

Divining food and flavor trends

How to identify emerging ingredients and distinguish trends from fads

Activated charcoal has emerged as an ingredient in food and beverages, adding a black tint or functional twist to cold-pressed juices, ice cream, lattes and pizza crusts. A couple of years earlier, it surfaced in shampoos, skin care and beauty products and has since migrated into toothpaste and teeth whiteners.

Product developers may have predicted the rise of activated charcoal in food and beverages by tracking its popularity in other industries, said Amy Marks-McGee, president of Trendincite, L.L.C.

“What’s happening outside of your industry might someday affect your industry directly,” Ms. Marks-McGee said. “You have to step back because trends are trickling down, up and happening concurrently.”

Ms. Marks-McGee was a part of a panel discussing consumer, food and flavor trends at IFT18, the Institute of Food Technologists’ annual meeting and food exposition in Chicago. She advised participants to combine intuition, experience and observations to identify patterns.

“Once you have identified the pattern, you’re using your industry knowledge to translate that pattern into your product or service,” she said.

Inspiration for emerging ingredients may be found in nature, beauty and personal care, travel, on restaurant menus and in other food and beverage categories, she said. For packaging ideas, explore cosmetics, confectionery and

ready-to-drink beverages, fine fragrances and distilled spirits and children’s toys. The next big color trends may be spotted in cosmetics and nail polish, fashion and home interiors, art and design, and the automotive industry, which forecasts 7 to 10 years out for the hottest hues, Ms. Marks-McGee said.

When trend tracking is tricky

Tracking global cuisine trends is trickier, said Maeve Webster, president of Menu Matters.

“When you’re talking about a cuisine, it becomes a bit more challenging because a cuisine is extremely broad,” Ms. Webster said. “It has almost a countless number of elements you can apply and consider, and almost every one

of those elements is going to move much differently in the industry. Understanding the movement of a cuisine becomes a much more challenging proposition.”

Indian cuisine is expanding in the United States but remains relatively unfamiliar to most Americans, she said. Limited accessibility is a barrier; there are only 5,000 Indian restaurants in the United States, compared to 40,000 Chinese restaurants and 40,000 Mexican restaurants.

“If it is difficult to describe an item in a way that Americans can understand and feel comfortable with, that becomes a problem,” Ms. Webster said. “If someone can’t pronounce that item on the menu, they are less likely to order it.”

She discussed four types of elements of a cuisine that define its movement through menu adoption — pioneers, close followers, trend beneficiaries and authentic re-definers.

“The pioneer is the first mover, easiest to apply and has the broadest applicability,” Ms. Webster said. “Beverages, desserts and condiments are almost always the first movers.”

Chai, the spiced tea, was the first pioneer element of Indian cuisine to become mainstream in the United States, along with chutney, curry and naan bread. Close followers were tikka masala and samosas, which are tied to already-familiar concepts of comfort food and street food. Then came the trend beneficiaries, which are typically unrelated to the growth of the cuisine but drive increased familiarity. Pakora, a

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flavorful vegetable fritter, fits the produce-forward movement on menus, and lassi, a yogurt drink, benefits from growth in non-alcoholic beverages, Ms. Webster said.

“Ghee and turmeric are benefiting strongly from the functional food movement,” she added.

The authentic re-definers of Indian cuisine include the less-familiar saag paneer, kati rolls and chaat. Such elements reset expectations to more authentic ingredients and applications and are late-stage growth drivers following broad acceptance and familiarity with the cuisine, Ms. Webster said.

“Understand that cuisines are not going to grow holistically in the U.S.,” she said. “Think about how all of these elements of world cuisine are going to be part of those larger movements. Functional foods, as one. Fusion cuisine, street food, comfort food. How can you start pulling those pieces out of a broader cuisine?”

When a trend jumps the tracks

Another factor to consider in trend tracking is the “trend ricochet,” when an ingredient or food jumps categories, said Suzy Badaracco, president of Culinary Tides, Inc.

She pointed to beans as an example, which began in bowls and wraps, salads and side dishes, hopped into chips, bars and cereals, then beverages and flours, and are now featured in packaging materials. Beans have followed a pattern similar to grains, moving into single, ancient and

heritage, and heirloom varieties over time.

Beans also link strongly to health, sustainability, global cuisine, flexitarian and street food trends.

“If you have a trend that does not link into other trends, you have a short-lived trend,” Ms. Badaracco said.

Food trends follow different patterns and pathways. It is important to understand the birth and lifecycle of a trend before tapping into it, Ms. Badaracco said.

“Spend more time researching a trend’s personality and trajectory than worrying about what your competitors are doing,” she added.

When a trend is not a trend

In the packaged food and beverage

While low-carb launches spiked and rapidly declined in the early 2000s, whole grain product introductions have shown consistent growth over the past two decades.



marketplace, understanding trends has become more important because the number of new product introductions increases each year, said Lynn Dornblaser, director of insights and innovation at Mintel, in a separate presentation at IFT18.

“We see more and more products on the market every single year; that creates a lot of noise out there for consumers,” Ms. Dornblaser said. “Understanding what trends are out there that are motivating consumers ... and understanding how product activity helps you understand what’s a trend or not can help you figure out what to do, what kinds of products to look at, what kinds of trend areas to focus on.”

A trend shows slow, steady growth over time and expands into various categories and countries. It is versatile and easy for consumers to understand and adopt, Ms. Dornblaser said. A fad, on the other hand, appears quickly, grows quickly and disappears quickly. It may be found in limited categories and countries and is difficult for consumers to adopt.

A striking example may be seen when comparing U.S. new product introductions of low-carb products and whole grain products. While low-carb launches spiked and rapidly declined around 2005, whole grain product introductions have shown consistent growth over the past two decades.

“In the end you have to use data and you have to use your gut to make a decision,” she said. “Data is absolutely important, but you have to listen to your common sense as to whether something makes sense for you and your company.”

A new product may be on-trend and still fail, she noted. There is no guarantee of success when the product hits shelves.

“One of the best ways to help ensure against failure, at least a little bit, is to be sure whatever it is true to your branding and fits with your consumer base,” she said. “That sounds really obvious, but I’m sure you can identify a handful of products in your company where that didn’t happen, and the products failed.”

Above all else, she said, the product must taste good.

“We can’t say this to our clients enough,” she said. “That is probably the best predictor of success, is something that hits that taste that consumers are looking for, and that’s probably the hardest thing to do.” **FBN**