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Rush-Hour Traffic - US Food Trends

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Grab-and-go is a foodservice growth market, and upgraded ready-to-eat foods grab consumers' interest.

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By Allison Perlik, Senior Editor

As customer-focused operators earn kudos for innovative carryout and curbside pickup, innovators already are a step ahead. They're applying the consumer-mandated combination of quality ingredients, bold tastes and stepped-up convenience to another foodservice frontier loaded with profit potential: the grab-and-go market.

Crafted with renewed attention to freshness and creativity, prepackaged, ready-to-eat foods make more sense than ever for consumers, who in 2006 ate 127 to-go meals compared with 81 in-restaurant meals per person, according to Port Washington, N.Y.-based The NPD Group.

"Grab-and-go really is becoming a destination point," says Bill Mitchell, senior director of national program development for Gaithersburg, Md.-based Sodexo Corporate Services. "Convenience is king, and customers are looking for fast, fresh dining experiences."

In upgrading such options, operators are exploring nontraditional grab-and-go fare from chicken skewers to frittatas and also are rethinking sandwiches and salads—two versatile, portable standbys that always score big with diners—to add fresh, contemporary flair.

An example is Sodexo's Salad Shots, snack-size versions of the contractor's most-popular recipes tucked inside 5-ounce plastic cups. One option offers Roma tomatoes and fresh mozzarella tossed with pine nuts, fresh basil and olive oil; another brings together grilled flank steak, bell peppers and red onions with roasted corn, tomatoes and avocado in cilantro-lime dressing.

Recognizing that leisurely meals at Spago or Chinois aren't consumers' most-frequent dining experiences, Los Angeles-based Wolfgang Puck Inc. also operates Wolfgang Puck To Go kiosks. New "pocket" sandwiches of savory stuffings encased in pita-shaped pizza dough fit the bill and are ideal for customers at airports, universities and convention centers. The Pesto Chicken Pocket, now a top seller, builds on chicken breasts marinated in chile flakes, herbs and olive oil. The whole-muscle protein, cooked fresh daily, is tossed with romaine lettuce, Roma tomatoes, red onions and creamy dressing made with pesto, lemon juice and rémoulade sauce.

"Folks make decisions about what they're going to buy very quickly," says Andrew Hunter, vice president of culinary development for the concept. "When they walk past a grab-and-go case, the food has to be identifiable but also make them think, 'That looks a little different from what I'm used to; I'll give it a try.'"

Go Far Out (But Not Too Far)

For Bethesda, Md.-based airport-concession operator HMSHost, finding unique tastes to entice diners often means thinking outside the sandwich-and-salad model. A prime example is chicken skewers, a seasonal offering at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

The recipe comes from local celebrity chef Kathy Casey, whom the company recruited to adapt signature recipes from the grab-and-go format at her Dish D'Lish fast-casual concept in Seattle's Pike Place Market. Chunks of teriyaki-marinated, boneless chicken breasts are skewered, baked on-site and packaged cold over sticky rice with a soufflé cup of sake-teriyaki sauce.

Breakfast is a growing opportunity for HMSHost, says Dave Widmer, senior director of food and culinary standards. The company is testing wraps such as a wheat tortilla holding pineapple-studded cream cheese, romaine lettuce, chopped fruit, raisins and walnuts. Another version, this one savory,

calls for sun-dried tomato tortillas with garlic-Brie spread, hard-cooked eggs, tomato, red onion, Cheddar cheese, green onions and ham or bacon.

"It's almost like a nice egg-salad sandwich, breakfast-style," Widmer says.

At Sotheby's auction house in New York City, where foodservice is managed by New York City-based caterer and contractor Great Performances, Chef Peter Marrello tempts a food-savvy clientele with recipes not often found in grab-and-go formats.

A gyro-inspired wrap features boneless top round of lamb marinated overnight with oregano, thyme, rosemary and garlic. The meat is roasted, cooled and thinly sliced. For another nontraditional option, frittatas—with seasonal components such as tomato, basil and mozzarella—are cooked just before service, sliced into wedges, cooled and packaged atop mixed greens.

Marrello's upscale salads often incorporate firm, sturdy components—think fennel, beets, peas and corn—that hold up as products sit on shelves and in refrigerated cases. One well-balanced recipe combines slow-roasted golden beets with haricots verts, peppery watercress and tangy goat cheese in sherry-walnut vinaigrette.

Top Shelf, on the Shelf

Two up-and-coming chains, Seattle-based Organic To Go and New York City-via-London sandwich/salad shop Pret A Manger, emphasize quality cues such as natural, organic and trans-fat-free ingredients to distinguish their takeaway offerings.

Organic To Go's lineup touts the chain's use of antibiotic- and hormone-free proteins, organic produce and baked goods free of preservatives and hydrogenated oils. One creative choice, a niçoise salad featuring wild Alaskan sockeye salmon rather than typical tuna, illustrates how a concept built around prepackaged foods still can provide a degree of originality.

The company initially menued traditional niçoise, but it received numerous salmon requests from its West Coast catering clientele. Soon, the updated version became a menu fixture. To lock in fresh taste, the salmon is seasoned with olive oil, lemon juice, salt and pepper, grilled, and placed immediately in a blast chiller.

"What makes grilled meats taste left-over is oxidation, and that doesn't happen if the food is brought down to the proper temperature and stabilized quickly," says Culinary Director Greg Atkinson.

At Pret A Manger, a grab-and-go concept imported from London in 2000, Food Innovation Consultant Tom Caps relies on ingredients such as preservative-free chicken, never-frozen avocados and premium Parmesan cheese to deliver high-impact flavors in salads and sandwiches. He also piques diners' interest with uncommon ingredients such as crayfish tails.

The sweet, lean shellfish headlines a sandwich with baby arugula, mayonnaise and lemon juice, and also stars in a salad with sliced avocado, cucumber, baby field greens and balsamic vinaigrette. For both, the crayfish is slow-poached to keep it from drying out and then seasoned with the chain's proprietary spice blend.

Recipe assembly at Pret A Manger occurs throughout the day to ensure freshness; components such as proteins and dressings are prepared off-site to the company's specifications and delivered daily.

The Price is Right

Larry Harris, director of food services for Restaurant Associates at The Rockefeller University in New York City, says that keeping costs within consumers' comfort zone is one of the grab-and-go market's biggest challenges. To help rein in prices, he revises catering recipes to use more-economical components.

Curried beef typically prepared with tenderloin becomes a wrap with more-affordable flank steak that is marinated in sweet chile sauce, curry powder, fennel, ginger, garlic and coriander; the beef is wrapped up with a sweet, crisp vegetable slaw. An hors d'oeuvre of scooped-out seedless cucumbers filled with watermelon, goat cheese and crystallized ginger is reimagined as a salad of cubed watermelon, jicama, cucumber and fresh mint tossed in grapeseed oil and white balsamic vinegar.

"When we opened, we had it [set up] so customers could put the food in containers, and it just didn't sell," Harris says. "After a couple days we switched to this [grab-and-go] format, and it was amazing—people were buying individual containers of everything from curried chicken salad to tuna with olive oil and sesame seeds."

Special Delivery

With takeout's popularity comes greater scrutiny of how packaging impacts the environment, and operators are paying heed.

- Pret A Manger, a London-based chain with locations in New York City, encloses salads and sandwiches in branded, biodegradable cardboard boxes that show their contents through plastic windows.
- Boxed lunches at Portland, Ore.-based Elephants Delicatessen are packaged in unwaxed paper boxes printed with soy- and water-based inks so the boxes are compostable. The company also is seeking "green" alternatives to plastic wrap.

- Gaithersburg, Md.-based Sodexo is exploring the use of environmentally friendly materials such as recycled-content paper packaging and corn-resin-based plastics, and also is working to better promote recycling across accounts.

This Is No Vacation

For the past seven years, Rochester, N.Y.-based Harris Interactive has polled Americans about their vacation habits for expedia.com. The survey finds that, over the past few years, consumers are working harder and getting out of the office on vacation less often. Among this year's findings:

- On average, U.S. workers receive 14 vacation days each year. The average is 36 in France, 30 in Spain, and 24 in Great Britain.
- More than one-third (35%) of employed U.S. adults do not take all the vacation days they have, giving back three of the 14 vacation days earned. The difficulty of scheduling vacation time in advance is the most common reason given for not using break time.
- Nearly one in five American workers has cancelled or postponed vacation plans because of work.
- Men are more likely than women to regularly work more than 40 hours a week (51% of men and 30% of women). However, men are more likely to take a two-week vacation (17% of men and 11% of women).
- One-third of employed adults (33%) say they often have trouble coping with stress from work during vacation time.

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