



NATIONAL RESTAURANT ASSOCIATION

WHAT'S

Hot

2026

# Culinary Forecast





# Top 10 chart- topping trends

What can we expect on restaurant menus in 2026? Flavors, dishes, and experiences that take us out of the “day-to-day” and transport us somewhere, sometime, or both—without breaking the bank.

This quest for comfort, nostalgia, and “flavor-escapism” intersects with an ever-present search for healthy options and value, as restaurant operators seek out the dishes that satisfy consumers’ cravings.

1

**Local sourcing**

2

**Comfort foods**

3

**Value menus  
and options**

4

**Smashed burgers**

5

**Clear  
menu labeling,  
icons, and cues**

6

**Allergen-friendly  
menus**

7

**Global  
comfort foods**

8

**“Cleaner” recipes,  
additive- and dye-free,  
or less processed  
menu items**

9

**Proteins  
as add-ons**

10

**Compostable and  
reusable packaging**





# “There, then, and back again”

## DISHES

Today's foodies are looking for escape—the chance to step out of their everyday into somewhere comfortable. There is a sense of nostalgia that's inspiring innovation to bring the past into the now. With social media making the smashed burger – once a diner staple – tempting to younger generations, the challenge is how to make one of the ultimate comfort foods new and even global. To that end, we're seeing this trend inspire some interesting twists, such as smashed burger tacos!

The top 5 dishes also highlight a deep-seated desire to experience the world through a variety of cuisines. Consumers want to be transported with every bite, whether it's a smashed burger in Texas, or a protein-packed miso dish that teleports them to the streets of Tokyo. Restaurant menus offer the chance to return to a vacation of a lifetime or satisfy some wishful thinking, and operators are eager to bring that global interest home through exclusive interpretations of dishes like elevated instant noodles, Caribbean curry bowls, and miso-glazed proteins.

Thanks to these elevated recipes, access to the world of food is at our fingertips in 2026. So, where are we “flavor-escaping” to next?

PICTURED: Smashed burger with guacamole and caramelized onions



## WHAT'S HOT

- Smashed burgers
- Elevated instant noodles
- Caribbean curry bowls
- Smoothie bowls
- Miso-glazed proteins



## EMERGING

- ✓ Lion's mane mushroom burgers
- ✓ Filipino pork tocino
- ✓ Middle Eastern za'atar flatbreads



# Strength with a sizzle...

## INGREDIENTS, FLAVORS AND CONDIMENTS

One clear winner in 2026 is protein. This macronutrient can now be added to everything from your coffee to your pancakes. Diners of all kinds are exploring the physical benefits of protein-rich diets, including muscle building and weight management. The trend highlights how health and wellness are a steady undercurrent, reshaping how consumers engage with food today. There is an underlying desire for balance between indulgence and intention, comfort and consciousness and operators are finding ways to integrate those desires in all of their menu offerings.

As interest in health and wellness props up menu trends across all categories, protein is popping up alongside spicy delicacies. Consumers want to spice up their meat, seafood, and tofu with chili-lime, gochujang, and even super-spicy ghost pepper hot honey. These fusions heighten the flavor profile without sacrificing health.

PICTURED: Bibimbap - Korean mixed rice, vegetables, and beef with a fried egg and gochujang in a hot stone pot



## WHAT'S HOT

- Proteins as add-ons
- Chili-lime sweet
- Miso
- Gochujang
- Ghost pepper honey glaze



## EMERGING

- ✓ African cuisine  
(Nigerian, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Somali)
- ✓ Black lime
- ✓ Smoked citrus



# We'll drink to that!



## BEVERAGES

**When it comes to beverages**, the trend we're seeing is toward less alcohol.

**As diners prioritize health and wellness**, low- and no-alcohol drinks are becoming more popular than ever. This is especially true for Gen Zs and Millennials, who often expect alternatives, like alcohol-free beers and CBD-infused beverages.

**When consumers do choose to drink**, they're increasingly interested in locally sourced spirits. This popularity is largely due to three things: a strong community connection, sustainability, and the products' own distinctive flavors. Consumers want to support small businesses and their local economies and appreciate the environmental benefits of reduced transportation and sustainable manufacturing practices. Furthermore, they reflect their region's heritage and artisanal quality.

**Personalized hydration**, such as smart water and beverages infused with certain electrolytes or supplements, are also quite popular now. There are even restaurants with water menus curated by "water sommeliers" that describe the taste profile and source of a selection of waters.

**Beverage menus often play a role** in consumer restaurant decision-making and creative expansions that focus on new flavors or taste experiences, with a nod to health trends, can be influential.

PICTURED: Paloma mocktail with club soda, red grapefruit, lime juice and agave syrup

## WHAT'S HOT

- Energy drinks
- Locally sourced spirits
- Low- and no-alcohol drinks
- Fermented and gut-friendly beverages  
(Kombucha, tepache, probiotic sodas)
- Personalized hydration



## EMERGING

- ✓ Soju
- ✓ Mood and mental wellness beverages  
(Adaptogenic and mushroom essences)
- ✓ CBD-infused beverages



# Sugar and spice = everything nice

## DESSERTS

**The sweet tooth is here to stay**, but consumers aren't happy with the same old sugar.

**This trend finds some beloved comfort desserts** getting new twists, like the sweet and salty flavor of a salted caramel sauce getting the nice bitter kick of espresso. S'mores, the classic camping dessert, is also getting a glow-up, as the reinvented treat hits its stride on restaurant menus. From flambé to smoked (fire is what makes this dessert perfect), s'mores are no longer just chocolate, marshmallow, and graham crackers.

**The desire to escape** is pulling Dubai chocolate to the top of the trending list - and the top of many restaurant menus. The combo of chocolate, pistachio, and kataifi are appearing in many combinations from ice cream to pastry.

**The consumer search for healthy options** and the operator desire for value are colliding in the new trend of freeze-dried fruits. While the ingredients are showing up in many menu options, in desserts their intense flavors, unique texture, and year-round availability are making them particularly popular. They're also popular with operators, because unlike fresh fruits, they won't spoil, don't have a specific season availability, and they can be used in many forms - whole, powdered, or even rehydrated.

PICTURED: Dubai chocolate cheesecake with kataifi and pistachio paste



## WHAT'S HOT

- Dubai chocolate
- Freeze-dried fruit
- Espresso salted caramel sauce
- Spicy pepper-infused sweets
- Reinvented s'mores



## EMERGING

- ✓ Functional sweet treats (*Probiotic, adaptogenic*)
- ✓ Date-based desserts
- ✓ Chaos cakes



# Comfort and value drive the trends



## MACRO TRENDS

Nothing is cozier than comfort food. Whether it's a smashed burger, spicy noodle dish, or decadent chocolate, consumers have clear cravings, but also want greater community connections on their menus. They're placing a higher value on local sourcing as another way to support the local economy through their dining dollars, and operators are responding by localizing their supply chains, and partnering with local growers and producers to create menu options that are fresh and unique.

In the current economy, nostalgia and comfort alone may not push a trend to the top. Value is still the most important driver for many consumers. That's why when you can hit all the right notes, a trend will take off. Case in point: The smashed burger, which may be the trendiest dish of the year, but it's also hitting the right notes for value. Operators know they can keep the menu price under control because the smashed burger offers lower meat-to-bun ratios, faster cooking times, and reduced food waste. It's a win-win where familiar meets smart

PICTURED: Dubai chocolate ice cream in an iced coffee latté with pistachios

## WHAT'S HOT

- Local sourcing
- Comfort foods
- Value menus and options
- Clear menu labeling, icons, and cues
- Allergen-friendly menus

## EMERGING

- ✓ AI-driven personalization
- ✓ Zero-waste kitchens
- ✓ Rapid prototyping



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## METHODOLOGY

**Targeted to thought leaders in the culinary world, industry professionals weighed in to tell us what they see as the leading menu trends for 2026.**

**Respondents were presented with a list of food and beverage items and industry macro trends curated by the National Restaurant Association:**

- **Dishes**
- **Ingredients, Flavors, and Condiments**
- **Beverages**
- **Desserts**
- **Macro Trends**

**They were asked to rate each item as a Hot, or Emerging trend. The top results are included in this report.**

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