

A Message to You Foodie 2011

Stop Your Messing Around. Better Think of Food Future.

In our last foray into food trends, things were looking pretty sour. Obesity was weighing us (and our kids) down, misleading food labels were offering everything *but* “smart choices,” and hucksters kept promising suspicious benefits from so-called “superfoods” that we could barely pronounce. Amidst plenty of **Future Fear** about intractable problems facing the economy, global politics, and the fate of *Two and a Half Men*, we’d understand if pessimism about food future was lumped into the mix. But, something funny has happened in the meantime: the major players in the food world suddenly started cooperating and taking significant swings at the category’s toughest problems. In the past few months alone, we’ve seen South Los Angeles (an area with chronically high rates of obesity) take a stand against food deserts by banning new fast-food restaurants and actively recruiting healthier options. We’ve seen San Francisco wrist-slap kids’ meals that dangle toys as carrots instead of just dangling some damn carrots already. We’ve seen food manufacturers like Kraft filling gaps in municipal funding (and giving kids a place to be active) by building neighborhood playgrounds. In fact, if we had to pick one overarching food theme for 2011, it’d be **progress and pragmatism** in tackling the category’s most entrenched problems. (Fortunately we *don’t* have to pick just one. We’ll get to the others in our **forthcoming Smartshot webinar**.)

As you’d expect, some of the biggest contributors to this remarkable progress have come from the liberal, hippie, anti-business, nanny-state environmentalists at... Walmart?? Yup, their Great Value private label foods were already tough competitors on price, and now Walmart’s launched a five year plan to reduce sodium, trans fats and added sugars in these foods. (A five year plan? What is this, Stalinmart?) The nation’s largest retailer is also exerting pressures on manufacturers like ConAgra and Kraft to adopt similar measures for the foods they sell in-store. For some added incentive, Walmart’s tightening the screws by dropping prices on whole grain foods, fresh fruits, and vegetables, and even considering a seal that would distinguish foods that are low in sodium, sugar, and fat. And, just to make sure they’re staying on task, Walmart has agreed to provide progress reports to... Michelle Obama?? Yup, the First Lady’s made childhood obesity her first priority, and her Let’s Move initiative is promising realistic, achievable changes that are grounded in common sense. While her neighbors in the Beltway must think that’s crazy talk, that’s exactly the kind of strategy that’ll go far in boardroom. The collaboration with Walmart is just one example of the First Lady actively engaging corporate America in her efforts, which is partially a realization that Walmart has as much power as the federal government to impact these problems (if not more). That’s not to say the feds aren’t trying. They just overhauled the USDA food pyramid, with takeaways that are uncharacteristically straightforward: eat less, be more active, cut back on salt and sugary drinks, and keep an eye on calories. The “eat less” piece is perhaps the most startling part (the pyramid has never really addressed the issue), and it’s a big win for the shift towards small (yup, we called it with **our Sized Right trend**). These recommendations are simple enough for a child to follow, and that’s no accident. Kids consume over half of their calories at school, which is why there’s an effort to get them involved in preparing cafeteria lunches or, at the very least, to understand where their food comes from.

This all sounds so completely... reasonable, which explains why we’re seeing such progress on these problems. There’s a growing acknowledgment that superfoods aren’t the answer, that quick fixes to health probably don’t exist, and that health

and wellness isn’t as complicated as we often make it out to be. There’s not a lot here that we didn’t already know; it’s just that eating healthy and being active have always been so *difficult* for the average consumer. Ask Walmart why they’re instituting the aforementioned changes, and they’ll tell you that *their customers asked them* to help by making the healthier foods more affordable than the junk. And that’s what’s radically different this time ‘round: for every problem facing the food world, the big players are offering **practical solutions** that make it easier for consumers to lead healthy lives. Yes, the USDA is telling us to eat less, but restaurants and food manufacturers are making this trade-off a tasty one by offering everything from sliders to substantial snacks to small plates. Yes, fatty foods are a delicious way to ensure you don’t live past 50, but chefs are finding smarter and tastier alternatives like duck fat (as any Hot Doug’s fan already knew). Yes, you knew that a bacon double cheeseburger is basically a sucker-punch to your circulatory system, but menus with calorie counts are now revealing the less obvious horrors of your morning muffin or daily burrito. Yes, you need to eat your veggies, so chefs and food manufacturers alike are reexamining ways to get all kinds of flavors out of formerly forsaken produce, even if it requires looking toward cultures that are more traditionally vegetable-focused (anyone catching a whiff of **our Primitive Simplicity trend?**).

But the idea of practical solutions is perhaps most evident in the realm of meat consumption. Americans are grudgingly acknowledging the personal and environmental downsides of consuming too much meat, but many aren’t ready for the extreme limitations required by vegetarianism or veganism. (Gotta allow for Baconnaise, right?) Normally, that’d be the end of the story, but a number of strange bedfellows are finding themselves promoting a third option: flexitarianism, or getting creative about cutting back on meat consumption (without completely eliminating it). It’s certainly worth noting when numerous trend-setting eateries embrace Meatless Mondays, including all 14 restaurants run by snout-to-tail advocate Mario Batali. But things are *really* changing when we see Meatless Mondays institutionalized at Sodexo, which supplies food for hospitals, government institutions, and schools. As one of the biggest employers in the world, reducing Sodexo’s meat consumption by 1/7 makes a dramatic dent in the overall demand for industrial livestock, but also makes it more likely that others will follow. For instance, Kellogg is doubling down on its Morningstar product line, including a new line of soy-based breakfast entrees. (And lest you think it’s those darn kids driving this trend, Kellogg’s primary target for this line is Boomer women.)

Flexitarians aside, the meat of the matter is that concerns about health and wellness are becoming an increasingly significant part of the American consumer’s value equation. They’re realizing the long-term implications of the choices they make at the table. They’ve clamored for practical solutions, and the food, beverage, and beauty industries (among others) have delivered them. So here’s the message to you, Foodies: get your programs in tune with progress and your consumers’ calls for practical solutions.

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