

# NATION'S Restaurant News

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## NRN EDITORIAL

## 'Healthy' shift in product marketing required an evolution in guests' appetites, awareness

I've become less skeptical about "good-for-you" restaurant marketing, which once seemed to do little more than send diet-conscious diners on guilt trips — straight into the arms of indulgent competitors who had shunned "healthy" agendas.

Apparently, Wall Street and the foodservice industry also are changing their minds and seeing good-for-you as good for them, too. And that's because mainstream consumers are demonstrating a newfound appetite for "natural" ingredients and healthful eating.

At least a small part of the soaring stock value of Chipotle Mexican Grill Inc. after its recent initial public offering could be a reflection of the fast-casual brand's success in touting the "integrity" of its produce and proteins, such as specially sourced free-range pork that's raised without hormones or antibiotics.

Peers and investors must be impressed that a self-described chain of "burrito joints" can find a following among patrons willing to pay premium prices for the "finest, freshest ingredients." Chipotle founder Steve Eells, the first Culinary Institute of America alumnus to become chief executive of a national quick-service chain, credits his chain's success largely to wary consumers' growing appreciation for pure, trustworthy ingredients.

If that approach works for Chipotle, why not for Arby's? Late last month the 3,500-unit sandwich chain began promoting its menuwide switch to Chicken Naturals, a "100-percent, all-natural chicken breast that is not altered or injected with added water, salt or phosphates."

In its new stance as a champion of unadulterated food, Arby's made the point that other "leading" fast feeders sell items whose "chicken breast" could contain up to 29.3 percent water, sodium compounds, oil, starch and phosphates.

Just days ago in an upscale Chicago mall, one of the industry's savviest operators, Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, debuted a good-for-you kiosk concept that's a joint venture with the 1.7-million-subscriber Time Inc. magazine Cooking

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MANAGING  
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Light. A prototype for potential chain expansion, Cooking Light@foodlife features the magazine's recipes for such fare as tossed-to-order salads, seafood dishes and leaner versions of homey stalwarts like sloppy joes, lasagna and meat loaf.

The merchandising of "diet food" isn't new, of course. But the latest marketing messages about virtuous victuals appear to have the kind of legs that were sorely missing years ago from mistimed or misbegotten flashes in the pan like the D'Lites chain and product flops like McDonald's McLean Deluxe and Taco Bell's Border Lites line.

A big difference mass marketers find today is that more aging baby boomers have begun confronting their mortality, adjusting their mealtime habits and passing on their newfound regard for dietary discretion to their offspring in the echo boom generation.

A recent study by contract caterer Aramark Corp. found that "health consciousness" now ranks as the No. 4 most influential factor in dining-out decisions, up from No. 5 in 2004. Aramark's research — involving 5,279 consumers over 18 who were polled online, with the results weighted by age, gender, race and socio-economic status to reflect the U.S. population at large — also found that 41 percent of the group want nutritional information disclosed on menus. And 44 percent "strongly agreed" they would order healthful items away from home more often if such dishes were available, up from 41 percent in 2004.

Part of the change in diners' regard for healthful eating has to do with increased awareness about such issues as good fats versus bad fats — helping make salmon an enduring darling of diners and fueling the movement among prominent operators to jettison hydrogenated frying oils in favor of trans-fat-free replacements.

Awareness also has grown about the role flavorful whole grains can play in metabolic fine-tunings that substitute complex carbohydrates for weight-inducing starches offering only scant nutrition.

In January, the 1,600-unit Blimpie chain became one of the largest operators to address the recently growing demand for whole-grain products. After Blimpie replaced its old wheat bread line, one-fourth of all sandwich customers ordered the new whole-grain bread, inspiring management's upbeat outlook.

"To us, the whole-grain phenomenon isn't a fad but a trend," said Mark Mears, Blimpie's chief marketing officer. "Whole grains and organics are starting to move because they fit guest needs and lifestyle."

Atlanta Bread Company's 170 bakery-cafes in 28 states also did a rollout in January of new whole-grain bread and bagel items, initially as a test. "We felt these whole-grain bread products would have appeal, and they did, so we're putting them on the menu permanently," Basil Couvaras, Atlanta Bread's chief operating officer, explained, adding that "we're looking at a whole series of products to follow."

Those two chains joined such other converts as Bruegger's, Fazoli's, McDonald's, Noodles & Company, Olive Garden, Panera Bread, P.F. Chang's China Bistro, Romano's Macaroni Grill and Ruby Tuesday in offering at least some menu options that include whole grains.

Italian authenticity doesn't impede the offering of multigrain or gluten-free pasta as a \$1-extra option at one of my family's favorites, Pomodoro Cucina Italiana, the Southern California identity of the San Francisco-based Pasta Pomodoro full-service chain launched by fine-dining chef Adriano Paganini.

For its part, Pasta Pomodoro co-owner Wendy's International ushered in the quick-service sector's lucrative main-course salad trend, which was an influential driver of health-enhancing dining options.

But the real driver, it seems, was the new awareness and responsiveness among consumers — the same people in many cases who had spurned such initiatives as McLean Deluxe and Border Lites. And that serves as a reminder that foodservice marketers are most effective not as innovators or trailblazers, but as pulse-takers and responders. ■

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