

# Food trends could drive production decisions

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The agricultural sector is about producing, processing and marketing food and fibre to consumers. Although the natural fibre side of agriculture should never be neglected, the largest portion of the sector remains the production of various food products.



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The demand for food is shaped by several factors that can range from the amount of spendable income to demographic and social factors. This demand for food, however, changes over time as countries, cultures and the economy develops. Another aspect that influences food demand is the supply of new food products to the market that can steal some market share from known products.

Whether you are involved in primary production, processing or the marketing of food, you should always take note of changes in food trends that will ultimately influence the demand for your product/s. These new trends can create opportunities for you if you produce commodities that consumers want.

## Trends and the value chain

When you search the internet, you will find a wealth of information from different sources on expected food trends for the year. Yet it is interesting to see that most of the published information comes from large supermarket chains such as Waitrose, Metro and Whole Foods. This does make sense, as it is the different types of food outlets that interact with the consumer, and they are therefore first in line to receive suggestions from customers.

So, why call it interesting then? The answer lies in the very effective communication system throughout the whole food value chain. The consumer speaks only to the food outlet and in the end, his or her demands are usually met. This means that requests travel back through the value chain to the producers of the necessary raw products, which will again go through new types of processing to reach the consumer at some point in the future.

One way in which producers and processors can get to know the demands of consumers is by perusing published research that can be found on the internet, but this is a slower and at times almost accidental discovery unless they have permanent market researchers.

If producers and processors, therefore, want to be on the forefront of food product innovation according to the needs and wants of consumers, a good relationship with the marketer of their current products is of the utmost importance. They will then be the first to know whether they should consider changing current practices.

Although it may be a bit late to get involved in the new expected world food trends for this year, it may still be worthwhile to consider them and ask the question of how one is going to keep up with innovation.

## **Food product trends**

There is a worldwide drive towards specific types of food products. Although this might differ between countries, it remains a quite interesting experience to learn what people want to eat nowadays.

One of the biggest food product trends is mushrooms. Mushrooms are believed to help with a range of ailments – stretching from gout to cancer prevention – and the strong, unique taste of many variants makes it an ideal product to use in other food products. The current trends include mushroom drinks such as coffee, protein shakes and alcohol such as vodka and gin. Mushrooms will also start to function more and more as a replacement for calories as it contains 92% water and no fat.

The world has started to go crazy for tacos. Tacos are traditional Mexican corn or wheat based tortillas folded around a savoury filling. With the new taco craze new variants of tortillas, such as grain-free products, are hitting the shelves while chefs are pushing the boundaries with fillings for breakfast and dessert.

An interesting new trend is an excitement around floral flavours. Floral flavours derived from flowers, for example, elderflower, rose, hibiscus, lavender and geranium, are used to flavour everything from soft drinks, granola and marshmallows to ice-cream, ciders and cocktails.

Two traditional food hypes that are expected to grow in 2018 are Indian street food and Japanese 'dude' food. Large parts of the world are already curry loving, but the new trend is more about pared down Indian takeaways with no compromise on flavour. The Japanese 'dude' food trend is to include rich and surprising flavours from Japan to more local 'men loving dishes' (I think of it as pub food) such as small skewers and sausages.

## **Food type and consumption**

Food trends are not only about specific products and flavours, but also the type and source of food that consumers demand. One of the greatest trends is the quest for plant-based proteins that is supported by the 'clean eating' idea.

The demand for plant proteins such as pulses, shoots, grains and seeds are set to become big business as consumers attempt to replace the so-called heart-heavy meats. New technology makes products (plant-based burgers, nut-based milk and yoghurt, etc.) more appealing to previous meat and dairy loving consumers.

With the wealth of information available to almost all consumers from the palms of their hands (smartphones), they want to know everything about everything and require an exponential amount of information. They are demanding full disclosure and total transparency from food and drink companies as they do not trust regulatory systems and manufacturers. They need to see labels on products that clearly identify the origin, ingredients, production processes and supply chains, such as GMO-free, responsibly grown and reared, free-range and fair trade.

Consumers want new sensations when it comes to their food to enable them to be fully engaged in the culinary experience. The taste, smell and look of food are not enough anymore and texture is the latest tool to engage senses and deliver share-worthy (think social media) experiences. New textures range from chewy drinks and crispy ice-cream to popping candy biscuits.

Over the years, the amount and size of meals have changed often. The world went from three meals a day to eight small meals to continuously snacking, and back to three meals a day. The new trend is to have four small meals a day that will fit into a busy lifestyle and keep you satisfied enough to prevent you from snacking.

## **Food for thought**

Apart from the trends mentioned in this article, there are many others that will influence food demand in the year ahead as well as in future. As producers, processors and marketers of food, our focus is usually on our current business, and although it evolves over time, it is often based on the fact that change is needed to stay alive. Proper consumer demand research may just give you some insight into those changes and assist you in making use of new opportunities.

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