What ingredients are consumers looking for in 2011?
How are consumers’ expectations for taste and healthfulness changing?
Read on for top trends in the industry, ranging from flavors to portion sizes to healthy indulgences.

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Each year, Pavone—a full-service marketing, advertising, and PR agency that specializes in food and beverage marketing—issues a food trends study that highlights consumer movements that are potential game-changers for manufacturers and marketers. The perspectives of trend-setting culinarians, food scientists, innovation officials, agricultural officials, food marketers, and major grocery retailers as well as the agency’s in-house food experts are compiled for the study.

Two themes emerged from the 2010 research that transcend the trends themselves while impacting each of them in some way. First, consumers are making healthier choices, not necessarily healthy choices. They’re refusing to sacrifice the quality, texture, and flavors they enjoy but are cutting back their portion sizes or making trade-offs elsewhere in their diets. They’re choosing a decadent muffin or pastry, but they’re having it with skim milk rather than whole milk. Second, consumers are more empowered than they’ve ever been before. They’re taking action and speaking out when they’re displeased with a product or a service. This touches each of the trends we’ve identified in a slightly different way. Let’s dig into the results, shall we?

All-Star Ingredients
All-star chefs, best-selling cookbooks, blogs, and even feature films are touting the importance of top-notch ingredients. Consumers who cook are going to be more interested in varietal ingredients on the shelf than ingredients in prepared foods and entrees.

Food Network shows, such as Iron Chef America, commit a full hour to a featured ingredient. They announce it, they prep it, cook it, plate it, present it to the judges, and the judges evaluate usage. Even the most casual viewer is destined to glean a good deal of knowledge about the featured ingredient as well as innovative ways to include it in a meal. The movie Julie & Julia, aside from being entertaining, effectively served as a two-hour cooking class, discussing all-star ingredients and cooking techniques, and educating moviegoers on culinary jargon.

Chef Richard Blais—Bravo Top Chef, Flip Burger Boutique—puts it best, “Consumers are learning about ingredients in restaurants and on TV. They’re getting smarter. They’re learning the difference between lemons and Meyer lemons, limes and Kaffir limes. They’re most willing to try new ingredients when they understand the baseline flavor profile. It’s easier for them to try a Meyer lemon, because they know what lemons taste like.”

This trend is currently being expressed by gourmet food purveyors, but expect to see the call-out of all-star ingredients to become more mainstream. For example, chocolate and vanilla will no longer be stand-alone flavor descriptions; they’ll need to be bolstered by additional specifications such as Dagoba (chocolate) and Madagascar (vanilla).

One of the indicators reinforcing the validity and scope of this trend is consumer demand for specialty salt. Celebrity chefs, through the food media, have created awareness and driven consumption of exotic varieties, including pink Himalayan sea salt, French grey sea salt, and even cheddar and smoked salt. Interest in ancient grains has also taken off; Oroweat, Pepperidge Farm, Country Harvest, and other brands have begun capitalizing on the excitement created by culinarians and artisan bakers. Specialty grains are in the spotlight, too, as “all-star ingredients” in the fastest-growing beverage segment—craft beer. Progressive food and beverage managers are featuring craft beer pairings and flights in the same way that they have offered wine in the past; it has become “the new wine” by most standards, including sophistication and price point. Consumers are seeking out products that feature specialty grains, from bread to beer; they’re also seeking to be educated on their characteristics, benefits, and flavor profiles.

We expect to see similar consumer responses to specialty varietals in all categories and classes. The “all-star ingredient” call-outs that will be most successful are those that pique consumer interest by establishing a strong connection to a specific quality—be it a unique taste or texture, the demonstration of culinary sophistication, or a particular health benefit.

Relax
High stress is taking its toll, and consumers are more concerned with sleep than ever. As consumers shift attitudes about the nature and value of rest, they will look beyond better mattresses and bedding to find foods and drinks that enhance the quality and quantity of sleep.

What’s driving this trend is consumers’ desire to find holistic ways to stay healthy. Sleep isn’t just a way to be less tired, it’s essential for maintaining immunity, boosting energy levels, and performing well—both mentally and physically. Expect to see food and beverage products being positioned and recognized as significant contributors to a restful, balanced, and healthy lifestyle.

Consider that 42% of healthy, middle-aged American women have trouble falling asleep. All indicators show that consumers seek natural ways to relax and fall asleep. They’re moving away from prescription and over-the-counter medications and now seek natural, diet-based solutions. Manufacturers of traditional sleep medications, such as Nytol, have responded by developing herbal alternatives and supplements.

Teas made with sleep-inducing ingredients are becoming more sophisticated and varied. Until recently, only chamomile tea was closely associated with relaxation and sleep. Now, chamomile is blended with St. John’s Wort and passionflower to calm and prepare consumers for bedtime. For non-tea drinkers, herbal relaxation is now available in the form of a 2-oz. “shot”—the antidote for popular energy “shots.” Brands of such products include iChill and Blue Cow—the obvious opposite of Red Bull.
These products include ingredients such as valerian, melatonin, rose hips, and B vitamins, but more importantly are indicative of consumers’ quest for sleep solutions.

Other sleep solutions are more food-based. Research has proven that high-carbohydrate, high-calcium, and medium-to-low-protein snacks are ideal, sleep-inducing bedtime snacks. A peanut butter sandwich, oatmeal cookies, or whole grain cereal with milk—even a slice of pie served with ice cream—will relax, soothe, and satiate, providing a good night’s sleep.

This is because eating carbohydrates with tryptophan-containing foods makes this calming amino acid more available to the brain. A high-carbohydrate meal stimulates the release of insulin, which helps clear from the bloodstream those amino acids that compete with tryptophan, allowing more of this natural sleep-inducing amino acid to enter the brain and manufacture sleep-inducing substances, such as serotonin and melatonin. Eating a high-protein meal without accompanying carbohydrates may keep one awake, since protein-rich foods also contain the amino acid tyrosine, which perks up the brain.

The relaxation trend represents a tremendous opportunity for the grains industry. Communicating with the consumer on this subject is key.

A Single Voice

With the rise of digital media, individuals are powerful armed to affect change. A single complaint can escalate into a crusade. Consumers can now use digital tools to reach millions of other consumers without the endorsement of traditional media or even the benefit of real proof. Corporations beware.

While tools like Facebook and Twitter offer extensive marketing opportunities, it’s important to remember that these forums have opened up a two-way dialogue. Consumers can now speak out in a very public setting, and they expect not only to be heard but to be responded to.

Cyberspace has proved to be an ideal outlet for consumers expressing opinions and garnering the support of others in their positions. More often than not, consumers are using this forum for speaking out against manufacturers and service providers who have disappointed them in some way. If you’ve visited YouTube in the last year, you may have come across Dave Carroll’s musical rant about United Airlines’ poor customer service. He was forced to check his guitar, saw it being mishandled on the tarmac, and claimed it after the flight only to find it broken. He followed the airline’s claim process, but United representatives refused to replace his guitar. Being a songwriter, Carroll wrote and performed a song about his experience. He then posted it on YouTube and more than 9,488,000 people have viewed it to date. Those are numbers that make prime-time network television envious.

And there are millions more like Carroll, who share their disappointment with corporations on the Internet. Consider that when searching for “consumer complaints” online, more than 2,190,000 results are found.

“According to Christine Hartman, director of graduate executive programs in food marketing at St. Joseph’s University, Philadelphia, PA, U.S.A., “Corporations need to heed the return of the singular voice. Consumers used to need collectives or organizations to make a voice heard. That’s not true anymore. One voice truly can make a difference.”

Realize that a complaint launched against a product online can quickly turn into a crusade. Embrace the use of digital media and use it to proactively communicate with consumers and constituents. Dialogue with and respond to them or face an escalated public relations nightmare later.

Indulge Me

Consumers want to eat healthier and are looking for healthier ways to indulge. Restaurants led the way with smaller plates, and now consumers are looking to recreate small but indulgent portions at home. Shoppers are still open to buying in bulk, but at the same time they will find “right-sized” portions appealing.

Products like dessert shooters, sliders, McDonald’s Snack Wrap and Snack-Sized McFlurry, the 90-calorie (7.5 oz) can of Coca-Cola Classic, and 2-oz. “Mar-teenies,” all speak to consumers’ desire to enjoy decadent, full-fat, or full-calorie treats—but in smaller sizes. These reduced serving sizes are conducive to snacking but also to mixing, matching, and trying new flavors as well as increased frequency. Consumers don’t want to sacrifice quality, taste, or texture; they’re turning away from reduced-fat and reduced-calorie options, preferring instead to have “the real thing” but in smaller portions.

Consider Pillsbury’s Sweet Moments bite-size brownies, which come refrigerated and ready-to-eat in two varieties: chocolate caramel and chocolate fudge. This product isn’t necessarily healthy, and it makes no health claims, given the 9 grams of fat in three tiny bites. Pillsbury makes sure to emphasize, however, that the brownie bites are “decadent and delicious.” The product’s small size, high “splurge factor,” and quick and easy consumption position it nicely for the consumer seeking a healthier indulgence. The chocolate-dipped treat is one consumers perceive as healthier because the portion size is smaller. They’re not eating a giant brownie or a whole cake, after all.

In many cases, small portion sizes are cues to quality and luxury, which is something to be considered when trying to indulge consumers. Location and context are key when considering how your product is merchandised. What might be pedestrian in one retail or foodservice setting could be perceived very differently in another. Pillsbury’s Sweet Moments bite-size brownies look like the ultimate splurge in the grocery store’s refrigerated case, but they probably wouldn’t be perceived as very special next to fancy petit-fours in a gourmet bakery. Of course, presentation is another very important factor—it can make or break your positioning as an indulgence.

The bottom line is consumers want to be indulged. They expect manufacturers to call-out and explain the benefits of all-star ingredients. They look to food as a natural sleep aid and they absolutely will not tolerate anything less than proactive communication, full disclosure, and responsiveness from manufacturers. If manufacturers consider how each of these trends applies to their products and how their companies can capitalize on consumers’ changing attitudes about food, they’ll be well positioned in 2011 and beyond.

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