

FRESH PRODUCE

Premium Values

Four concepts that have built success by keeping
their produce promise to customers



Strawberries and blueberries stud Wendy's Berry Almond Chicken Salad, a creative and tasty mix of fruit, greens and protein dressed with açai juice.

BY KATIE AYOUB

The proliferation of fresh produce on menus across all foodservice segments is astounding and wonderful. Fruits and vegetables add flavor, vibrancy and nutrition to meals at any daypart. Their origins also provide a backstory with a sense of place. Most important, perhaps, is the message produce sends about a concept's commitment to freshness.

Diners' food IQ is higher than ever. Consumers expect fresh salads bursting with delicious combinations of fruits and vegetables that, a few years ago, wouldn't be found in the mix. As evidence, look no further than Wendy's Berry Almond Chicken Salad, studded with strawberries and blueberries and tossed with a dressing made with açai-berry juice. Or California Pizza Kitchen's Moroccan Chicken Salad, which offers dates, roasted butternut squash, dried cranberries, avocado and beets.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is now validating that hankering for fresh produce with its new MyPlate graphic (see sidebar). But what is consumers' attitude about fruits and veggies? Are they seeking more farm-to-fork connections? Are they looking for local or organic produce? And, as an operator, how do you effectively relay your core values through produce?

Flavor & The Menu pinpointed four concepts that illustrate progressive menu development and a value system that aligns with wholesome, better-for-you, local and organic: Beautifull, Le Pain Quotidien, Unforked and Obikà. These concepts fit the fast-casual model, and, while they're much smaller (two are micro-chains and one, a single-unit start-up) and therefore more nimble than high-volume chain operations, even mainstream multi-units can learn from their established value systems and positioning of produce.

Not only do these four concepts demonstrate progressive menus, but they boast a customer base that truly understands — demands, even — the values embedded in those menus. Those are enviable bragging rights. It's fair to say that most multi-units are tasked with demonstrating those values, walking their customers through a sea of post-modern terms, such as “sustainable” and “whole.” Chipotle and Five Guys are two fast-casuals that do this really well. Not surprisingly, the promise of great flavor drives the message, but the value of food integrity rides shotgun.

So, besides the advantage of serving diners who appreciate the values of local, sustainable and/or organic, the concepts highlighted here can knock it out of the park with their menu design. They succeed by being nimble, adjusting their offerings according to the availability and price point of local produce. Indeed, their flexibility is trumped only by independent operators, who literally can chalkboard their daily specials depending on whim and what looks good at the farmers' market that morning.

Several important data nuggets can be mined from these four concepts. Yes, they are riding the tip of the wave, but it is a wave nonetheless. What can higher-volume operators learn from their systems of produce procurement? How can a concept maintain a healthy food-cost ratio while delivering on the values that fresh fruits and vegetables represent?

MYPLATE: Good for Produce



In June, hoping to make dietary needs clearer to consumers, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released a new graphic that replaces the food pyramid. And the message on produce consumption is very clear: Fruits and vegetables should dominate the plate. With MyPlate painting a vivid picture of what they should be eating, diners may be expecting more when they eat out.

"Understanding that half of everything you eat — whether it's breakfast out or lunch at home — should be produce, well, there's a lot of potential there," says Kathy Means, VP of government relations for the Produce Marketing Association (PMA). "From an operator's standpoint, when you increase produce use, you decrease your plate cost. Simply looking at it from a business perspective, increasing produce on the plate is a good move."

Industry experts agree the MyPlate graphic is good for both the produce industry and operators. And it's just one of the indicators of an over-arching movement toward better-for-you eating.

"A lot of restaurant chains are coming out with more healthy meals because this is what their customers want," says Rich Dachman, VP of produce for Sysco/FreshPoint in Houston. "Simply put, it's almost impossible to get healthier items without adding more produce. Sure, you can opt to broil instead of deep-frying, but if you're serious about adding healthy menu items, you have to add produce. The MyPlate imagery is a beautiful complement and a motivator to go along with what I believe is a big movement today."

Dachman cites efforts targeting school foodservice for creating awareness and dietary changes in a younger population. "We're on the verge of an absolute explosion in this country. Look at the age group populating these healthier fast-casual concepts. These are college-aged kids. Those customers are the ones we need to listen to," he says. "This new generation understands how to eat healthy, and that will have an extraordinary impact on our economy."

Salinas, Calif.-based Markon Cooperative's President Tim York sees big potential for produce in the growing better-for-you mindset. "The produce industry, restaurants and consumers all stand to gain with greater produce consumption," he says, noting that there are untapped opportunities for marketing the attributes of produce on the menu.

"Imagine how powerful MyPlate imagery on a menu could be," he says, suggesting the idea of placing an icon alongside items that followed the MyPlate design. "A consumer could readily identify which items meet the guidelines. Helping consumers think about the positive attributes as opposed to negative — calories or fat — would be a start."

Dachman stresses that it's important for the produce industry and operators to work together to ensure produce is being menued optimally. He urges high-volume operators "to work closely with suppliers to understand the true seasonality of produce, and when is the best time to work with that product. That way, they're not putting pressure on a supply that may not be there or serving a product that their customers won't like," notes Dachman. "In the end, for the customer — although they want to be healthy and do the right thing — it still has to have flavor."

BUT FIRST, WHO CARES?

Technomic's Healthy Eating Consumer Trend Report (October 2010) tells us that consumers between 18 and 34 eat more natural, sustainable and organic foods than their older cohorts. The report also points out: "In order to justify the higher price points of these types of foods, consumers need to know what distinguishes these products from traditional ones and have a clear idea of the health and environment benefits of these items."

The golden customers place high value on produce that is super fresh, seasonal and, often, organic and/or local, and seek out restaurants that offer it.

Unforked is a brand-new concept, calling itself "fast fresh." Opened in Overland Park, Kan., in June, it hopes to expand locally and then into Phoenix, Tulsa and Dallas. "Our customer is any person who loves great food and appreciates inherent value," says Rob Corliss, chef and director of innovation & sustainability. "It's someone who wants a cleaner way to eat, who wants fresh, real food."

At Beautiful, a three-unit concept in San Francisco, customers range from moms to younger people interested in health and eating well. "And foodies," says Donna Insalaco, executive chef of this "fresh food space," which *Business Week* named one of America's Most Promising Startups in 2009. "Our food tastes wonderful while delivering on the promise of whole and natural."

Le Pain Quotidien, with 51 units across the country, makes the enviable claim that its customers understand the brand promise intuitively. "Our customer base is highly educated, well traveled and sophisticated," says Kaegan Welch, director of food and beverage and research and development. "They move between markets and are pretty savvy. We don't need to tell them what quinoa is. We don't need to demonstrate our value."

Obikà Mozzarella Bar is a micro chain in Los Angeles and New York that also counts its customers among the sophisticated elite. "[They] understand the value of organic, natural food," says Raymond Boggia, owner and CEO of B Ventures USA LLC, the company that developed Obikà. "But we do have to convey that our products are of the highest quality."

BEAUTIFULL

A fresh-food fast-casual concept built upon the principle of “Ingredients + Preparation = Taste + Health,” *Beautiful* offers inspired, produce-rich sandwiches, wraps, entrées, soups, bowls, salads, and baked goods. Menu items range from a Butterbean-Green Garlic Soup (\$4.99) to a Grilled Salmon Caesar Salad (\$12.99).

“We engineer dishes so that we can use a combination of ingredients that are important to us with ingredients that are less expensive,” says Executive Chef Donna Insalaco, who’s been in foodservice for more than 20 years. “A lot of faster-food restaurants just don’t put in the time developing dishes that balance the ingredient mix really well.”

At *Beautiful*, she meets that balance in dishes like the *Beautiful* Bowls, which feature

Kale and Arame Salad with Sesame-Tamari Vinaigrette layers the fresh, earthy flavors that *Beautiful*’s nutrition-conscious patrons seek.



BEAUTIFULL

a base of organic brown rice or quinoa, but then are topped with ethnic ingredients, such as preserved lemons and tomatoes. Dishes like the Tuna Salad Sandwich with Red-Pepper Relish, she says, “are not a high-margin item. That sandwich runs a 33 percent food cost, but it expresses our brand really well.”

Indeed, it’s no ordinary sandwich, and each component calls out artisanal, sustainable traits: whole-grain, seeded bread, Wild Planet tuna bound with housemade aioli and a relish made with roasted red pepper and capers tossed in a champagne vinaigrette.

One of *Beautiful*’s bestsellers is the Golden Beet Salad with Verjus and Tarragon Vinaigrette (\$8.99 per pound). Insalaco roasts whole beets in their skin, then peels and cuts them into wedges. She makes the vinaigrette with good olive oil, shallot, verjus, lemon juice and tarragon. It’s served as a side salad, or diners build a meal with it, adding a protein, such as *Beautiful*’s Tea-Smoked Salmon.

“We use golden beets because they’re delicious and also because they don’t stain like the red ones,” she says. “The colors are wonderful, the flavors are earthy and sweet.” Another star on the sides menu is Kale and Arame Salad with Sesame-Tamari Vinaigrette (\$9.99 per pound).

“It’s nutrient rich, and our diners really appreciate that,” says Insalaco. “The flavors are layered, earthy and fresh.”

Insalaco notes that “whole, healthy foods hold the highest value for us. We first want to get people eating vegetables; then let’s get them to think about organic. I can’t always afford organic — if we used only organic, we’d price ourselves out of our market.”

But the brand is committed to whole foods; *Beautiful* serves only natural, hormone-free, additive-free, steroid-free and antibiotic-free food. It uses no white flour, no butter, no refined sugar or refined grains in its recipes, and whole-grain muffins and seasonal soups are made from scratch daily. Locally grown fruits and vegetables are used in the soups, salads and entrées.

Lesson Learned: Focus on which produce items hold the highest value for your operation, and optimize those foods in dishes with less-expensive ingredients.

UNFORKED

This recent start-up in Overland Park, Kan., is the brainchild of Sheridan's Frozen Custard founder Jim Sheridan. In a new, "fast-fresh" approach to convenient, quality-driven value dining, Unforked focuses on in-season, healthful foods including a Crispy Avocado Taco topped with golden tomato pico and micro greens (\$2.50) or a Thai Salad made of slivers of green mangos, rainbow crunch carrots, mung bean sprouts, toasted coconut and peanuts with red miso dressing (\$7.50).

Pulling inspiration from street food with heavy influences from Latin flavors, dishes at Unforked include a Conquistador steak taco with poblano chimichurri, blistered onions and queso fresco. Or, for breakfast, the Traffic Jam taco of crispy chorizo potatoes, queso and sliced scallions.

Rob Corliss, chef and director of innovation & sustainability, describes Unforked as "a flavor joint, not a Mexican joint," and names priorities as "local first, where we're supporting local infrastructure, GAP-certified [Good Agricultural Practices] and organics."

The accessible, fast-casual format is important to the brand's success. "We don't want our customers coming in once a month," says Corliss. "We want them twice a week. We want to be that place you come back to. A lot. So the focus is on craveable food that speaks to their values."

Unforked doesn't serve huge portions. Tacos, for instance, run a menu cost of \$2.50 to \$3.50 and offer about 3 ounces of meat in a 6-ounce tortilla. "We don't have a value menu. We don't have a kids' menu," Corliss says. "We focus on quality and the right portion."

The Dolce Vida sides, sold for \$2.50, feature seasonal "farm-fresh" fruit. In the spring, that might be six to eight strawberries; in summer, cantaloupe or a wedge of watermelon; and in the fall, simply a whole pear.

"Offering a side of fruit for this type of concept is huge," says Corliss. "Our guests can get fries or chips with their burgers or tacos but have the option of fresh fruit." He underscores an important dynamic here: the sustaining trend of diners demanding choice:

fresh produce as a side to a burger on a Wednesday, but on Sunday, they'll indulge with fries. And presenting fresh produce as part of a menu mix also serves to kill the veto vote. McDonald's learned this years ago, and parents can now move their children from a side of fries to apple slices while still delivering the warm glow of a Happy Meal.

The driving force behind the marketing message at Unforked is transparency. "We're proud of our food sources, and we like to share that with our guests," says Corliss. Unforked lists its produce partners, much as fine-dining restaurants do.

The concept is also savvy about freshness cues, from the inviting glass containers of housemade aguas frescas to the interactive display of fresh orange juice. Diners who order O.J. (\$2.50) are given a basket of oranges, which they run through an industrial juicer. "Kids love putting the oranges in and watching them get squeezed," he says. "It's wholesome entertainment, and also a great visual of our commitment to fresh, whole foods."

Unforked uses the display juicer to squeeze citrus fruits for its aguas frescas, too. These refreshers, in varieties like lavender-lemonade or hibiscus-rose, are an example of how produce drives business at Unforked. Corliss asserts that they create flavor memories because they are unique in the marketplace. "We make more money on sodas and iced tea, and the aguas frescas are labor intensive, but they convey our brand message beautifully," he says.

Lesson Learned: Highlight "freshness cues" in your operation, whether through menu descriptors or fresh-food displays.

Latin flavors and street-food traditions inspire the menu at Unforked, where farm-fresh produce gets top billing.



LE PAIN QUOTIDIEN

With its 51 domestic locations mostly in urban markets, this Brussels-based concept places an emphasis on serving food that's "good for our bodies, our communities and our earth" in a European bakery and communal-dining format. Menu options range from a Roasted-Stone-Fruit Oatmeal with apricots, peaches and organic granola to a Six-Vegetable Quiche with artichoke and garden vegetables.

"With produce, we look at what's in season and what's running locally in our different markets," says Kaegan Welch, director of food and beverage and R&D for Le Pain Quotidien, headquartered in New York. "Organic is important to us, but it's not always available; there's not always enough supply."

Le Pain Quotidien, a Belgian concept that specializes in artisanal organic breads, stresses simply prepared food using high-quality ingredients. Its market penetration is

Salads at Le Pain Quotidien reflect what's in season locally. Farm partnerships are a major source of the fresh produce on the menu.



LE PAIN QUOTIDIEN/PO LICENSING

thoroughly urban, with a built-in customer base of savvy diners. Women make up 70 percent of Le Pain's demographic, skewing from 25 to 55 years old.

The chain's value system is one to watch — and learn from: a sense of community; meaningful, transparent partnerships with farmers; wholesome food; and eclectic menu items, such as Organic Blueberry and Corn Scones with fresh ricotta and wild blueberry jam and a Seaweed Salad with miso dressing and cucumber. Le Pain Quotidien has a European sensibility, but it's thriving here.

The chain prides itself on building its menu on ingredients first, cost second. "We don't value-engineer our menu backward," says Welch. "We work forward from the quality of ingredients, and then run a fair price based on the quality we're serving."

Bestsellers include the entrée salad of Organic Red Quinoa, served with arugula, artichoke hearts, chickpeas and basil pesto. "It's very simply prepared, with super-clean flavors," says Welch.

Tartines, a Belgian/French open-faced sandwich, are signature at Le Pain Quotidien, and include an Avocado Tartine with chickpeas, alfalfa sprouts and spicy tahini. The Seaweed Salad boasts a small, but loyal following of diners. Niche menu items hold cachet, certainly, and this concept understands that value.

"Dishes like this differentiate us from the competition, helping us position ourselves as an uncommon destination," says Welch. The Seaweed Salad, for example, offers diners a lower-priced salad option that comes in at only 100 calories (around 300 if they add a protein like salmon).

Communal, rustic tables made from reclaimed wood set the scene that is at the heart of Le Pain Quotidien's brand — breaking bread as a community. Respecting that community means sourcing wholesome, seasonal food and preparing it simply. Chalkboard menus call out vegan, vegetarian and other fare, adding rustic charm and a changing-with-the seasons sensibility.

Lesson Learned: Use premium produce to develop niche items that can distinguish your operation as an "uncommon" destination.

OBIKÀ

Three-omit Obikà Mozzarella Bar is a new concept which centers its offering on its mozzarella di bufala, “together with the research of recipes and artisanal products typical of the Italian tradition.” With a sleek, urban appeal, the Italian Obikà is introducing America to the notion of a mozzarella bar, with offerings like a salad of Melon, Rocket, Apples, Radishes and Pecorino Romano and Trofie Pasta with light Basil Pesto, Green Beans and Potatoes.

The famed mozzarella at Obikà is flown in daily from Italy, but the micro-chain also places a premium on produce quality.

This Italian-based micro chain opened in the United States in late 2010 touting a menu that boasts flown-in-daily Italian treats, such



OBIKÀ MOZZARELLA BAR

as Mozzarella di Bufala Campana DOP and salame di Cinta Senese. Moms are the most frequent customers, followed by professionals aged 25 to 40 who like to travel.

Growth plans include moving into the San Francisco market, then considering other areas. Obikà promises a commitment to organic produce and, indeed, places organic above local in its value system.

“Organic is good for the planet,” says parent company B Ventures’ owner Raymond Boggia. “We feature all organic produce. Local organic is our first choice, but if that’s not available, then we compromise on local, but we don’t compromise on organic. We’re looking at long-lasting structural changes, so we want to reduce our chemical footprint on the planet.”

“Our margins are the same as most restaurants — we’re not making money on organics,” says Boggia. But, of course, menu prices reflect the cost of organics. The Smoked Wild Salmon Salad, which features smoked Alaska sockeye salmon, arugula, avocado, cherry tomatoes and Songino salad (lamb’s lettuce or mâche), menus for \$16.

“It’s not a cheap salad, but our customers pay less in doctors’ fees,” Boggia says. Other representative dishes include Roasted Bread topped with tuna, yellow peppers, cherry tomatoes, capers, basil, smoked mozzarella di bufala Campana DOP and salted ricotta, as well as a Percoca Peach with ice cream, raspberry sauce and whipped cream.

“We convey our values on our menu and we display it in our vegetable cases,” says Boggia. “Customers see the freshness of our salads. We change them every two hours.”

Obikà’s gleaming displays are similar to those at upscale delis, and they speak to its impeccable sourcing and commitment to a sustainable food system. The reward? Eighty percent repeat business.

Lesson Learned: Clearly determine the standards and those produce items upon which your operation is unwilling to compromise; communicate your commitment. ☺

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Take-Away TIPS

ACT ON YOUR PRIORITIES: Organic, local, in-season, sustainable, all of the above – decide what resonates most with your customer base and budget and then source and menu accordingly.

COMMUNITY COUNTS: Partnering with farmers for fruits and veggies shows a commitment to the area you serve – and helps ensure quality.

SWITCH SIDES: Offer diners the option of a serving of fresh, wholesome fruit or vegetables in place of the starch with their meals.