on menus. The data also show that pork is increasingly being used in combination with other proteins. During the second quarter of 2011, pork saw a 15% increase in use in shellfish dishes, 13% in chicken dishes and 8% in both beef dishes and burger dishes.

Jared Sutton, assistant vice president of channel marketing for the National Pork Board, said the board is very pleased with the results of this study but added that it is not surprised.

"Our marketing group has been working hard to drive demand in the foodservice sector and has seen much success in 2011. For example, our team of culinary experts has been focusing on establishing pulled pork as a menu must-have this year," Sutton said.

He credits the Pork Board's "Pork. Be Inspired." tagline for the increase in pork's popularity, which he said has given the board a solid marketing platform on which to build effective, successful strategies across all of its marketing disciplines.

"From our national advertising to retail customer marketing to foodservice, this call-to-action message is resonating with consumers, and it works with operators, too," Sutton said.

Sutton said pulled pork is "versatile, flavorful and serves as a great base for countless cuisines. It also presents itself as a terrific value for operators and consumers alike."

Additionally, he said pork "serves a vital role in building a nutritious diet plan. With mandatory labeling in effect, operators must list the nutritional profile of the products they serve."

The pork trend crosses meal parts, with many types of pork being featured in new dishes. A sample of new pork items includes:

- * BBQ spare ribs and pork roast at L&L Hawaiian Barbecue;
- * Country-style pork cutlet at Max & Erma's;
- * Mojo roast pork at Pollo Tropical;
- * Red beans and rice with Andouille sausage at Applebee's Neighborhood Grill & Bar;
- * Wood grilled chorizo sliders at Bahama Breeze, and



• Memphis BBQ skins with pulled pork at Chili's Grill & Bar

Technomic's online MenuMonitor database provides instant access to menus from more than 2,000 restaurants globally. Subscribers can search by menu items, meal part, specific ingredients and more and apply trend-tracking tools.



Krissa Welshans holds a bachelor's degree in animal science from Michigan State University and a master's degree in public policy from New England College. Welshans has long been involved in agriculture and has worked with numerous agricultural groups, including the Animal Agriculture Alliance and United Horsemen.



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