

WHAT'S

2026

Culinary Forecast



Top 10 chart-topping trends

What can we expect on restaurant menus in 2026? Flavors, dishes, and experiences that take us out of the "day-to-day" and transport us somewhere, sometime, or both—without breaking the bank.

This quest for comfort, nostalgia, and "flavor-escapism" intersects with an ever-present search for healthy options and value, as restaurant operators seek out the dishes that satisfy consumers' cravings.

1

Local sourcing



3

Value menus and options



5

Clear menu labeling, icons, and cues 6

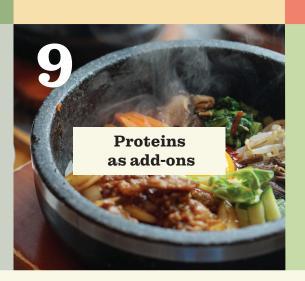
Allergen-friendly menus

7

Global comfort foods

8

"Cleaner" recipes, additive- and dye-free, or less processed menu items



10

Compostable and reusable packaging



DISHES

Today's foodies are looking for escape—the chance to step out of their everyday into somewhere comfortable. There is a sense of nostalgia that's inspiring innovation to bring the past into the now. With social media making the smashed burger – once a diner staple – tempting to younger generations, the challenge is how to make one of the ultimate comfort foods new and even global. To that end, we're seeing this trend inspire some interesting twists, such as smashed burger tacos!

The top 5 dishes also highlight a deep-seated desire to experience the world through a variety of cuisines. Consumers want to be transported with every bite, whether it's a smashed burger in Texas, or a protein-packed miso dish that teleports them to the streets of Tokyo. Restaurant menus offer the chance to return to a vacation of a lifetime or satisfy some wishful thinking, and operators are eager to bring that global interest home through exclusive interpretations of dishes like elevated instant noodles, Caribbean curry bowls, and miso-glazed proteins.

Thanks to these elevated recipes, access to the world of food is at our fingertips in 2026. So, where are we "flavor-escaping" to next?

PICTURED: Smashed burger with guacamole and caramelized onions

WHAT'S HOT

- Smashed burgers
- Elevated instant noodles
- Caribbean curry bowls
- Smoothie bowls
- Miso-glazed proteins



EMERGING



Lion's mane mushroom burgers



Filipino pork tocino



Middle Eastern za'atar flatbreads



- · Chili-lime sweet
- Miso
- Gochujang
- Ghost pepper honey glaze



African cuisine
(Nigerian, Eritrean,
Ethiopian, Somali)



Black lime



Smoked citrus



Personalized hydration, such as smart water and beverages infused with certain electrolytes or supplements, are also quite popular now. There are even restaurants with water menus curated by "water sommeliers" that describe the taste profile and source of a selection of waters.

Beverage menus often play a role in consumer restaurant decision-making and creative expansions that focus on new flavors or taste experiences, with a nod to health trends, can be influential.

PICTURED: Paloma mocktail with club soda, red grapefruit, lime juice and agave syrup

and artisanal quality.

WHAT'S HOT

- Energy drinks
- Locally sourced spirits
- · Low- and no-alcohol drinks
- Fermented and gut-friendly beverages (Kombucha, tepache, prebiotic sodas)
- Personalized hydration

EMERGING



Soin



Mood and mental wellness beverages (Adaptogenic and mushroom essences)



CBD-infused beverages



PICTURED: Dubai chocolate cheesecake with kataifi and pistachio paste

WHAT'S HOT

- Dubai chocolate
- Freeze-dried fruit
- Espresso salted caramel sauce
- Spicy pepper-infused sweets
- Reinvented s'mores

EMERGING



Functional sweet treats (Probiotic, adaptogenic)



Date-based desserts



Chaos cakes

NATIONAL RESTAURANT ASSOCIATION / WHAT'S HOT

Comfort and value drive the trends

MACRO TRENDS

Nothing is cozier than comfort food. Whether it's a smashed burger, spicy noodle dish, or decadent chocolate, consumers have clear cravings, but also want greater community connections on their menus. They're placing a higher value on local sourcing as another way to support the local economy through their dining dollars, and operators are responding by localizing their supply chains, and partnering with local growers and producers to create menu options that are fresh and unique.

In the current economy, nostalgia and comfort alone may not push a trend to the top. Value is still the most important driver for many consumers. That's why when you can hit all the right notes, a trend will take off. Case in point: The smashed burger, which may be the trendiest dish of the year, but it's also hitting the right notes for value. Operators know they can keep the menu price under control because the smashed burger offers lower meat-to-bun ratios, faster cooking times, and reduced food waste. It's a win-win where familiar meets smart

PICTURED: Dubai chocolate ice cream in an iced coffee latté with pistachios

WHAT'S HOT

- Local sourcing
- Comfort foods
- Value menus and options
- Clear menu labeling, icons, and cues
- Allergen-friendly menus

EMERGING

- AI-driven personalization
- Zero-waste kitchens
- Rapid prototyping

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FOR MEDIA INQUIRES

VANESSA SINK

Senior Director Media Relations Targeted to thought leaders in the culinary world, industry professionals weighed in to tell us what they see as the leading menu trends for 2026.

Respondents were presented with a list of food and beverage items and industry macro trends curated by the National Restaurant Association:

- Dishes
- Ingredients, Flavors, and Condiments
- Beverages
- Desserts
- Macro Trends

They were asked to rate each item as a Hot, or Emerging trend. The top results are included in this report.

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