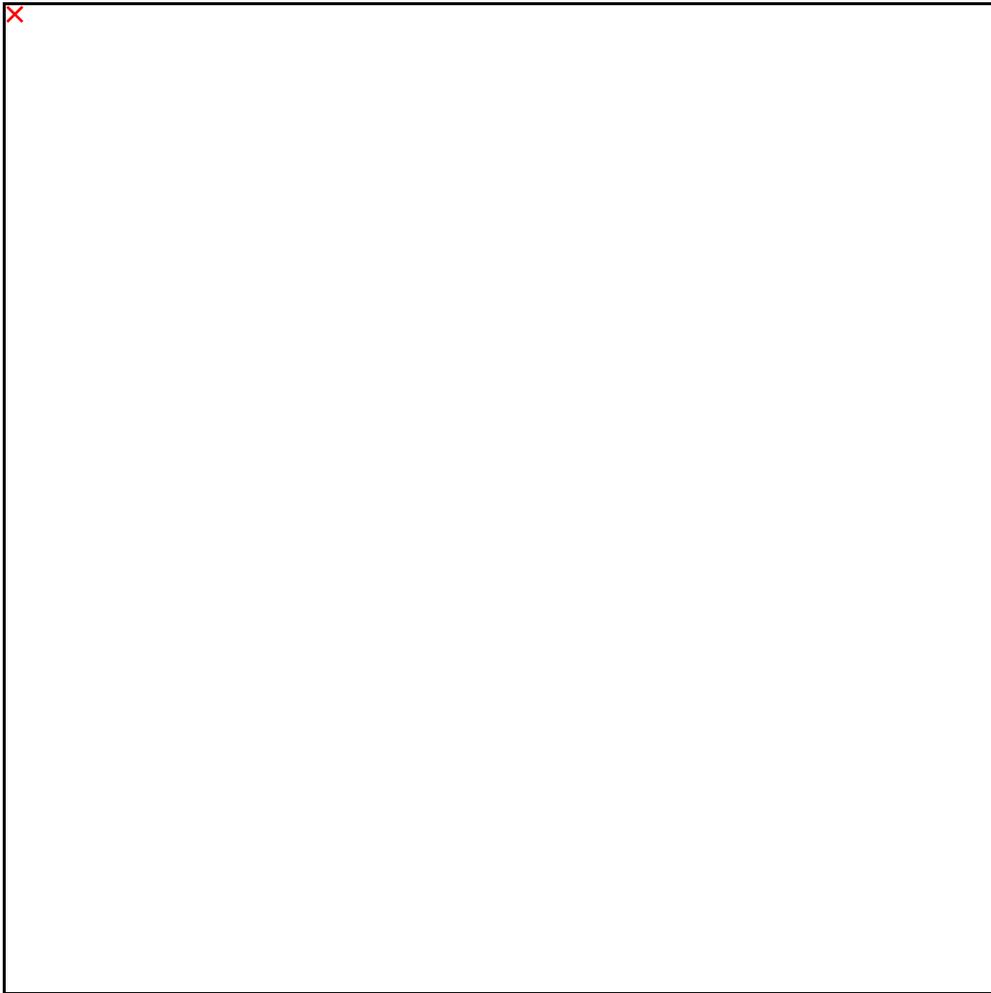


BENCHMARK's 2017 Food & Dining Trends: From Framer Chefs to Sustainable Seafood

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The Woodlands (Houston), Texas, August 2017 ... Chefs become farmers, eggs are more edible than ever, the drinks of the '20s roar again, onions appear in jams and desserts, while the demand for sustainable fish is rising like the tide. It's largely driven by Millennials with adventurous tastes, disposable income and a good bit of nostalgia for the foods they may have missed growing up.

"Chefs from Benchmark Resorts & Hotels and the Gemstone Collection are not just tracking culinary trends; they are setting them with a commitment to sustainability, quality and creativity," according to Todd Parmelee, vice president food & beverage at BENCHMARK®, a global hospitality company, which includes both hotel brands in its management portfolio. "Our chefs are forging new paths and listening to our guests and suppliers in creating a holistic and sustainable approach to the dining experience we offer," Parmelee says. Among the trends spotted across the US are:

Trend #1 Millennials Are Making It Happen

Food trends are driven by informed and open-minded millennials. This demographic is dining out more than previous generations and they want healthy, sustainable, and original dishes based on natural ingredients, responsibly sourced. Growing up in a more diverse society, they have been exposed to a variety of ethnic foods and are far more likely to try new dishes. Technically savvy and issues-oriented, millennials do their research and are informed consumers. They are interested in food, environmental issues and natural, healthy ingredients as well as animal welfare, and America's chefs are responding.

Trend #2 The Farmer in the Kitchen

Custom farming is the new path to sustainability. Contemporary chefs are taking the farm-to-table

movement to new levels as chefs become more involved in the growing of the food they serve, right down to planning what seeds will be cultivated for new menu development. Chefs have partnered with local farms, purchasing plots of land where hotels' and restaurants' produce will be grown. But the process does not stop there. Plans are underway for these 21st Century farmers to provide staff training to culinary teams and farms also host exceptional events and dinners on site, moving dining to the farm.

Trend #3 What's Old Is New Again

Iconic food is trending with updated versions of American classics. Consumers long for the food they grew up with, but with less fat, fresher ingredients and greater depth of flavor. Many of America's most popular foods evolved from regional specialties such as nachos, Buffalo wings, barbecued ribs, chili and pizza that are now national favorites. Classic sandwiches like BLTs, Reubens and Grilled Cheese have evolved into innovations of homemade bread, artisanal cheese, smoked meats and food produced in-house, including fermentation, pickling, and curing.

Trend #4 Incredible Edible Eggs

Eggs are not just for breakfast any more. From burgers, salads, and even entrees, eggs are appearing well after breakfast and brunch. Baked, boiled, fried, scrambled or deviled, eggs are finding their way into frittatas, in soups and atop meat, rice and grains. Incorporating an egg to a favorite meal gives the food another dimension in flavor and texture. Quail eggs, a delicacy in many part of the world, are appearing on American tables as exquisite little canapés, in salads and with smoked fish. Duck eggs are becoming increasingly available at farmers markets and offer a heartier, more flavorful option. Guests increasingly demand eggs that are organic and free range and not produced in "factory farms."

Trend #5 Innovate with Onions

The humble onion packs a powerful punch of flavor and nutrition. Onions have been a culinary staple since the first cave dwellers threw some wild onions into a pot. Cooks today are realizing that in their infinite variety, onions are emerging in an array of new and exciting ways – even in jams and desserts.

Today's menu items feature onions: Sage & Nutmeg Onion Gratin, Corned Beef & Onion Sweet Jam, Onion & Cockle Chowder, the classic Beer Battered Onion Rings and a singular Balsamic and Onion Ice Cream. Onions have long been used to treat various ailments and new research show how these can provide essential nutrients, antioxidants and can contribute to cardiovascular health.

Trends #6 Doughnuts

They're Not Just for Dunking Anymore. While we cherish the ritual of dunking a doughnut into a hot cup of coffee, doughnuts are bringing a new dimension to America's favorite sandwiches. Get ready for Doughnut Burgers, Glazed Doughnut Cheddar Burger, and Jalapeno, Pork BBQ Po' Boy, and a Raspberry Bismarck Reuben.

Trend #7 Eat Your Veggies!

Vegetables continue to get new respect as plant-based diets grow in popularity. Not too long ago, vegetables such as chard, kale and daikon were trending – now they are staples on menus and grocery shelves while new varieties of squash, tomatoes, cabbage and potatoes are becoming available. Chefs are taking vegetables to new levels by replacing animal proteins on menus with plant-based ingredients that include sea vegetables, fruit, nuts and seeds, beans and legumes and whole grains.

More imaginative use of these ingredients is making them popular among diners – who are sampling delicacies such as a Roasted Cauliflower Steak with Sweet Pea-Hazelnut Pesto & Fricassee of Foraged Mushrooms.

Trend #8 Good Libations

Jazz Age Cocktails, Bourbon and Beer Cocktails are trending nationwide. Consumers of all demographics are driving trends in cocktails with a resurgence in Prohibition-era drinks, such as French 75s, Whiskey Sours, Manhattans and Southsiders. During Prohibition, these retro cocktails, made with fruits and syrups, were developed by creative bartenders to hide the harsh taste of bootleg alcohol. Today, fresh and often more exotic fruits, a variety of tonics and garnishes and top-of-the-line liquor, combine to make

new and dynamic cocktails. Bourbon consumption continues its meteoric rise with carefully crafted and exclusive Bourbons.

Microbreweries are having their creations transformed into beer cocktails, made by mixing with a distilled beverage or another style of beer. In this cocktail, the primary ingredient is, quite simply, beer. Mix with a beverage that contains a soft drink and you have a Shandy. From the Michelada, to a Raspberry Snakebite (featuring a raspberry lambic), to a Dublin Iced-Coffee (Stout, Irish whiskey, iced-brewed coffee and heavy cream), beer cocktails are rapidly becoming cult favorites.

Trend #9 Fish to Fork

Sustainable fishing gains new importance. As fish becomes more expensive and scarce, chefs, fishermen and fisheries are looking to encourage consumers to look to farm-raised fish and less pricey and more plentiful seafood. Today's diners are aware of endangered species and growing concerns about the impact of global warming on ocean waters, lakes and streams.

Trend #10 Food Theater!

Expo Kitchens are kicking "food theater" up a notch, or two or three. Exhibition kitchens have been around in some form since the invention of Brunch. But today we're talking full-blown food theater.

Driven by Food TV in all its incarnations and the prevalence of social media outlets that are ideal for everything food and beverage, restaurant kitchens today offer a front row seat at a dining performance and guests are crowding around to take in the aromas, flavors, cooking tips and high energy of the stars of the show--the chefs! It's a visual and sensual spectacle that entertains, nourishes, and satisfies everyone in the entire dining room.

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BENCHMARK®, a global hospitality company, is a trailblazer in the development, management, marketing and owner-advisory services of resorts, hotels, conference centers and exclusive private clubs. In addition to the company's iconic Benchmark Resorts & Hotels portfolio, the Gemstone Collection is a distinctive luxury portfolio of independent hotels & resorts in highly preferred destinations.

BENCHMARK'S distinguished and proven reputation is deeply-rooted in core values that are focused and aligned with exceeding ownership and stakeholder performance expectations. The combined portfolios feature nearly 70 unique and distinctive properties domestically and internationally. The company leadership and valued employees are passionately committed to delivering the industry's most authentic, enchanted, soulful, vibrant, unrivaled and memory-making experience. BENCHMARK'S progressive "Be The Difference" culture and values are a cornerstone to the company's nearly 40 years of extraordinary achievement and prosperity. Many properties have been recognized with the Benchmark Conference Centers® mark of meeting excellence. BENCHMARK, a global hospitality company, is based in The Woodlands (Houston), Texas, and has regional offices in Park City, Utah; Miami, Florida; New Brunswick, New Jersey; Seattle Washington; and Tokyo, Japan.

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