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“

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Mike Kostyo, Menu Matters

Now trending
What to expect in '26.

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Trend thoughts

Reconsidering, redefining what it means for a food to be hot

By Andy Nelson

Every year, there are a host of new trends that forecasters, consultants, producers, retailers and everyone else along the food supply chain single out as worth keeping a close eye on.

But in addition to shining a spotlight on this or that specific ingredient or food, there's also a significant uptick in discussions about just what we mean when we talk about "trends."

How long they last, how long they *should* last, how they should be promoted, how much of "staying on trend" means jumping on a bandwagon rather than promoting something truly new and different.

Maeve Webster, president of Menu Matters, thinks a reframing of the whole concept of trends could be in order.

"There's so much flattening of the industry now, with the same trend dominating in nearly every category to the point it's all you seem to see across the store, that it's time we took a step back from trends to answer bigger issues for consumers, because they're seeing the sameness as well," she said.

Mike Kostyo, Menu Matters' vice president, added that food producers and marketers need to "be real" for their consumers.

"They don't want AI advertising, they don't want more subscriptions, they don't want corporate branding, they don't want empty promises — the list goes on," he said. "So the trend I'm most excited

to see in 2026 is the industry figuring out how to connect with their customers on a more real, human level."

Finding ways to meet that need offers great opportunities to grocery fresh departments, he said. Retailers can emphasize, for instance, that the fresh produce department is where you find whole fruits and vegetables.

"Call it the 'one ingredient' section," Kostyo said. "Food doesn't get any more real than that."

Other opportunities to "be real" can be found in the instore deli or bakery. It might be the only time during their shopping trip, Kostyo said, where consumers actually talk to someone else in the store.

"That's a real person moment, which are becoming too rare. How do you take advantage of that opportunity?"

Unfortunately, Webster said, ongoing economic uncertainty could mean a continuation of the old, traditional way of looking at trends. Manufacturers, retailers and operators will likely lean even more heavily on trends as "low hanging fruit for innovation."

"The thought being: the trends are popular, so that's safer innovation than actually creating something truly new or transformative," she said.

That might work in the short term, but long-term, such an obsessive focus on trends as the





Look for Levantine cuisine to be trending up in 2026 as US consumers continue to expand their horizons when it comes to cuisines from different countries and cultures.

solution is creating a “trend doom loop” that’s undermining the relevance and engagement with the industry.

“We’ll see continued acceleration of trends that will make it almost impossible for any larger manufacturer, retailer or operator to keep up,” Webster said. “But while they try to speed up trend capture, consumers will start to turn away from food to other industries for exciting innovation.”

One effect of this is that individual trends are flaming out faster because of their rapid, prolific adoption. Webster and Kostyo agree that a great recent example of that is Dubai chocolate, which peaked fast and now is quickly waning.

Trending tech

Another “meta” trend that Trendincite’s Amy Marks-McGee will be keeping a close eye on in 2026 has to do with how technology will impact food development, production and delivery.

“I’m excited to see what new products and flavor combinations are launched in 2026 using AI,” she said. “AI is driving innovation in consumer products, restaurants, and personalized nutrition.”

For example, restaurant delivery is now coming to ChatGPT. DoorDash, Uber Eats, OpenTable, and Instacart have partnered with OpenAI for consumers to use ChatGPT for ordering.

“In the food and beverage industry, it’s rapidly growing from predictive trend analysis to optimizing ingredient combinations and will continue to revolutionize how food is produced and consumed.”

Another tech trend Marks-McGee will be watching is autonomous food delivery robots. DoorDash is testing Dot, its autonomous robot built to deliver food and drive on roads, bike lanes, and sidewalks at speeds up to 20 miles per hour. In the UK, meanwhile, Domino’s tested the Domidog for delivering pizzas to beach-goers.

It’s the economy...

Economic uncertainty is “simplifying everything,” said Suzy Badaracco, president of Culinary Tides Inc. It’s changing how we shop, eat, and define value.

“2026 will favor brands that make restraint feel rewarding: indulgence that’s earned, wellness that’s accessible, and fewer products that tell richer stories.”

Rising costs and trade pressures are eroding purchasing power, leading consumers to stretch budgets while still craving joy, she added. As a consequence, consumers will treat indulgence as a calculated investment, rewarding themselves in small, meaningful ways.

Examples include “everyday luxuries” like single-serve desserts, artisanal flatbreads, and better-for-you butter. Also look for premium ingredients in approachable formats, frozen fine-dining meals, upscale condiments, air-fried snacks.

“Value will be redefined not as cheap but as worth it,” Badaracco said. “Brands will compete on emotional payoff per dollar.”

As part of that same trend, look for affordable functionality to replace premium wellness as a dominant trend, she said. As disposable income shrinks, consumers still want health, but at a lower price point and with visible benefits.

“Expect a wave of functional but frugal foods, leveraging accessible ingredients for energy, calm, and digestive support.”

Examples include fiber-forward oats, roots like cassava and chicory, and multi-purpose ingredients like vinegar and yogurt doubling as functional flavor enhancers.


“The wellness halo moves from superfoods to smart foods — nutritious, recognizable and budget-friendly.”

Cost concerns in 2026 will also likely mean fewer new products, Badaracco predicted.

“Supply chain volatility and cost containment are forcing SKU rationalization — fewer products, but with stronger differentiation. Brands will concentrate on storytelling and purpose to justify shelf space.”

Products, she added, will need to resonate on cultural and emotional levels, not just rely on functional claims.

As the economy continues to weaken and consumers face financial concerns, private label brands are gaining momentum, Marks-McGee



Rotisserie chicken with rice and beans is a great example of two converging trends: comfort and value.

Comfortable, balanced, less “extreme”

Culinary Tides’ Suzy Badaracco described some key trends likely to define 2026 as “emotionally intelligent”: nostalgic, yet fresh; global, yet comforting. “We’re seeing the pendulum swing from excess to equilibrium: food that restores, not performs.”

In the coming year, look for flavors that “come full circle,” she added. back to their roots, sharpened with acid, and elevated with nuance. “We’ll see heritage ingredients like teff and bone broth return with purpose, a new wave of tangy brightness from verjus and pickled fruit, and subtle profiles like smoked citrus and green spice redefining what ‘flavorful’ really means.”

Life is complicated, and consumers are looking for simpler times, added Trendincite’s Amy Marks-McGee. Comfort foods tied to nostalgia and “newstalgia” have been trending for decades. The pandemic propelled this trend, as consumers were anxious and stressed, and with the current economic uncertainty, reinvented comfort foods will continue to drive these trends, she said.

A related trend to keep an eye on in 2026 is what Badaracco calls “the end of food’s extreme era.” “From keto rigidity to over-processed ‘health,’ plant-based perfectionism to sugar-coated heat, consumers are walking away from the noisy and the engineered.”

Replacing them, she said, will be foods that feel balanced, real, and deeply satisfying and grounded in flavor, not formulas. For example, keto, paleo and intermittent fasting products will increasingly be replaced by products that support GLP-1 lifestyles and holistic wellness and foods that work across multiple eating styles (e.g., low sugar and gut friendly).

In addition, over-engineered plant proteins and meat analogues (especially those relying on long ingredient lists or high processing) will increasingly be replaced by hybrid proteins — combining, for instance, mushrooms, grains, or legumes with animal protein — and what Badaracco calls “vegetables as heroes”: things like roasted cabbage “steaks,” lentil patties, and grain-legume blends that “celebrate whole foods, not faux foods.”

Roasted cabbage is one of the new twists on fresh vegetables that will be hot in '26.



said. Private label brands are narrowing the gap between national brands because they’re affordable and offer competitive, premium food and beverages.

“Due to fluctuating tariffs, I anticipate that food and beverage brands’ innovation pipelines will be disrupted because of limited access to ingredients and materials,” Marks-McGee said. “I also foresee brands possibly changing formulas or using more local ingredients to adjust to the economy.”

The ongoing economic uncertainty is affecting the industry in significant ways, Kostyo said.

On social media, for instance, people are talking more about how to save money, how to cook more at home and how to shop smarter.

“We see creators showcasing how to make meals for \$5 for a whole family, how to use inexpensive ingredients like beans and rice, and how to make less expensive holiday meals for crowds.”

The industry, Kostyo added, needs to showcase to consumers how they can still have the interesting, unique, on-trend meals that they crave these days — but for less, made in their own kitchens.

For the fresh perimeter, it means renewed emphasis on presenting rotisserie chicken, salad bars and other items from deli/prepared as the building blocks of cost-effective meal solutions.

Ethnic food trends

When it comes to ethnic food trends, Middle Eastern foods are poised to strongly influence a broad range of categories, Webster said.

“I expect they will start to overtake Asian cuisines and Korean in particular over the next 12-18 months.”

In 2026, “global flavor is getting personal” Badaracco said.

Look for comfort and connection at the center of every plate, she said, from “rooted American heritage and Levantine calm to Latin brightness and Middle Eastern warmth.”

“The new global cuisine isn’t about distance or novelty,” she said. “It’s about familiarity, belonging, and stories that taste like home.”

Consumers still want global adventure, but they’re seeking comfort and relatability. She calls it the evolution of fusion into “rooted remixing” — global flavors in formats people already love.

That could mean harissa tacos, tahini guacamole, turmeric fried chicken and Korean-Italian and Indian-Southern U.S. comfort mashups.

“It aligns with the economic mood — comfort, not risk — and the emotional trend toward authenticity and approachability.”

Levantine cuisine, meanwhile, is poised to become the next Mediterranean wave, Badaracco said.



Peri-Peri is a trending African spice that meets demand for ever-new sources of all things spicy.

The influence of GLP-1s

The widespread use of GLP-1 drugs and their impact on the food industry will be a major trend to watch in 2026, said Amy Marks-McGee of Trendincite LLC.

“GLP-1 drugs are impacting consumers’ relationships with food and beverages, tastes, and shopping behavior,” she said. “They’re changing their purchasing patterns, such as buying less food overall or changing the types of food they purchase.”

Protein is a prime example. Protein has been trending for the last decade. What’s changed, Marks-McGee said, is the audience and protein applications.

Protein products were originally marketed to bodybuilders, weightlifters, and athletes. However, the market has shifted, and protein products are no longer strictly reserved for athletes. They’re for everyone, and the weight loss drug revolution has expanded their ubiquity even more.

“Users of GLP-1 medication lose muscle mass, and many are turning to protein- and fiber-rich foods. The convergence of these two trends is proliferating protein innovation. I’d be hard-pressed to find a food or beverage category that is not adding protein to its products.”

It’s in snacks, ice cream, RTD beverages, coffee, bread, frozen foods, pasta, sauces, you name it.

A recent example of how GLP-1s are reaching the masses, Marks-McGee said, is that Costco will be selling Ozempic and Wegovy to consumers with a prescription at 500 Costco pharmacies in the U.S. Members will pay \$499 out of pocket for a four-week supply of the prescription-only injectable pens for both drugs.

In addition, brands are beginning to formulate products specifically for GLP-1 users to meet their nutritional needs.

Nestlé, for instance, was one of the original manufacturers to launch Vital Pursuit, a line of frozen products like Sandwich Melts, Pizzas, and Bowls for consumers using GLP-1 medications.

It’s a cuisine she describes as bright, communal, plant-forward, and emotionally grounding, all while delivering rich sensory contrast. It aligns perfectly with 2026’s appetite for calm comfort and approachable sophistication.

“These flavors — labneh, za’atar, pomegranate, pistachio-rose — already have consumer familiarity and cross easily into dips, sauces, snacks, and beverages,” she said.

Consumers can’t seem to get enough spicy flavors, Marks-McGee said. African spices such as African bird’s eye chili pepper — also known as Peri-Peri — Berbere and Harissa are gaining traction. And brands are experimenting with spicy foods and spicy combinations such as Swicy (sweet + spicy), Swalty (sweet + salty), and Swavory (sweet + savory).

Look for a new take on sweet heat in 2026, Badaracco predicts.

Hot honey, spicy maple and chili jam, for instance, have all peaked.

“Every brand jumped on the same pairing, and consumers now perceive it as repetitive and commercialized,” she said, echoing the sentiments of Webster and Kostyo.

In their place, look for more products that feature complex heat (smoky, fermented, aromatic); sour and bitter flavor profiles as the new “flavor thrill”; and what she calls “Swicy’s girlfriends” — Swalty, Swokey and Swangy.

Badaracco cites IFT data that forecasts that new sour, herbal, and acidic profiles (sumac, verjus, green mango) will overtake sugary heat.

Asian flavors, meanwhile, remain popular because many offer umami experiences, Marks-McGee said.

“I’m watching Miso emerge in a variety of unexpected applications, such as miso caramel cookies and ice cream. Miso-spiked coffee lattes are trending on social media, and Starbucks Reserve just launched a Caramel Miso Hot Cocoa beverage for the holiday season.”

Middle Eastern and North African cuisines will also be trending up next year, Badaracco said.

The region delivers “approachable sophistication,” as she termed it — layered, aromatic, and plant-forward foods that feel both comforting and premium to consumers.

“It’s the next Mediterranean evolution and aligns with the 2026 desire for calm, sensual flavor experiences. Its ingredients (harissa, pomegranate, pistachio, labneh, za’atar) are versatile, recognizable, and easy to integrate across snacks, sauces, meals, and beverages.”

Latin American and Caribbean cuisine, meanwhile, its “having its heritage moment,” Badaracco said, delivering joy and escapism while feeling natural and inclusive.

Ingredients like guava, tamarind, mole, and aji peppers cross categories seamlessly, offering both adventurous flavor and mainstream comfort. 