

ACXION REPORT » Q4 2026

Passing Trend or Lasting Traction?

How to know when a foodservice trend is
worth the investment.

Passing Trend or Lasting Traction?

Food trends by nature are difficult to predict. While some find their way into the mainstream (think protein, “swicy,” global flavors, and nonalcoholic beverages), others are over seemingly as fast as they started.

With more menu launches happening across foodservice than ever, almost anything can look like it’s taking off. What’s much harder to tell is whether or not that momentum is real.

The implications are huge for foodservice professionals. Every time a flavor or format makes news:

- A category manager is deciding whether to greenlight a limited-time SKU or invest in a line extension
- An operator is deciding whether an LTO deserves a permanent menu slot or a quiet retirement

These choices carry real costs—from sourcing and supply contracts to training and menu redesigns. So how do you avoid missing out on the next big thing and missing the mark with a flash in the pan? We’ve put together this report to help you evaluate trends on their merits before you spend the money finding out.



What's Inside

01

Growing Volume
of Launches

02

04 The Impact of
Social Media

03

06 Our Methodology

04

08 The Three Patterns
of Growth

10

05

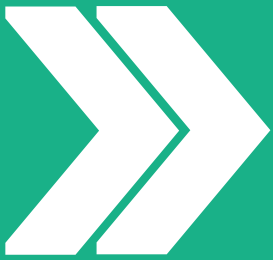
Real-World Examples

06

16 Conclusion

07

18 About Acxion Foodservice **20**



Growing Volume of Launches

01

This much is certain: the volume of launches is real.

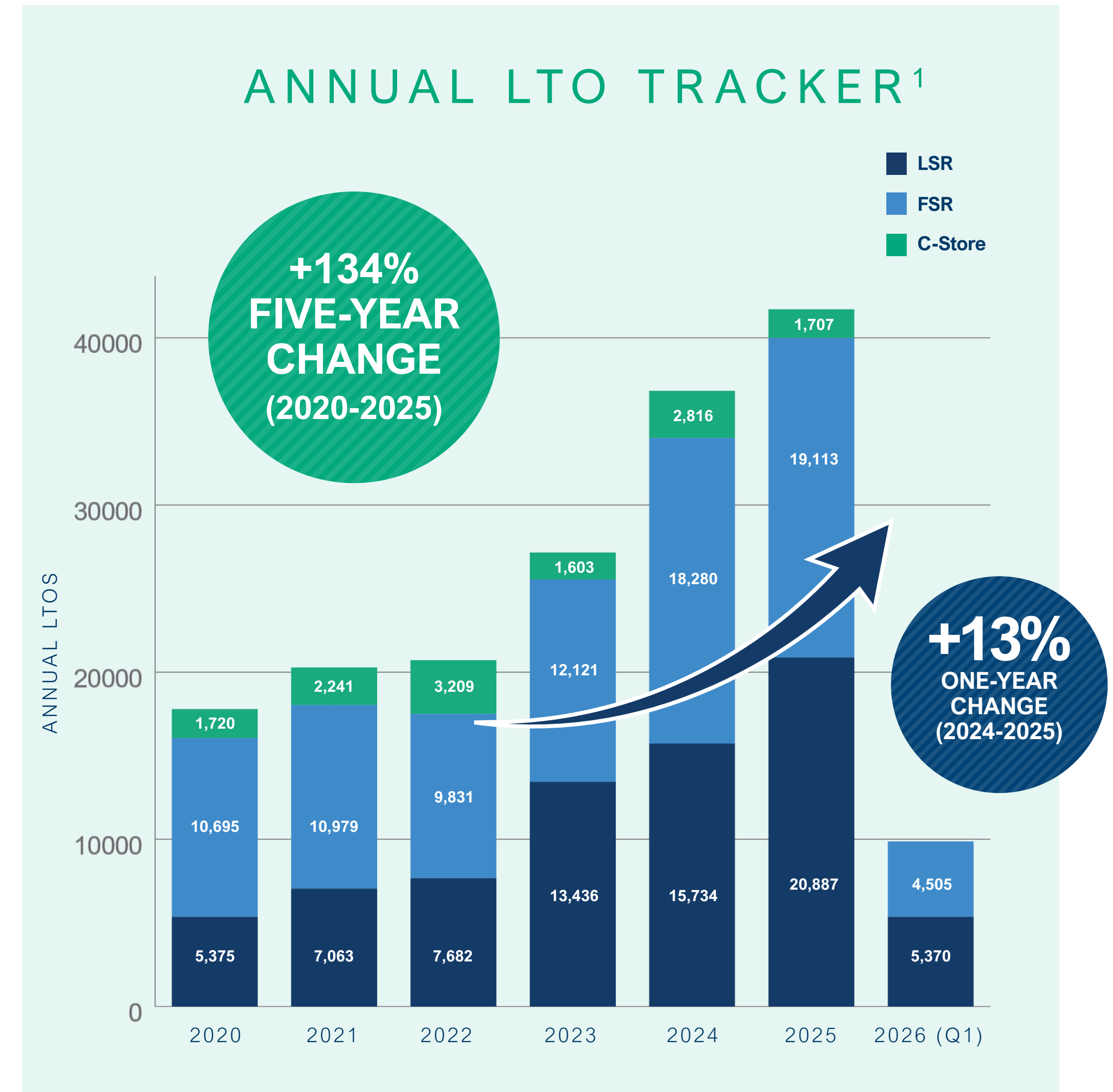
Technomic's Annual LTO Tracker counted **17,290 limited-time offers**, across the industry in 2020.

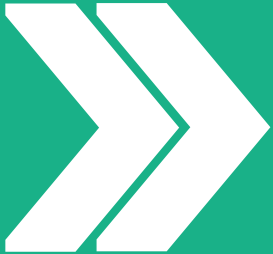


By 2025, that number was **41,707**.¹

↑ 134% increase

33% of operators increased the frequency of their LTOs and specials over the past year, vs. just 6% who pulled back.²





The Impact of Social Media

02

Social media platforms are the accelerant.

Beginning in the mid 2010s, social media began compressing the distance between emerging idea and full-on menu launch. Instagram led the way by turning “**post worthy**” plates into rapidly scalable trends, and TikTok intensified that effect around 2020.

While viral visibility essentially creates a virtual test market, it also creates pressure for operators to deliver constant newness in order to stay relevant. The result is a menu cycle that **increasingly moves at the speed of the feed.**

Add to this the fact that consumers crave novelty—

64% say they’re looking forward to new food and beverage trends in the year ahead,³

—and the stakes become even higher for operators to respond judiciously.

DUNKIN’

The **48-OUNCE “COFFEE BUCKET”** took off on TikTok in the summer of 2025. Six months later, Dunkin’ was testing the format in one-fifth of its U.S. locations.

In 2026, they went nationwide.^{4,5}



»» Our Methodology

03



More research, less guesswork.

So, when a flavor or format trend emerges onto the scene, how can you tell whether it's going to be relevant for a decade or simply fade away once the social feed moves on? We've identified key indicators that can give you a prognosticative edge.

To separate the two, we analyzed item-level data for dozens of food and beverage trends using Datassential's Launches & Ratings platform.

The pages that follow will help provide a roadmap for evaluating new opportunities within your own operation.

Our methodology:

- 1** For each trend, we measured both the number of chains adopting it for the first time (adoption breadth) and the total number of items launched (launch volume).
- 2** We then divided the volume by the number of active chains to calculate launch intensity: the average number of items launched per participating trend.





The Three Patterns of Growth

04

The Three Patterns of Growth

Trends can sit at various stages of the adoption curve—inception, adoption, or ubiquity.⁶ But how fast a trend moves through these stages is critical. Two trends can sit in the same stage with **completely different momentum underneath**.

Our breadth-vs.-depth split identifies three distinct shapes of trending. They represent **different bets with different time horizons and different capital requirements**.

01

Broad Acceleration

New operators and item launches rise together at a steady ratio. Growth is widening across the market, not just deepening among existing adopters.

02

Concentrated Depth

Item launches keep rising while new-chain adoption stalls or fails. Committed operators are generating more variations, but the trend is no longer recruiting new participants.

03

Slow-Burn Persistence

Adoption and launches accumulate gradually, without a sharp acceleration. Less visible but often more durable, these trends build staying power over a decade or more.

The Three Patterns of Growth

Pattern 1: Broad Acceleration

Broad acceleration is the clearest signal that a trend warrants long-term commitment.



The indicators: An item launches and new-chain adoption rises in step, showing that momentum is widening across the market.

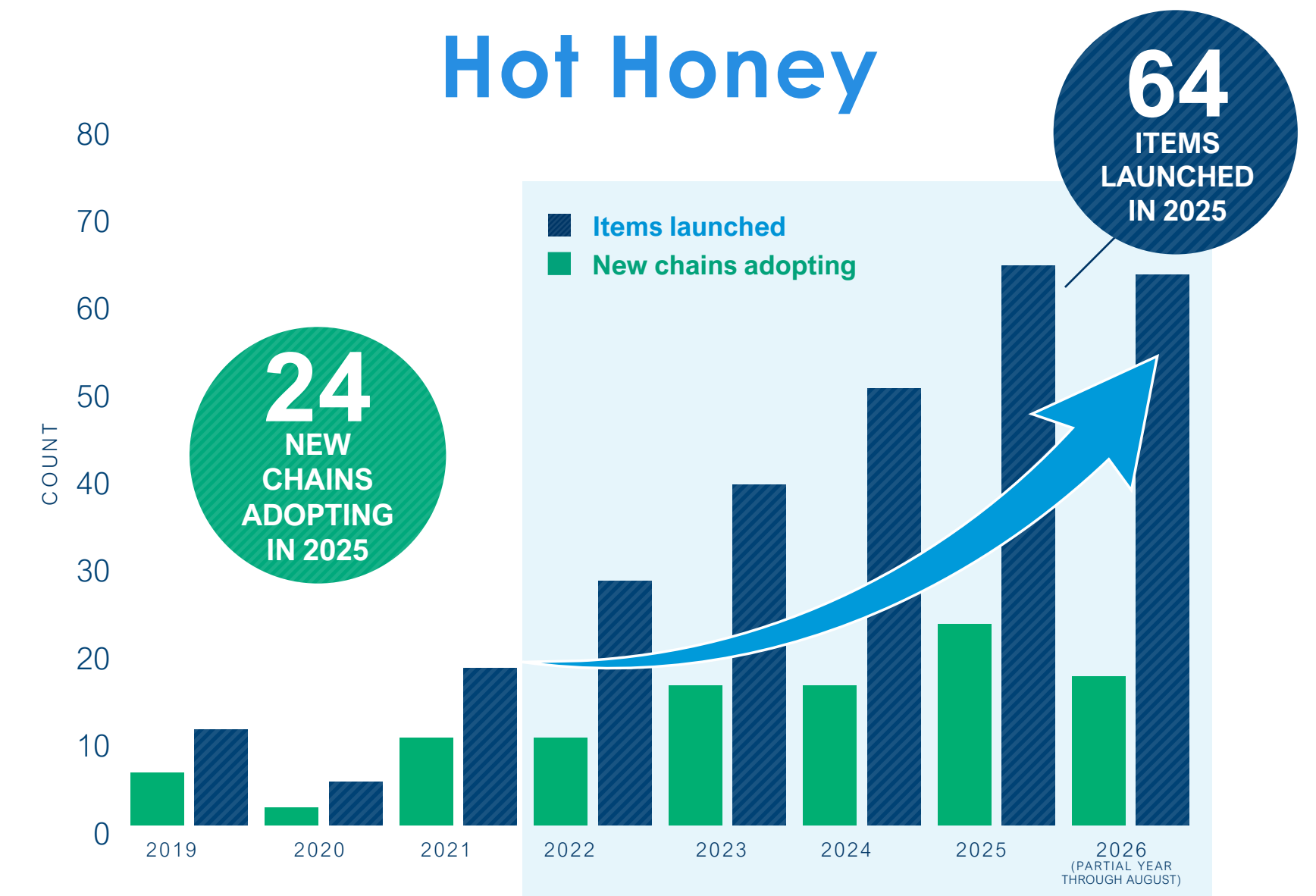
The strongest evidence of staying power is not only launch volume alone, but also a growing list of participating chains.



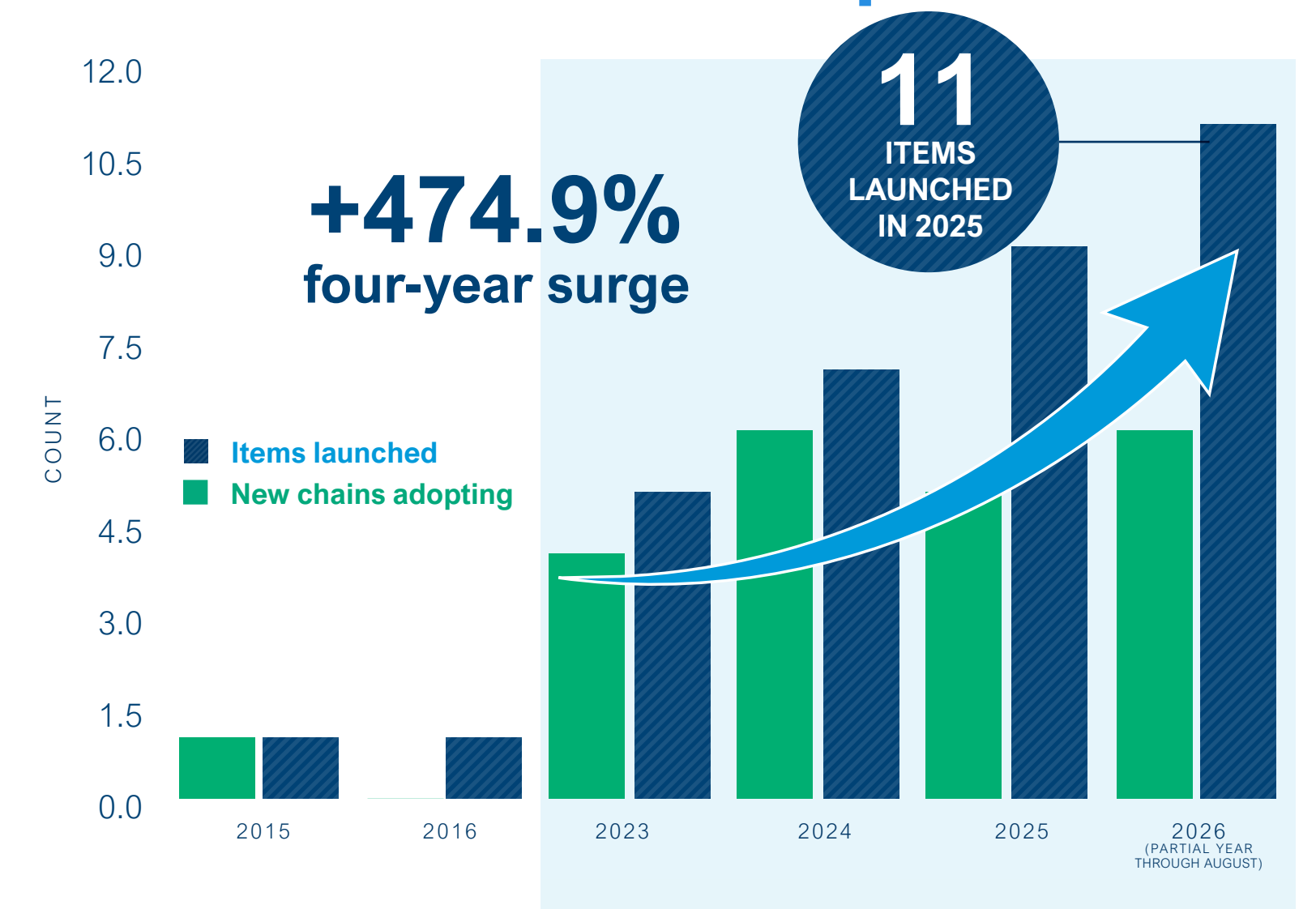
The takeaway: This is the green light to **go big**. New operators keep entering as volume rises, showing widening demand that's more than a temporary spike. It's worth committing real R&D time and ramping up production capacity.

Also Showing this Pattern: Dragon Fruit

Hot Honey



Chili Crisp



The Three Patterns of Growth

Pattern 2: Concentrated Depth

Concentrated depth creates the appearance of momentum.



The indicators: Launches rise, but participation remains concentrated among a small group of committed operators.

Item volume can overstate market expansion, and a trend's trajectory can change as new operators begin to enter.



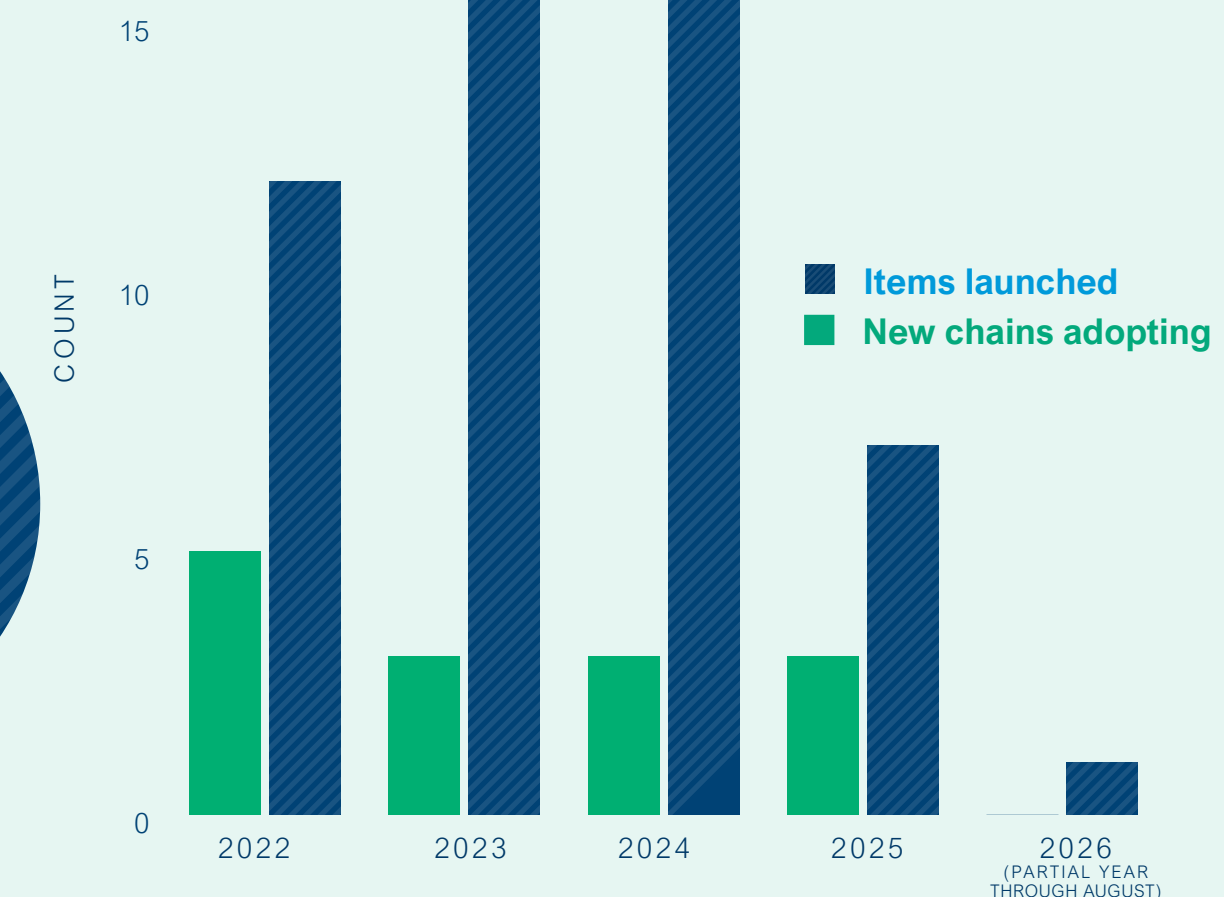
The takeaway: Make a small bet and size it for a short run. Operators may be chasing the traffic and social buzz an LTO drives, whether or not the trend itself has staying power. The volume here is real, but it's more likely to come and go than to compound. Plan for a limited release, not a long-term commitment, until the chain list actually starts to grow.

Also Showing this Pattern: Detroit-Style Pizza

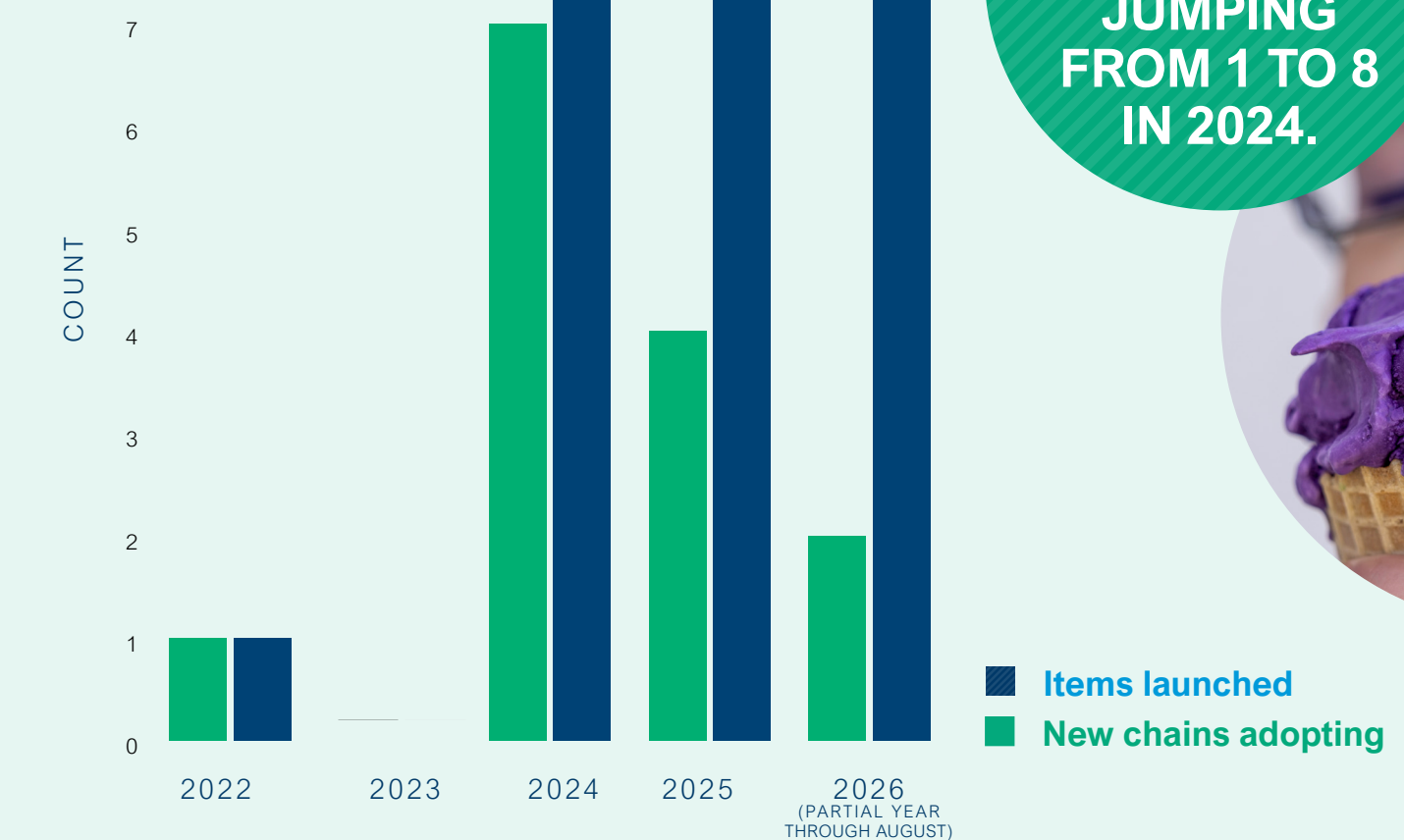


**SURGED
+221.2%
OVER FOUR
YEARS**

Birria



Ube



**ANNUAL
ITEM
LAUNCHES
JUMPING
FROM 1 TO 8
IN 2024.**



The Three Patterns of Growth

Pattern 3: Slow-Burn Persistence

The growth is slow, but that doesn't necessarily indicate weak potential.



The indicators: These trends build through steady, multi-year adoption rather than viral surges, making them easy to overlook even as their relevance compounds.

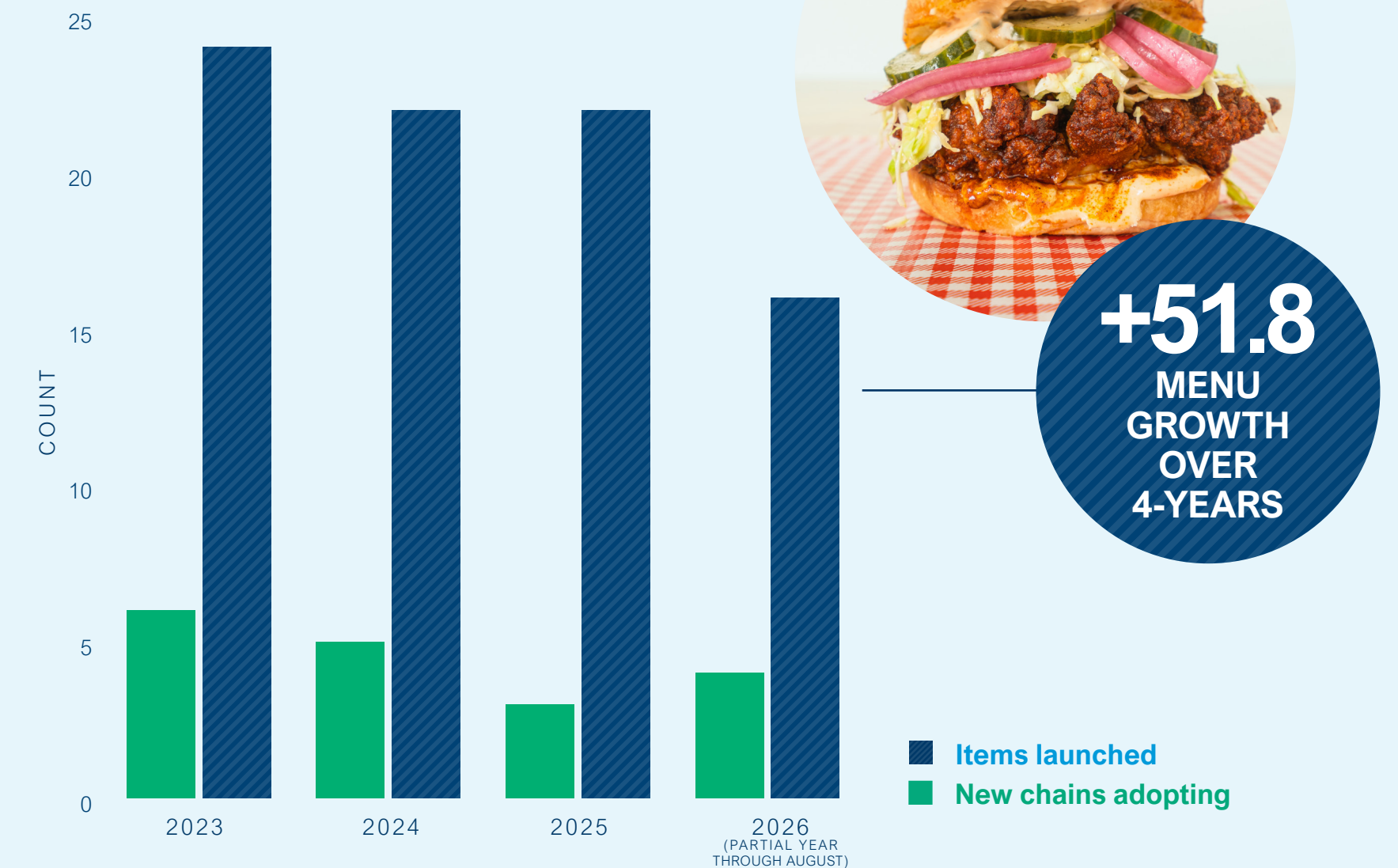
Durability can exist without acceleration, versatility can sustain gradual expansion, and rising awareness may be the payoff of years of quiet adoption, not the start of a trend.



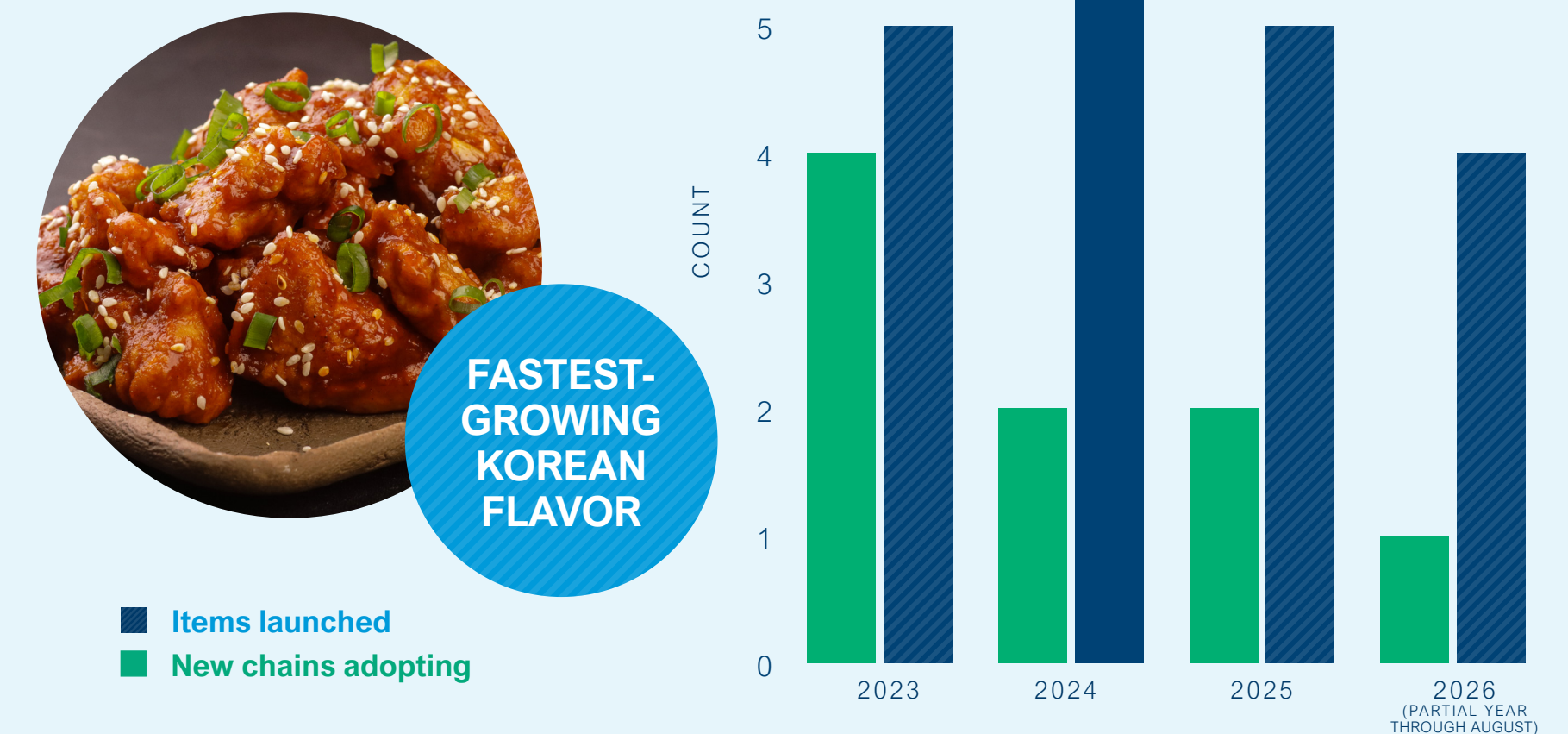
The takeaway: This is a good bet, but size it small. Don't launch a portfolio of items chasing this space; pick one or two meaningful entrants and build over time. The volume may stay modest, but the demand is durable. What's more, being the first committed player in this category can compound into an edge that's hard for others to catch up to later.

Also Showing this Pattern: Elote

Nashville Hot



Gochujang



The Three Patterns of Growth

Applying the learnings

Adoption patterns are easiest to recognize in hindsight. The more valuable (and difficult) task is using them to evaluate trends still taking shape.

By tracking new-chain adoption, launch volume, launch intensity, menu penetration, and consumer awareness and affinity, we can distinguish widening demand from concentrated experimentation.





Real-World Examples

05

Real-World Examples:



Dirty Soda—Passing Obsession, or Staying Power?

Dirty soda shows the clearest signs of **Broad Acceleration**. After incubating regionally for more than a decade and breaking through on social media around 2021-22, it generated 25 launches across 10 newly adopting chains in 2026.⁷



Salsa Macha—Is it the Next Chili Crisp?

Salsa macha's adoption pattern appears to be **Concentrated Depth**. It's had a flatter start than chili crisp, and its natural home (Mexican and trend-forward kitchens already fluent in the flavor) is a narrower lane than chili crisp's universal drizzle-on-anything appeal.⁷



Black Garlic—Will Quiet Versatility Stick Around?

Black garlic is less likely to break through a single viral moment. It's showing **Slow-Burn Persistence** with fast-growing consumer awareness and slow-but-steady menu penetration growth.^{8,9} We'd bet on this one compounding quietly for years rather than breaking out.⁷

Together, these three trends demonstrate why **“growing”** is not a single market condition. The right investment depends not only on how much each is growing, but on what kind of growth the data reveals.



Conclusion

06

What potential does this trend hold?

How do you know when a foodservice trend is worth the investment? Evaluate the three patterns of growth and three different investment decisions.

01

Broad Acceleration

When new operators keep joining alongside rising volume, it's worth committing production capacity and R&D time to keep pace with it.

Best move: COMMIT

02

Concentrated Depth

When volume rises but the chain list doesn't, make a small, short-term bet. Don't plan for a long-term supply commitment until the chain list actually starts growing.

Best move: TEST

03

Slow-Burn Persistence

When growth stays modest but keeps compounding year after year, that's a good bet. But make a smaller one. Pick a meaningful entrant and build it over time.

Best move: BUILD

Before your next capital commitment, carefully **measure the trend** you're considering vs. these key indicators. Doing so will help you determine the best way to play your hand for maximum success.



07

About Acxion Foodservice.

Acxion Foodservice is a trusted partner to foodservice manufacturers seeking smarter ways to grow. Acxion brings together sales expertise, culinary innovation, data driven insights, and modern marketing capabilities to help clients reach operators more effectively and convert demand into measurable results. Powered by proprietary intelligence platforms and deep distribution relationships, Acxion delivers practical, end to end solutions that uncover opportunity, accelerate revenue, and enhance performance at every level of the foodservice ecosystem.

Learn more at [acxion.com](https://www.acxion.com)





What's new at Acxion?

GameChanger Pro is our next-generation CRM built for the way Acxion sells today. It puts product information, distributor codes, trends, menu ideas, call logging, and Media Hub tools into one mobile-first platform, helping sellers move faster and respond in the moment.

With Ginger, our AI interface, delivering instant answers and helping organize field photos and generate client-ready reporting, GameChanger Pro turns everyday activity in the field into sharper insights and better follow-through. Over time, it becomes more than a CRM—it becomes a smarter selling platform and business intelligence system that helps save us time, improve conversations, and create advantages for our clients and our teams.

Want to learn more about Acxion?



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Kevin is a foodservice leader with 35+ years of experience in business development and growth strategy, leading manufacturer partnerships and enterprise initiatives across the industry.



Tune into The Dishcourse

Where three food industry and trend experts come together to dish and debate the hottest topics in food innovation.



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Want to hear more about trends & insights?

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Montina is a food and beverage strategist with 12+ years of experience across culinary innovation, consumer insights, marketing, and restaurant operations.

Thank you.

Sources

¹ Technomic Foodservice State of the Industry Midyear Update July 2026

² Datassential Menu Innovation vs. Simplification Elevate Huddle, March 2026

³ Datassential Trend or Fad? August 2026

⁴ Datassential Social Media Sensations February 2026

⁵ Food & Wine, "Dunkin's Ridiculously Large 48-Ounce Coffee Buckets Are Finally Going Nationwide," May 2026

⁶ Datassential Menu Adoption Curve Framework

⁷ Datassential Launches & Ratings Platform YE June 2026

⁸ Datassential Consumer Preferences Platform YE June 2026

⁹ Datassential Menu Trends Data YE June 2026