

Food Trends of College Students

What Happens When the Kids Leave College?

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There is little question that the dining habits of our youth are some of the most important predictors of our nation's future eating habits.

More specifically, we believe college students may prove the most critical and relevant lens within which to make sense of future eating patterns. While so-called tweeners or high school students clearly have important *preferences*, they ultimately lack sufficient freedom of choice — at least on a regular basis. Put another way, for most Americans, college represents the first moment in young adults' lives in which they are truly free to establish their own set of eating habits, habits largely independent of those expressed while part of their larger household as children. College is — quite literally as well as metaphorically — about how we come to define ourselves.

Looking more closely at college dining trends over the past five years we find, not surprisingly, the same microcosm playing out around us in the larger world today. That is, what was initially understood as an impulse toward “healthy eating” and “better for you” foods and organics has now been almost wholly subsumed — and some might suggest obliterated — by a larger, more overarching interest in [quality food experiences](#).

Consider the following quotes taken from *New York Times*'s articles in the past five years:

“At the college and university level, using local food has many pluses, said Dr. S. Georgia Nugent, president of Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. As colleges compete for students, locally grown food has become a marketing tool for baby boomer parents, who created the organic food movement, and their environmentally aware children. You get higher quality food and lower environmental impact,” [The New York Times 8.24.2005](#)

“AT Terra Ve, a vegetarian cafeteria at Purchase College in Westchester County, N.Y., the bacon pizza is vegan, the Asian rice is low fat, and a big poster next to the French fry station extols the virtues of zero trans fat soy oil. “It was kind of healthy and surprisingly good,” said Daniel Abillama, 19, a freshman from Southampton, N.Y., of the stuffed broccoli pizza he had for lunch last Monday. “Luckily, we are too poor for dessert.” [The New York Times 8.31.2006](#)

After reading the above, those of us in the food business might rightly have thought to ourselves, “Oh...I get it...college students are really taking charge of their health and trying to eat *better* — though not necessarily differently.” So, we might respond by removing trans fats from our food products or perhaps substituting healthier ingredients into our pizza toppings. But most of us

failed to change the products themselves: After all, students will be students, so we keep offering them more or less the same preparations we've been offering all along — sandwiches, prepared macaroni and cheese, pizzas, frozen meals and such — and we returned to our work at hand.

But when we reunite with our intrepid college students some 18 months later, something markedly different emerges. For the first time, it becomes clear that what we initially believed to be an interest in “healthy eating” was actually something much more fundamental and profound. Yes, health is important, but what we find is that it is not just an interest in health or ingredients that is at play here, but a more foundational interest in the nature of food itself. Specifically, students are interested in eating higher quality foods, and much of those quality attributions are driven more by the [unique food preparations and flavor profiles](#) than the healthfulness of the ingredients themselves.

In what appears a most ironic turn of events, the students in our institutions are increasingly rejecting institutional food. And, if they won't settle for institutional food while they are in college, why would we expect them to do so for the rest of their lives?

Consider the *New York Times* most recent comments on college students eating habits:

“The smell of a curried butternut squash soup wafts through the air as you walk into the dining room. At long tables of dark wood, beneath windows soaring 20 feet overhead, customers dine on vegetable ragout over polenta, spicy orange beef, Dijon-crusted chicken, cheese quesadillas, vegetarian pho — Vietnamese noodle soup — and spinach sautéed with garlic and olive oil. If it weren't for the trays, and the fact that most diners are under 25, you'd think it was a restaurant. But this is Thorne dining hall at Bowdoin College here.” [The New York Times 04.09.2008](#)

“Virginia Tech, with 26,000 students, serves 160,000 meals a week, both through regular meal plans and with à la carte selections paid for with a discount swipe card. The West End Market dining hall, 1 of 13 (including some outside franchises), has 8 separate areas, each with its own design scheme and food. At J.P.'s Chop House at the West End, with dark wood paneling and brass fixtures, “You can order a whole Maine lobster, New York strip and rib-eye steaks cooked how you want them, grilled sesame-crusted tuna with wasabi mayo,” Rick Johnson, Virginia Tech's director of housing and dining, said of some of the à la carte selections.” [The New York Times 04.09.2008](#)

The story in the description above — with its references to Maine lobster and rib-eye steaks — is much less about *healthy* eating than it is *quality* eating. Gone are Salisbury Steak, Spaghetti Red and a host of other “delectable” dishes forever linked to large, institutional food purveyors such as Aramark and Sysco, and in their place are the dishes comprising some version of “the pantheon of tomorrow.”

And this leads us to the biggest challenge facing food branders, marketers and purveyors in the coming years. Namely, understanding that consumers will not be content with the same old foods, or healthier versions of the same old foods, but, instead, will seek out ever more unique and higher quality foods. Ironically, one of the chief factors driving the “high quality” belief is

the perception that the food in question is not manufactured by a large food company. This isn't necessarily a rational belief, but what can we expect from mere mortals. After all, we're the same species that foisted Fruitopia, *Gummo* and *Shakes the Clown* upon this great planet.

Vegetable ragout over polenta, New York strip and Dijon-crusted chicken all work because they are not *that* — that which has been extruded by the consumer packaged foods and institutional food business for the past 50 years. Don't misunderstand, we still see plenty of growth opportunity for the likes of Aramark or Sysco — as well as packaged foods business in general — but the challenge will be providing food opportunities that appear symbolically and consciously disassociated with their very purveyors.

The upshot of this is that consumers of tomorrow will be demanding two important components from their food purveyors: (a) unique flavor combinations that exude high quality and (b) the perception that the food in question was not produced by the global food production system. What consumers of tomorrow will surely not be demanding are “better for you” versions of increasingly dated, 20th Century staples such as macaroni and cheese, turkey sandwiches, spaghetti, chicken-fried steak and so forth.

Food for Thought

This brief foray inside contemporary academic life, we believe, maps perfectly with everything we have ever documented with regard to contemporary American eating trends. We've been squawking about how food [quality will supersede traditional understandings of health and wellness](#) for several years now, and the evidence drifting in from today's college students could not be clearer on this account.