

by A. Elizabeth Sloan

## Fast Foods Slim Down

Lower-calorie *Satisfries* at Burger King, no GMOs at Chipotle Mexican Grill, meals of less than 500 calories at El Pollo Loco, and locally baked buns, fresh fruit teas, and hand-sliced tomatoes at the Sonic chain—options like these make it clear that health and high quality are on the front burner at quick-service restaurants. It's also apparent that foodservice operators' strategies are more diverse than ever.

Six in 10 frequent fast food diners cite healthy menu items among their top reasons for choosing a limited-service restaurant, reports the National Restaurant Assn.'s (NRA) *2014 Forecast*. Almost one-quarter (23%) of adults ordered more healthy fast food items in 2013 than they did in 2012; those ages 18–34 were most likely to do so, according to Mintel's *2013 Quick Service Restaurants*—U.S. report.

Eighty-seven percent of fast food operators say their customers are paying more attention to nutrition than they were two years ago; 68% offer menu items identified as nutritious, and 75% offer healthy items for kids, per NRA.

Fresh is the menu descriptor that best conveys health in fast food restaurants; it is cited by 89% of diners. Other terms that signal health include “real,” “handmade,” and “never frozen,” according to Mintel's *2013 Healthy Dining Trends*—U.S. report. Mintel Menu Insights reports that “light” was the top nutritional claim on restaurant menus in 2013; it was followed by “fat-free.”

Asked about how they would like to see fast food menus improve, consumers polled by Mintel mentioned lower-calorie options, fruit/vegetable side dishes, all-day breakfast items, and smaller portions at lower prices. The 400–600 calorie range gets the most votes for an acceptable level of calories in a healthy fast food meal; only 3% of those surveyed see menu items with more than 1,000 calories as healthy, according to Mintel.

It's likely that upcoming mandated menu labeling will cause calorie “sticker shock,” but the longer-term impact may be less than expected. After all, only 13% of consumers are regularly counting calories, according to FMI's *2013 Shopping for Health Survey*.

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Healthy items dominate the top 20 fast food menu trends for 2014, according to NRA's *2014 Forecast*. Foodservice operators ranked gluten-free as the top menu trend; healthful kids' meals were second. Also making the hot trends list were fruit/vegetable sides, locally sourced produce/meat/seafood, low-fat milk/100% juice, organic items, grain-based salads, and snack-size offerings. Operators also mentioned fat, calorie, and sodium reduction.

NPD/CREST reports that fresher/better-for-you dominated the list of fastest-growing menu items in 2013. Products perceived as indulgent or unhealthful (e.g., chicken nuggets, French fries, pies, mashed potatoes, fried chicken, and hash browns) were among the poorest performers.

According to the NPD Group's *2013 The Future of Foodservice Report*, healthy/light sandwiches are projected to enjoy strong growth through 2022. Smaller sandwiches such as Arby's Jr. *Roast Beef* and Jr. *Turkey Sandwich* are finding a welcome market as are turkey burgers at Burger King and turkey tacos at the Carl's Jr. chain. Turkey sausage and egg whites continue to gain ground in the breakfast daypart. Einstein Bros.' reduced-calorie *Bagel Thin* egg white sandwiches are among the company's best performers.

According to Technomic's *2013 Breakfast Consumer Trend Report*, more than one-third of parents feel fast food restaurants don't offer enough healthy breakfast choices for kids. More than one-third of consumers (37%)

want to see more healthful snacks on the menu, making this more of a priority to them than variety and meal deals and combinations, according to Mintel's *2013 Trends in Snacks and Value Menus in Restaurants*—U.S. report.

Beverages are increasingly being used to create a healthy aura at foodservice. Nonalcoholic happy hours have enjoyed great success at Sonic, Taco Bell, and Einstein Bros. Diet carbonated soft drinks are giving way to flavored/enhanced waters, teas, and hand-squeezed fruit drinks, according to NPD/CREST.

Breadings are getting lighter. For example, Popeye's Louisiana Kitchen's *Chicken Waffle Tenders* feature a lighter, crispier batter; Hardee's has introduced charbroiled *Cod Fish Sandwiches*, and Wendy's *Flatbread Chicken Sandwiches* are on five-grain bread.

Chick-fil-A is in the process of removing all artificial dyes, high fructose corn syrup, and some preservatives from its menu. California Pizza Kitchen offers five new gluten-free pizzas. McDonald's is working to deliver “sustainably verified” beef beginning in 2016.

It's likely that health will never be the main driver of fast food sales. After all, only 2–3% of McDonald's sales come from salads, according to CEO Don Thompson. Nonetheless, healthy menu options give consumers permission to indulge, making great-tasting healthy foods a menu “must have” for foodservice operators in the years ahead. **FT**



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