

FLAVOR & THE MENU

Healthy Meets Delicious

The approach to better-for-you menu strategies varies, but flavor should always take the lead

By Amanda M. Westbrooks

Healthful dining is no longer a trend only for “health nuts” but a paradigm shift in the restaurant industry, following the buying habits of the American consumer and the rulemaking by the FDA on menu labels.

Consider that sales of organic foods grew from just \$1 billion in 1990 to more than \$28 billion in 2012, according to the Organic Trade Association. The rise of retailers like Whole Foods and The Fresh Market are mirrored in the foodservice industry by the growth of chains like Chipotle, Seasons 52, Sweet Green and Lyfe Kitchen—concepts that tout healthier menus as a better lifestyle.

A recent study by NPD Group found that consumers are making a conscious effort to live a healthier lifestyle and are looking for products made with less fat, sodium and sweeteners. However, these attitudes have little influence on a diner’s choice of restaurant and menu item, with only a small percentage of consumers seeking nutritional information such as calories (20 percent) and fats/oils (13 percent).

“As chefs, we have a responsibility to strive for the highest of culinary standards and perpetually advance and evolve with changing times,” says Rob Corliss, chef-consultant with ATE (All Things Epicurean), a culinary consultancy based in Nixa, Mo. “I encourage all chefs to be proactive in their menu development versus reactive to industry or legislative mandates.”

When the FDA’s menu labeling and other mandated nutrition programs hit the scene, the industry originally looked at them with a “less is more” attitude—less calories, less fat, less salt, less sugar. But those who embraced the change and cut the bleeding edge of the healthful dining movement are now following a “sometimes more is just more” philosophy, building flavor versus subtracting it. They have found no small amount of success, while also earning the trust of their customers.



Flavor need not be sacrificed in better-for-you options like this bruschetta with a topping of roasted tomatoes, carrots and broccoli tossed in a healthy Omega-9 oil dressing. PHOTO COURTESY OF OMEGA-9 OILS.

CONSCIOUS MENU PLANNING

“Many of the chains give up too easily,” says Corliss. “They could be optimizing existing products versus reinventing the wheel, but get stuck in ‘paralysis by over-analysis,’ when they really need to start small and let the program grow.”

Corliss points at Wendy’s as a good example of program-building, with its “Quality is our Recipe” approach, touting fresh ingredients, better flavor and fewer calories. Its website is chock full of nutrition information and tips on making smarter eating choices. Wendy’s is also a member of the National Restaurant Association’s Kids LiveWell healthy dining initiative.

“The key is to lead with flavor and ingredients, and have the nutrition information available online or in an app to back it up,” Corliss says.

It’s a strategy that’s working outside the fast-casual segment as well. “We worked with a lot of nutritionists in the beginning,” says Cliff Pleau, senior director of culinary and beverage, of the menu strategy at Darden’s upscale Seasons 52 concept. “But you can’t have that as a hurdle to your creativity. Our mantra was ‘seasonal, and, by the way, it’s good for you,’ and 10 years later, that’s still where we are.”

Seasons 52 has since paved the way for other healthy concepts, and according to Pleau, that was the intent.

“We were way out on the edge when we came in, and others have skated into the healthful dining space behind us. We started from scratch with our whole concept,” Pleau explains. “We started the healthy plate approach by asking, ‘What needs to be on the plate and how do we build it?’ versus creating the Ultimate Cobb Salad and taking away from it. We looked at every part of the dish and built up. Did we need lettuce? Could it be organic? Then, we chose a real premium chicken product: farm-fresh, whole, roasted all-natural chicken.”

Adopting a proactive approach to healthier menu items has even taken hold in the city infamous for her cream sauces and fried seafood—New Orleans. “I was reluctant at first, but it was easier than I thought it would be,” says Matt Farmer, executive chef at Apolline restaurant, whose menu features French contemporary cuisine with Creole influences. “We always highlight the ingredient—there’s not a single cream sauce on the menu. I was already doing 90 percent of it; I just didn’t know it.”

Two years ago, Apolline was one of the first restaurants to partner with Eat Fit NOLA—a hospital-backed program working with chefs to create and market individual dishes that meet the nutrition guidelines of the American Heart Association (AHA). In fact, the program exceeds AHA guidelines by limiting sugar and eliminating white carbs. In addition to the more than 30 local restaurant partners—which include big names like Commander’s Palace and Bayona—Copeland’s of New Orleans and Cheesecake Bistro have incorporated Eat Fit NOLA in all 25 of their locations, from Texas to Maryland.

With recipes in hand, Farmer met with the registered dietitian behind the program, Molly Kimball, and she helped him make minor changes to a handful of dishes to adapt them to the program.

“After talking with Molly, it really opened my eyes to a whole different world of cooking,” Farmer admits. “The minor adjustments didn’t make a difference in flavor or taste. I haven’t changed my style, but I am much more conscious—it’s almost embedded in my brain now. I like that without any effort, we were able to accommodate and present ourselves in this way to our guests.”

ADDING, NOT SUBTRACTING

The reality is that there is a growing demand for wellness from our food and our food systems. The perception of what is healthy, however, varies greatly. This actually bodes well for culinary creativity, as chefs can blaze new trails of health and wellness on menus. These days, healthy menus are more about what is there versus what has been replaced.

For example, a number of QSRs are utilizing turkey as a breakfast protein. Recently, Dunkin’ Donuts introduced a Sliced Turkey Breakfast Sandwich to its line of DD Smart Options. The sandwich features a new toasted multigrain flatbread, folded around three slices of turkey, reduced fat cheddar cheese and pepper egg whites.

Jamba Juice’s new line of Whole Food Nutrition Smoothies includes a Kale-ribbean Breeze Smoothie, a blend of passionfruit-mango juice, kale, mangoes, nonfat Greek yogurt and chia seeds—good for protein, fiber, Omegas-3s—and a serving of kale.

“The key is to satiate with flavor versus volume,” says Corliss. “Flavor is king—it’s quality. Consumers would rather have something that tastes great over something they’ve been told is healthy.”

Sometimes a little technique is all it takes. “I can take the worst tomatoes in the winter and turn them into something completely unexpected,” says Pleau. He roasts plum tomatoes on a rack for an hour and is rewarded with a more flavorful tomato, which can be blended into sauces or used to make a bright vinaigrette dressing.

At Apolline, Farmer makes a rémoulade oven-dried tomato vinaigrette which he pairs with coriander seared tuna. “Coriander has a really unique flavor, especially when toasted,” he explains. “When we sear it in the pan, it makes a fruity bouquet, and adds to the flavor of the tuna. We’re not adding salt or fat, just flavor—and it’s ten times better than grilling the tuna.”



Shrimp spring rolls with a sriracha-hot chile sauce epitomize light-but-satisfying dining that showcases bold flavors and fresh ingredients. PHOTO COURTESY OF KIKKOMAN SALES USA INC..

DON'T MESS WITH PERFECTION

Quality, origin and the history of an ingredient tie into transparency, an uppermost concern for today's diner, but it plays a flavor role in healthful dining, too.

"Quality starts with what you put in the pan," says Brent Wertz, executive chef and VP of food and beverage at Nemaquin Woodlands Resort in Farmington, Pa. Wertz oversees 14 food and beverage outlets, including the 5-star Lautrec and 4-star Aqueous. "If you can get local or better ingredients, do it."

The resort drains the local gardens six months out of the year, and buys from the Amish farmer auctions. "We take advantage of what God has given us and try to stay true to it," Wertz says. "Taste everything and see what it offers you. If you get great golden watermelon, just compress it and let it be great golden watermelon."

Cantaloupes are mostly water, but still offer flavors to build on. Wertz recommends a melon-grilled scallop with cantaloupe sauce. "You can lay off the herbs and heavier sauces and just highlight the product," he says.

Wertz and Pleau have also nearly eliminated roux in their kitchens, opting for squash or vegetable purées as thickeners instead. "Unless you're making a gumbo or black roux where it's really bringing flavor, there isn't much point," says Wertz.

Apolline has a confit duck on the menu that Farmer thought would never meet healthy nutrition requirements, but he was surprised to be proven wrong. "It's the one really fatty ingredient on my menu, and all we had to do was remove the skin," he says. "We limit the portion size, serve it with a whole-grain-wheat flour spiced bread over arugula with a moderate amount of Cashel Blue cheese and an apple cider vinaigrette."

SALT OF A DIFFERENT COLOR

While sodium is a concern, there are ways to bend and manipulate it to meet menu needs.

Sea and gourmet salts are available in many flavors and varieties, from all over the world. "Salt can be a finishing touch that might be called out on a menu, but the consumer isn't seeing it directly," says Corliss. "Instead of using truffle oil to jazz up pomme frites, a lot of chefs are using truffle salts. It's simply a high end sea salt with truffle powder in it."



At Apolline restaurant, a member of New Orleans' Eat Fit NOLA program, Coriander-Seared Tuna gets a healthy but flavor-forward treatment from toasted coriander, rémoulade, oven-dried tomato vinaigrette, pistachios and frisée. PHOTO COURTESY OF APOLLINE.

Olive and smoked salts are also gaining popularity on appetizers and breads as an added flavor component.

“I’m using a black Hawaiian sea salt on lavash, because I can see it,” says Pleau, emphasizing the importance of keeping a close eye on added salt usage.

“Always consider the natural sodium levels of foods when creating,” he advises. “If I don’t have to add salt, I won’t. You have to use ‘palate distractions’ that provide a surprise somewhere else in the mouth. I reach for lemons, herbs, aromatics and crunchy things.”

Occasionally, something acidic can stand in for salt. Try grilling lemons and squeezing the grilled lemon juice on fish or chicken, or combine it with olive oil and a bit of sea salt. It’s a simple alternative with a lot of impact.

GARNERING CUSTOMER TRUST

When people are led to their own wellness decisions, they become more informed and thus transformed.

“I need to be able to stand stable on every product in my pantry,” says Pleau. “We’ve developed a trust with our guests. We’ve chosen good ingredients and we’ve done the nutrition and all the work—their toughest choice is where to park.”

Apolline and other restaurants in the Eat Fit NOLA program are also seeing a return on their investment of altering their menus. “It took a while for people to get it,” admits Farmer. “This city is still on its way to that mindset. Nobody has asked me for nutrition information my whole career—and all of it has been spent in New Orleans. But, for some of my customers, it’s opened their eyes to healthier eating because the flavor is there. That’s all I can ask for.”