

RESTAURANT SMARTS PROTEINS



LEAN PROTEINS SERVE AS SUBSTITUTES FOR FOODS FORBIDDEN BY TODAY'S TRENDY DIETS.

MEAT & LIVESTOCK AUSTRALIA

Meating the Demand

Shifting consumer diets mean big changes for proteins. *By Peggy Carouthers*

As the health benefits of diets high in protein continue to spread, consumers are eating more proteins than they have in the past. Chefs are responding to the demands of their customers to plate more proteins while trying to follow new nutritional guidelines in their menus.

“We are seeing consumers increasingly craving high-protein diets—78 percent of United States consumers believe that protein contributes to a healthy diet, and more than half of adults say they want more of it in their

diets,” says Doug Wickman, vice president of marketing and business development for **Perdue Farms**.

One reason is that many Americans are using proteins as a substitute for foods forbidden by today’s trendy diets, like the Paleo Diet, gluten-free, Slow-Carb, and Whole30. This means that chefs are expected to incorporate more high-protein dishes into their menus.

Yet research regarding the types and portions of proteins consumed is influencing how they are used. Simply

increasing meat consumption can lead to an unbalanced diet, so some operators are plating more lean proteins like chicken, lamb, and turkey.

“We are seeing a lot of interest in local lamb from consumers who follow Paleo, clean eating, the Mediterranean Diet, and more,” says Megan Wortman, executive director of the **American Lamb Board**. “They are looking for high-quality lean proteins, and lamb is a flavorful alternative to other proteins. When you are giving up so many things from dairy,



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Big Flavor Trends

Grilling isn't just a name: "Grilling has undergone tremendous transformation recently," says Dr. Bob Johnson, director of foodservice business development for **Red Arrow Products**. "No longer the general catchphrase for foods that were not fried, baked, or roasted, the term 'grilled' has descriptively evolved into aspects such as wood-fired, flame-seared, fire-roasted, flame-kissed, and charred."

Barbecue isn't going anywhere: "With the wonderful diversity we have in ethnic cuisine, consumers have tremendous choices," Johnson says. "One trend we're seeing is a proliferation of American comfort foods—barbecue being chief among those. Barbecue is positioning itself on many menus, and I don't think it's going to revert back anytime soon. America has a fondness for smoked meat."

Clean labels are important, especially for seasoning: "Two things gaining greater momentum are clean labels and heightened nutritional—examples are not limited to, but may include MSG alternatives and reduced sodium levels," Johnson says. "We're seeing tremendous advances in terms of salt substitutes and savory flavor potentiators used in combination with one another. Culinary professionals are mindful of these and investigating options to satisfy consumer needs and requests."

Reduced sodium does not mean reduced flavor: "Because of the long held consumer perceptions that low sodium means low flavor, those professionals who have formulated with items such as potas-

sium salt and savory enhancers to maintain the same or even elevated levels of umami while significantly reducing sodium may elect to not call out or advertise this on the menu because of historically negative perceptions," Johnson says.

"Significant breakthroughs have resulted in both savory enhancement and salt substitutes that impart very familiar and flavorful potentiation to most any dish where a reasonable sodium reduction of 30 percent or more can be achieved with desirable eating satisfaction."

Bold flavors are bigger than ever: Proteins are taking on bolder flavors than have been traditionally seen in American cuisine.

"Rainbow trout is a mild tasting white fish, so it is ideal to pair with bolder flavors such as pretzel mustard and harissa," says Kurt Myers, vice president of sales and marketing for **Clear Springs Foods**. "Harissa is very interesting in that it is in the early stage of the Menu Adoption Cycle. It is a flavor profile that comes from North Africa. The menu mentions are starting to increase."

'Hot chicken,' which originated in Nashville, is another bold dish now growing on a national scale.

"Hot chicken is the dish at the moment," says Doug Wickman, vice president of marketing and business development at **Perdue Foodservice**. "In addition to fried chicken seeing a resurgence, a trend toward spicier dishes has led to hot chicken appearing on menus across the country. Many chefs are putting their own twists on spicy fried chicken. Sriracha chicken is one we've seen, as well as South Korean garlic and soy fried chicken." ■

to sugar, to wheat, adding flavor and variety with lean proteins is important."

Clean Labels

One trend revolutionizing the way consumers interact with food is the clean-eating movement, which favors ingredients and dishes with fewer additives, preservatives, and chemicals, as well as non-GMO and low-sodium products.

Due to this shift, the priority for chefs and producers is clean labels and transparent communication with consumers about the source of their ingredients.

"There's a really strong perceived value for meats with a 'clean label,' with no added hormones, grass-fed, no antibiotics, and a strong animal welfare story," says Catherine Golding, foodservice business development manager for **Meat & Livestock Australia**.

Bryon Coleman, vice president of foodservice and international sales for **Jones Dairy Farm**, largely attributes changing consumer demands to growth of the Millennial population.

"Millennials are driving a lot of products and innovation," Coleman says. "Things that are important to consumer groups today, like the Millennials, is understanding what's in the ingredients list, and the shorter the list the better. Not only are the operators, consumers, and customers going to grocery stores and looking at the ingredient deck, but they also want to understand the nutritional features of these products, like the protein delivery, the sodium content, and the fat content. All these things contribute to purchasing decisions."

Operators who are equally concerned with these features, as well as those wishing to differentiate themselves in a competitive market, are meeting their customers' demands by sourcing their proteins from distributors that offer clean labels.

"We've seen an increasing demand from restaurant operators for poultry that is raised with no antibiotics ever or is USDA Certified Organic," Wickman says. "Operators are seeking out proteins that meet their patrons' demands for transparency."

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This trend is showing no signs of slowing down.

“Without a doubt, organic offerings will continue to grow on menus and be solidly represented in menu trends. ‘No antibiotics ever’ and ‘all vegetarian fed’ proteins will also continue to grow and will become more readily available across segments and cuisine types,” Wickman says.

Sous Vide

Another trend taking off as a result of the clean-eating movement is *sous vide* cooking, the French term for “under vacuum.” *Sous vide* involves enclosing proteins, such as chicken or pork, in plastic bags, which are then submerged in warm water or steam. The proteins, or in some cases, vegetables, are cooked for longer and at lower temperatures than with traditional methods. The process allows chefs to cook items evenly without losing moisture or overcooking the proteins’ exteriors.

Though this technique was first used at the end of the eighteenth century, it

is regaining popularity with the rise of the clean-eating movement, because it is an additive-free way to retain the tenderness and moisture of meats.

“Ten years ago, if I said pork you thought of a dry, roast pork you never wanted to eat or a pork chop that was like cardboard,” says Jeff Cowles, director of culinary sales for **SugarCreek Packing Company**. “But those dry tasteless products are so different from what you’re seeing now with the *sous vide* capabilities that bring marvelous functionality where the pork is exceptionally tender, velvety, delicate, and luscious.”

Previously, suppliers had to use additives to enhance the tenderness of meat to combat that dryness associated with pork, but the *sous vide* method of cooking has changed that.

“*Sous vide* cooking allows us to use no phosphates, starches, or gums to maintain moistness. It fits perfectly in a clean label,” Cowles says. “The clean label thing is huge. Every restaurant really jumped into this thing with both

feet, and everyone is very cautious and concerned about it. With *sous vide* you don’t need preservatives.”

By cooking with a method that maintains quality and moisture without adding extra chemicals, chefs and suppliers are able to meet consumer demand for cleaner products without sacrificing the quality of their proteins.

“We work with a lot of restaurant chains, and no restaurant chains want the ‘ugly words’ on their labels that allow you to cook pork so that it’s moist or tender,” Cowles says. “I can get rid of those and use the very gentle, low, and slow *sous vide* cooking technique to create pretty much the same thing, and in some cases, a better finished product.”

Though consumer diets continue to change with new trends and research, proteins continue to be a key portion of the human diet. As chefs and suppliers work to meet consumer demand, the way proteins are served and consumed will continue to evolve increasing the nutritional value and environmental sustainability of American cuisine. ■



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RESTAURANT SMARTS KEY PLAYERS



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