

What's Cookin'? **A Look at Consumer Food Trends**

*Comments by Joy Taylor, Executive Editor of the Family Food Collection™,
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What do consumers want? They seek a balance between three things: well-being, comfort and time management. The following observations of consumer trends are based on feedback from consumer panels conducted with *Better Homes and Gardens* readers and other trend reports.

1. Sources of comfort to consumers include seeking foods, products and occasions that encourage family times, traditions and quality time. Belonging to a community and contributing to it are sources of comfort. The home is regarded as an oasis. Home cooking fits right in.
2. Family mealtimes are very important. On average, families eat dinner together six times per week. Consumers are longing for bygone days and are cooking with recipes that grandma used to make. There is a desire to preserve family traditions. The hobby scrapbooking is huge. Families are creating scrapbooks, photo albums, as well as family cookbooks to create legacies.
3. Community creates comfort. Today's accelerated lifestyles create a sense of hunger for social connections. Consumers are entertaining casually by having potlucks. Volunteerism at the local and national level is taking place. People are contributing to community cookbook projects.
4. Consumers are spending more on their homes and making them private retreats and entertainment centers. Ninety one percent of Americans view their home as a private retreat (Roper). Seventy eight percent view their home as an entertainment center (Roper).
5. Consumers are hosting casual get togethers. Simplicity is key. Casseroles and one-dish meals are in. Consumers are going back to basics and cooking comfort food. Restaurants are serving cobblers and crisps. The crockpot is hot. Eighty percent of all households own one. Meredith is targeting this consumer audience

with *All-Time Favorites, Slow-Cooker Recipes*, one of 150 special interest publications the company publishes.

6. Time Management is another element consumers desire. The food industry calls it meal solutions. Consumers just do what works today. They have so many choices and so little time, calories and money. Another solution is to let someone else do the cooking.
7. Meal solutions save time. More shelf stable and refrigerated entrees that are fully cooked and only need reheating are available at stores. There are more portable, one-handed meals and snackables, such as yogurt in a tube available today. These solutions save time, yet, how nutritious are they?
8. Home cooking is still very desirable but they are spending less time cooking. Consumers spend no more than 30 minutes on weekdays and 45 minutes on the weekends preparing a meal. Consumers are selecting meals that require fewer ingredients. They are preparing fewer courses and no desserts.
9. The definition of cooking from scratch has changed over time. Now, cooking from scratch might be defined as spaghetti sauce made with canned tomatoes. Or a cake made from a cake mix with an additional, personal ingredient. Or a purchased jar of spaghetti sauce along with an added ingredient.
10. What works for me? Is it fast, faster and fastest, or slow? The slow method may be the way to go using a crockpot and oven meals. Some cook today for tomorrow by preparing several meals in one day and storing them for later use.
11. Entertaining is still important to consumers. They share the effort by hosting potluck meals. They continue to make time for special occasions and entertain on weekends and holidays.
12. Let someone else cook. Fifty-nine percent of consumers say they are eating less fast food than a year ago. Consumers want more choices, especially healthier foods. Fast food chains are regarded as being "out of touch." Subway now has more units in the United States than McDonald's.
13. Take-out food from restaurants such as Applebee's or a brand of pizza, is viewed as a sign of caring. Consumers regard it as tastier, healthier and a good value. Take-out food may compose a whole meal or part of a meal. It is OK to serve for company, too.
14. Consumers are eating out less. Despite 11 years of restaurant growth, Americans are actually eating fewer meals in restaurants than 15 years ago. Fine dining is down even for the wealthiest consumers.
15. Well-being was the third element they desired. The choices they make impact them, others and the environment. People desire to feel fit and look good. They question if food is safe to eat. They also continue to cook for fun and pleasure.

16. Huge growth is expected in organic foods. Consumers are buying organics for personal health reasons, not to protect the environment. Customers are looking for taste, price and convenience. The majority of organic foods are purchased in supermarkets, not specialty stores.
17. Consumers are confused when it comes to biotechnology. They don't know if it is right for them. Most consumers don't really care. It isn't a high priority. If they do care about biotechnology, they want more information for a variety of reasons such as allergies, politics, religious beliefs or just plain choice.
18. There is some consumer acceptance of irradiated foods. Labeling of irradiated food products is important. When consumers were asked about irradiated ground beef, 48 percent expressed interest in buying it. That is important since 50 percent of all beef is sold as ground beef.
19. Consumers still include meat in their diets. The use of veal in recipes seems to be a hot button with some consumers. Regarding pork, 68 percent of consumers had "moderate concern" or were "very concerned" about the potential risk of environmental pollution caused by pork production. Consumers are also showing a lot of interest in free-range chickens. Just .5 percent of the population is defined as being vegetarian.
20. Expect to see more soy-based products in the marketplace. There is a broader consumer acceptance of soy, especially among women, for health reasons.
21. The Slow Food Movement, (www.slowfood.com) started in Italy in 1986 to promote good food and the people who produce it, now claims to have 65,000 members worldwide. It is for people who appreciate good food. Food is allowed to ripen fully before harvest, and then prepared by hand in traditional ways.
22. Well-being also relates to feeling fit and looking good. The USDA's Food Pyramid is under scrutiny. It suggests that all fats are dangerous and most carbohydrates are safe to eat. Whereas the Mediterranean Diet recommends good carbohydrates made of whole grains and good fats such as olive oil, while warning against refined carbohydrates. The Mediterranean Diet also includes daily exercise and weight control at the base of its pyramid.
23. Obesity is out of control. Since 1990, obesity has doubled among adults and tripled among children. Today, 61 percent of adults and 13 percent of children are obese. Causes of this problem include super sizing food portions, the lack of exercise and fat-free foods. The consequences to obesity include health problems such as diabetes, heart disease, and higher health care costs.
24. Well-being attitudes depend on age. Baby boomers tend to look for a magic bullet for lifelong good health. Meanwhile, Generation X is more concerned about

- weight and body image. Among all ages, 70 percent of adults admit their diets could be a lot healthier. Most adults consume only 3.2 servings of fruits and vegetables a day. Forty-two percent said they are “very concerned” about the nutritional content of food.
25. Regarding the safety of the food supply, non-organics, biotech and irradiated foods all speak to this. The meat industry has done a great job of educating consumers about food safety. Fifty-eight percent of U.S. households own a food thermometer. Bioterrorism concerns have increased sales of prepackaged, prewashed salad greens.
 26. Cooking for pleasure is a creative outlet. It allows the consumer to express him/herself and contributes to stress reduction. Cooking on the weekend helps during a busy week. When the consumer cooks, meals tend to be made healthier. Cooking for pleasure also allows for indulgences and to pamper others.
 27. When it comes to comfort, time management and well-being for consumers, taste still rules.

About the author

Joy Taylor is executive editor of the *Better Homes and Gardens*® Family Food Collection™ in Des Moines, Iowa. She joined Meredith Corporation in 1978 as a cookbook editor. She’s served as senior food editor for *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine and executive editor for *Hometown Cooking* magazine. Taylor serves as a national cookbook judge for the International Association of Culinary Professionals and Morris Press cookbooks. She is currently regional director for the Association of Food Journalists.

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