15 Food Service Trends for 2015
It’s a take-share market for most operators these days. To help spur growth, creativity is rapidly becoming the norm. Here we explore 15 trends sure to shape the foodservice industry and their operational impact for the coming year and beyond.

Competition in the foodservice industry continues to heat up. Technomic predicts overall nominal growth will be only 3.1 percent in 2015. Strip out inflation, and this pretty much means a zero increase. As a result, foodservice operators have to take share from their competitors in order to grow. To accomplish this, restaurants and institutions continue to come up with all sorts of ways to differentiate their operations from — and beat — their rivals in this sluggish environment. Creativity will be the new norm.

The main reason for the lack of restaurant industry growth, according to Technomic, is that consumers remain short on disposable income. They are not eating out as much as they were a few years ago. Great industry minds have been at work to counteract this and “get more butts back in seats.” As a result, 15 trends have emerged as potential game changers for 2015. Each impacts one or more of three key areas: design, equipment and workflow. Whether a concept renews its décor, its menu or its prep, these changes will affect its operation in some way.

Each trend comes with its own requirements for success, ranging from small tweaks to significant shifts. Chefs, trying to elevate the dining experience to new levels, continue to drive many of the trends. Technology drives other trends, enabling operators to take advantage of new apps that make processes more convenient, while consumers drive still more trends, with restaurants responding to changes in demand and tastes.

Whatever the drivers, these changes promise to stir up the industry and make it an exciting year.
TREND 01
Premium fast casual remains hot, hot, hot

It may only account for 15 percent of sales in the $231 billion limited-service category, but, according to Technomic, fast casual is the segment to watch. It grew at a rate of 11 percent in 2013, while overall QSR growth was flat. Fast-casual sales continue to outpace sales at full-service restaurants too. The attraction to fast casual stems from the fresh, made-to-order menu items that provide a step up from the processed food prepared in bulk at QSR chains. The only way the category could get hotter would be to up the ante on its menu offerings — and that is just what is happening, whether it's fresh ingredients or more options.

For instance, Five Guys Burgers and Fries, the number-eight burger chain, markets the fact that its units have no freezers, only coolers. Only fresh beef goes into Five Guys burgers, which customers can order in 250,000 ways, the company claims.

Some fast-casual concepts are hiring corporate chefs to take their menus to the next culinary level. Burger 21 named chef Mike Remes its corporate chef to oversee the offerings in the chain's 14 units. (Burger 21 has another 20 locations in development.) For example, the new Bayou Burger is made from homemade andouille sausage and turkey, with a skewer of blackened, grilled shrimp, plus sriracha and remoulade sauce with a relin' Cajun slaw and a toasted brioche bun. Burger 21 plans to roll out a new series of shakes that recreate diners' experiences as kids, such as a pineapple upside-down milkshake. The chain is testing proprietary homemade ice cream in the shakes. "It's all about our memories," Remes says, referring to the comfort-food aspect of the menu.

OPERATIONAL IMPACT: While Five Guys uses coolers instead of freezers, Burger 21's equipment package now includes a soft-serve ice cream machine. A hopper in the top of the machine keeps the ice cream base cold, and it freezes as it passes through a chamber into the container. Burger 21 also added an area to hold ingredients supporting shake preparation.

TREND 02
QSRs fight back by “fast casualizing”

Seeing their market share getting squeezed, QSRs are responding by renovating both their physical operations and their menus. This includes updated decor, using wood and metal touches seen in fast-casual concepts to give a fresher, hipper look.

Taco Bell has introduced several upgraded menu items, working with Miami chef Lorena Garcia to come up with items that will compete with fast-casual rival Chipotle. Its new Cantina Power menu doubles up on protein, offering such items as a grilled chicken bowl and using ingredients like black beans and corn salsa.

OPERATIONAL IMPACT: Renovating the physical space requires a collaborative effort between a concept's designers and executives. Renovation of the menu calls for adding the talents of an experienced chef and may or may not mean additional equipment used for prep, as well as new signage in the front of the house.

TREND 03
Full-service restaurants reinvent themselves

Not to be left out of the competitive fray, full-service restaurants are also investing in makeovers. Melting Pot, a 40-year-plus concept, has hired chef Jason Miller, whose experience includes working with Capital Grille and celebrity chef David Burke for more than a decade. As the corporate chef charged with leading culinary development, Miller plans to add a bar-food initiative to the chain's traditional fondue menu. Diners will now enjoy lobster quesadillas, flatbreads and Kobe beef sliders among other treats. The bar-food menu is available in 20 restaurants to date and will appear at additional locations.

Denny's started a project to redesign its decor, using dark wood, copper ceilings and full-wall photographic murals. The ultimate example of this is a new unit in Manhattan's financial district, the first upscale diner in New York. A full craft bar offers prosecco on tap. Diners can pair a Manhattan Cream Soda, made with bourbon, with a bacon-flavored bacon burger or a Pepino — a mescal with cucumber, sea salt and lime — with nachos. As for what goes with the Grand Slam breakfast? A $300 bottle of 2004 Drom Pergnion vintage champagne, of course.

OPERATIONAL IMPACT: Chef Miller has updated the tableside cooking equipment for fondue, using induction burners rather than electric. He has also added combi ovens in the back of the house for fast, convenient cooking of new menu items. Both combi ovens and induction cooking are trends in kitchens with small footprints and by chefs who like the convenience the equipment offers.
TREND 04

250,000 ways to order a burger — and quite a few ways to order a shake

With 15 toppings and several different sizes, Five Guys Burgers and Fries claims it offers 250,000 options in its more than 1,200 units. Recently, the fast-casual star expanded the customizable concept to milkshakes, which it is testing at 25 locations all over the East Coast. Starting with a basic vanilla shake, customers can add any of 10 ingredients to personalize their order. A number of other burger-and-shake chains continue to test the customizable concept as well.

OPERATIONAL IMPACT: The addition of shakes means an added section to the open prep line. At Five Guys, staff assemble burgers at one end, while another staff member mans the compact shake station. The shake station includes dispensers for cherries, bananas, Oreo cookies, salted caramel, peanut butter, coffee, chocolate, malted milk, strawberries and, yes, bacon. A staff member holds each shake under a blender for a few minutes before covering it with whipped cream, if desired, and serving it. Offering fresh bananas and strawberries as shake options means additional prep in the back of the house. Different toppings for burgers and shake options also require an organized station of options that are easily reached by staff.

TREND 05

Small plates still spinning

Although they have been around for a while, small plates have staying power. Consumers frequently order these tapas-sized menu items instead of an entrée, making the meal three plates instead of one. This satisfies diners' cravings for variety, offering a mix-and-match opportunity for one or more patrons. It also allows chefs to be more creative, coming up with interesting combinations for a greater number of dishes.

OPERATIONAL IMPACT: Variety in menu options may mean a need for additional prep and storage areas. Depending on the complexity of the items, additional staff may be necessary too.

Pizza is getting ready for its close-up

Pizza Hut is test marketing a lighter option. Called “Skinny Slice” pies, they have less dough and lighter toppings. The Toledo market is testing a slice that has a choice of 5 toppings and is less than 300 calories. To compare, the West Palm Beach market is testing 6 pre-determined pie choices that weigh in at 250 calories or less. With government regulation of menu labeling, the healthier options will help pizza operators with their nutritional story.

Domino's now has a store prototype that runs counter to its traditional delivery model. Called “Pizza Theater,” the redesigned space offers guests a chance to sit at a counter and watch the production of their pizzas. The open kitchen design doubles the amount of space formerly dedicated to the front of the house and features a step platform that enables kids to watch too. The theater aspect, showing the made-for-you process, communicates freshness and transparency. Domino's now incorporates a more authentic appearance, using real wood and real brick wherever possible. The new stores also feature big-screen TVs and order-tracking screens. Chalkboard walls allow guests and staff to leave messages or share thoughts. Some units even allow space for in-store dining.

OPERATIONAL IMPACT: Changing the prep specs for pizza, à la Pizza Hut, will not necessarily change the design or equipment. It will, however, require training for the production line in terms of workflow and will require new signage. A complete redesign of an existing footprint, as with Domino's, calls for new decor items. Domino's did not incur the expense of relocating ovens and ventilation equipment, but guests can now see all the action thanks to the open production area.
TREND 07
No more mystery meat for seniors
Aging baby boomers may be entering senior-living facilities, but they don’t want the traditional grub served to their parents. When they enter retirement living — whether it’s a private apartment, assisted living or a nursing home — they want gourmet choices. Facilities are hiring chefs to design menus that feature restaurant-quality fare. Smoothies continue to replace canned nutritional shakes. Some places even have cocktail hour. Food is becoming a competitive advantage for players in the continuing care market.

OPERATIONAL IMPACT: This trend results in the emergence of creative chefs in the on-site healthcare segment. These chefs also require new equipment to execute restaurant-quality menus to satisfy the new demands of exacting boomers.

TREND 08
Local supersedes organic in diners’ vocabularies.
With large conglomerates now playing in the organic space, consumers are less trusting of products that are labeled “natural” or “organic.” Now, the catchword is “local.” The halo surrounding local products — hand-crafted, produced by small farmers, healthy, free from chemicals — has become a symbol of trust and integrity. Local products are generally seasonal, which means they may not be available on a year-round basis. While meats and dairy products can be local, produce is by far the largest category. Often, restaurant operators will use the names of the farms in menu marketing.

OPERATIONAL IMPACT: Fresh produce has requirements for maintaining quality and food safety, including a receiving area, a washing station (which may mean extra sink space), and a dedicated prep area. Different produce items require different temperature storage, so it may be necessary to add cooler space. In some cases, to manage seasonal produce, restaurateurs flash freeze produce at the peak of harvest for use out of season.

TREND 09
Ultimate freshness cues: Condiments and specialties from scratch
The chef at Copperwood Tavern in Arlington, Va., makes his own ketchup from smoked tomatoes. He, like many chefs and patrons, doesn’t want the high-fructose corn syrup that comes in the processed version. He also makes peach and apricot ketchup. Known for its locally grown menu items, as well as grass-fed beef, the Tavern helps grow its reputation for freshness and wholesomeness with its handmade condiments.

Other chefs make their own mustards, aioli and pickles, in addition to curing their own meat and breeding their own chicken. This satisfies diners’ demand for authenticity and gives each restaurant a good story to tell on its menu.

OPERATIONAL IMPACT: Production of homemade condiments and specialty items may take place during off hours or may be done off-premise. This trend can have a positive impact on customer perception without necessarily changing the operation’s workflow.
TREND 10
Wines take center stage

Alcohol sales drive profitability in a restaurant, so anything to increase those sales remains a smart strategic move. To this end, restaurants with significant wine offerings now place their bottles front and center in wine walls or wine rooms that become a signature statement about the quality of the dining experience. The displays may be in the form of a wall, a room or a divider that separates the bar and dining room areas. They can be functional, with bottles in the display being served to diners, or as a combination of storage and suggestive selling, with wine orders filled from the back of the house. In most cases, the wine displays are glass enclosed, which allows for temperature controls and some kind of security system.

At the other end of the spectrum is the trend toward wines on tap. Wine drawn from a keg for single-glass servings improves speed of service. It also can be less expensive, since it saves vintners the expense of bottles, corks, capsules and labels.

OPERATIONAL IMPACT: Wine displays require appropriate racking. Materials can be wood or steel, depending on the look desired by the operator, with glass enclosing the racks. Temperature and humidity controls are necessary to preserve the wine. Weight of the display is a critical factor to consider as well. For wines on tap, stainless steel dispensers and surgical-grade tubing are required. Space for kegs of wine is a consideration too, either displacing or adding to existing kegs of beer on tap.

TREND 12
Sustainable decor passes the test of time

Reclaimed wood is a strong trend in restaurants as an interior design element. Designers continue to use wood from old buildings, barns and bowling alleys, not only for flooring and interiors but also for furnishings. Dark wood, particularly, communicates authenticity and tradition and supports the concept of a “farm-fresh menu.” The use of reclaimed wood will also help a restaurant earn LEED design points.

OPERATIONAL IMPACT: A caveat with reclaimed wood is that it must pass health department regulations. The key for an operator is to source from a reputable company that will provide documentation about the wood’s origins.

TREND 11
Craft beer leads the category

“Regular” beer as a category is flat, but craft beer is having a heyday. The production of craft beer was up by 9.6 percent in 2013, while the overall category dropped 1.4 percent. Craft beer is produced in small, independent microbreweries, and there are more than 3,000 of them in the United States. Innovation is the key, with flavors ranging from jalapeno cilantro to peanut butter cup coffee porter.

Many restaurants are even brewing their own beer on-site. The trend responds to consumer desires for variety and local products and is a favorite of well-heeled Millennials.

OPERATIONAL IMPACT: Most craft beer is served on tap and given the range of new flavors steadily coming out, bartenders and servers must be educated about each new label on a regular basis. For in-house brewing, most restaurants reserve a separate room for the process, with steel fermenting tanks and all the necessary equipment visible to customers.
TREND 13

Lighting a more enjoyable dining experience

Lighting represents a key challenge for all foodservice operations. It needs to reflect the daypart, the space, the segment and the atmosphere. Lighting for breakfast is far brighter than that for dinner, thus it should be adjustable to accommodate different dayparts. Lighting at dinner needs to be bright enough for reading the menu but also soft enough to lend atmosphere to the dining experience. New LED lighting can address the lighting challenge, and the trend is to design lighting for people, not for the design of the restaurant. In other words, lighting can be beautiful, but it must be functional. LED lighting offers color options as well as traditional white and has the advantage of low power consumption.

OPERATIONAL IMPACT: Lighting design and execution should keep in mind functionality. Choices will affect diners’ experiences, so operators should select lighting with the goal of creating a comfortable ambience that encourages them to stay longer and enjoy the food and drink.

TREND 14

Digital media screens for an ever-changing wall treatment

One of the newest design trends is installing screens that display artwork, movies or other images that reflect the theme of the restaurant. These screens go well beyond the wide-screen TVs for sporting events that became popular in the ’90s. These are photo walls, often encompassing an entire wall area, and these digital displays can be changed with the press of a button.

OPERATIONAL IMPACT: Some form of projectable surface is necessary for this trendy addition; this could be actual screens, or walls with special paint that allows for displaying images smoothly. There is also an investment in digital equipment needed, usually short-throw projectors.

TREND 15

DIY ordering and paying online is a long-term trend

Let’s see, do I want fries with that? Self-ordering kiosks and tablets at tables are a steadily growing trend. Speed of service and accuracy are two of the benefits. The convenience of ordering and paying electronically particularly appeals to Millennials, who spend a good deal of time on one device or another. When patrons place their own orders and pay for them electronically in a limited-service restaurant, they avoid waiting in line and can be in and out of a restaurant in a few minutes. Full-service restaurants have tabletop ordering screens. Many systems show previous orders so the diner can push the button and repeat the experience or, conversely, order something completely different.

OPERATIONAL IMPACT: Kiosks are in place at different points, depending on space or design of the QSR or fast-casual unit. They can be near the entrance or near the registers. The menus display a range of choices available, including alternative options, such as gluten-free or vegan. Chains using the self-ordering kiosks report that the ordering applications bring in higher check averages than those taken by cashiers.