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# What food trends will define 2021

After the year we've just experienced, one might think anything is possible. The COVID-19 pandemic has indeed prompted changes in consumer behavior that will be key in shaping the food system in the year to come, particularly in relation to what they eat and where they get their food.

With monthly coverage of all aspects of food science and technology ranging from ingredients and nutraceuticals to food safety, sustainability, and more, the editors of *Food Technology* have their pulse on the science of food. Here is their outlook for the biggest food trends of 2021.





## Chefs Reach for Private-Label Lifeline

Expect a continued uptick in private-label sauces, marinades, spice blends, meal kits and frozen entrees as a lifeline for independent restaurant chefs battered by last year's COVID-driven dining restrictions. A growing list of retail and direct-to-consumer brand extensions launched or expanded in 2020 includes spice and salt blends from celebrity chefs Stephanie Izard, David Chang and Eric Rivera; packaged and frozen gourmet cookies from New York's Milk Bar and Levain Bakery; and a restaurant/retail partnership launched last spring between supermarket chain H-E-B and several Texas restaurants, including Max & Louie's, Chris Shepherd's and Underbelly Hospitality, to develop and distribute take-home meal kits.

—Bill McDowell, Editor-in-Chief

## A Divided Marketplace

As we move into a post-pandemic world, consumers will take a bipolar approach to purchasing, opening up opportunities for both iconic CPG brands that got a boost during the period of our coronavirus confinement as well as budget-oriented private label offerings. Consumers who emerge economically unscathed from the pandemic will focus on health-promoting natural and organic products while those who have taken a financial hit will spend carefully, seeking out value-oriented brands that offer more bang for the buck.

—Mary Ellen Kuhn, Executive Editor



## Ghost Kitchens Are Here to Stay

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many restaurants started operating out of ghost kitchens—also called virtual kitchens, dark kitchens, etc.—due to a lower capital expenditure. And while the pandemic has certainly accelerated the ghost kitchen phenomenon (the United States is now home to around 1,500 ghost kitchens), the trend was well underway before the pandemic. Consumers demand convenience and ordering food online for delivery or pick up at a satellite location fulfills that desire. When combined with the benefits for restauranteurs, including the added flexibility and the ability to launch a new concept for thousands instead of millions of dollars, it should be no surprise that the ghost kitchen concept is here to stay.

—Kelly Hensel, Senior Digital Editor



## Shrooms Rule!

Expect to see mushrooms of all types, especially antioxidant-rich varieties like reishi, lion's mane, chaga, and cordyceps, to appear as hero ingredients in a growing assortment of foods, among them superfood coffees and chocolate. Both wild and domestic varieties are being explored for their many health benefits, which include immune, energy, heart, and brain support. A staple in Eastern cultures, their popularity is on the rise among Western consumers interested in clean-label, plant-based solutions for common health concerns..

—Margaret Malochleb, Associate Editor

## Eyeing Vision Benefits

While COVID-19 has pushed mental and immune health to the forefront of consumers' minds, expect growing interest in eye health as well. While this has mainly been a concern for the aging population, increased screen time—whether from virtual school, work, or gaming—will affect all demographic groups. Look for nutrients like lutein, zeaxanthin, vitamin C, and vitamin E to help with potential effects from prolonged screen time such as eye strain, fatigue, and dry eyes.

—Linda Milo Ohr, Contributing Editor, Nutraceuticals



## Food as Medicine

COVID-19 has been a unique catalyst, driving the global “food as medicine” movement mainstream. Buying foods for specific health benefits will continue to outpace selecting foods with more passive health positionings, such as organic, clean, local, etc. Watch for increased labeling of inherent natural health-promoting ingredients. If you got it, flaunt it! Those looking to manage and treat a condition with a food or beverage will reach an all-time high. With younger consumers embracing functional foods, new and unique health-promoting ingredients and superfoods will be a strong draw for consumers.

—A. Elizabeth Sloan, Contributing Editor, Consumer Trends



## New Sources for Probiotics

The COVID-19 pandemic has made consumers more aware of product shelf life and food waste. Looking ahead to 2021, interest in fermented and acidified foods will continue to rise as a result. Probiotic bacteria will find new nondairy sources such as cucumber pickles, peppers, and fermented beverages.

—Jane Caldwell, Contributing Editor, Food Safety & Quality

## Kefir Will Come on Strong

Growing health consciousness and the rising trend for lactose-free food products will heighten consumer demand for fermented foods such as kefir in 2021. Kefir has documented health benefits due in part to its microbial diversity. Commercial kefir with various flavors will continue to be consumed as a healthy and refreshing beverage in 2021, and both commercial kefir and homemade artisanal kefir will be found in many appealing recipes, including salad dressings, savory dips, poultry and meat marinades, fruit smoothies, ice cream, and breakfast pastries.

—Gülhan Ünlü, Contributing Editor, Food Safety & Quality



## Regionalized Packaging Reuse

The environment will take center stage with a regional twist. Life Cycle Analysis shows that regional reuse and recycling of packaging is more economical and more environmentally friendly than shipping used packaging large distances for recycling and handling to enable subsequent reuse. Packaging will expand from what is done in institutions to regional systems in which restaurants provide take-out meals in branded reusable containers and regionally standardized containers that can be returned to any regional restaurant.

—Claire Koelsch Sand, Contributing Editor, Packaging



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