ACXION REPORT » Q2 2026

The Paradox of Health in Foodservice

Why indulgence still wins, what *"better-for-you"* actually means today, and how operators should respond.

Interest in healthier eating continues to rise, with consumers seeking functional ingredients, clean labels, and higher protein. Yet the menu items generating the most traffic and attention remain distinctly indulgent.

This tension reflects a fundamental shift in the role of foodservice. While disciplined eating is increasingly reserved for the home, restaurants have become spaces for experience, enjoyment, and occasional indulgence. At the same time, evolving nutrition science, GLP-1 medications, and heightened interest in nutrient density are redefining how health is expressed on menus.

The opportunity for operators is not choosing between health and indulgence—but delivering both.

What's Inside

01

The Health Paradox

What consumers say vs. what they order.

53% More than half of consumers actively seek nutritious foods.[1]

45% Nearly half review nutrition information when ordering.[1]

At the same time, **many consumers who identify as health-conscious admit they do not usually look for healthy options when dining out.**[2]

Consumers increasingly identify as health-conscious—but that identity does not consistently translate into behavior.

02

The Restaurant Reality

Cravings still win the occasion.

63% of consumers choose health-focused foods at home, but only **33%** do so when dining out.[2]

As prices rise, dining out becomes more **intentional, focusing on experience, enjoyment, and satisfaction rather than routine eating.[3]**

SPENDING PATTERNS FURTHER HIGHLIGHT THIS DYNAMIC:

- ↑ **Fast casual returned to growth** (+0.2%), led by health-forward positioning[4]
- ↑ **Independents outperformed chains** (+4.8% vs -0.1%), driven by differentiation[4]
- ↓ **Pizza declined** (-3.5%), reflecting undifferentiated indulgence[4]
- ↑ **Small and mid-size coffee surged** (+21.2%), driven by premium, treat-driven occasions[4]

The results suggest that while cravings continue to drive occasions, the strongest growth is occurring in formats that **offer either clear identity, premium treat appeal, or perceived nutritional value.[4]**

Operators are confirming this reality.

Many brands are not prioritizing health-focused messaging, particularly if wellness is not central to their identity. **Instead, they continue to lead with craveability, indulgence, and menu items designed to generate excitement and social buzz.**

Across the operators I'm speaking with, health isn't the main focus right now," says Steve Madonna, the VP of Culinary at Acxion. **"If 'healthy' isn't central to the brand, most are doubling down on craveability and indulgence. Guests may say they want healthier options, but their purchasing still leans toward comfort, flavor, and treat-driven moments."**

Operators are confirming this reality.

If indulgence continues to dominate restaurant occasions and most consumers loosen dietary restrictions when dining out, it begs the question: **why is health still such a dominant conversation in foodservice?**

Because consumers still want to feel like they are making better choices—even when they indulge. **Brands are not replacing indulgence; they are reframing it with better-for-you cues.**

REAL-WORLD CHAIN EXAMPLES:

Chipotle's High Protein Menu

Offers 15g–81g of protein in just one item and includes a Double High Protein Bowl (81g of protein), High Protein-High Fiber Bowl (46g of protein, 14g of fiber), High Protein-Low Calorie Bowl (36g of protein, GLP-1 friendly), and more.

Dunkin' Protein Winter Menu

Highlights "Protein Milk", along with five new refreshers and lattes that feature protein. Protein Milk provides 15g of protein and can also be added to any beverage that allows a milk or nondairy base.

Shake Shack's Good Fit Menu

Features "Shack favorites made to fit your lifestyle," with a variety of high-protein, low-carb lettuce-wrapped options, as well as gluten-free and vegetarian options.

03

The Better-for-You Evolution

The new definition of healthy.

For decades, health messaging focused on elimination: low fat, low calorie, low carb, and sugar-free. However, in the last decade, **the emphasis has shifted toward positive nutrition—focusing on what foods provide rather than what they remove.**

Tune into our Discourse episode
'Fiber to the Maxxx: Functional Food's Final Frontier'
where we do a full-on fiber deep dive!

LISTEN NOW

PROTEIN

61%

of consumers are interested in foods and beverages that are high protein, and...

FIBER

54%

are interested in high fiber.[5]

Nutrition through the ages.

The Elimination Era (1990s–2010s)

For roughly two decades, health messaging centered on removing "bad" nutrients:

- low fat (1990s)
- low carb / keto (2000s–2010s)
- low calorie
- sugar-free

Menus and packaged foods focused on restriction and avoidance.

The Transition Period (Mid–2010s)

Around 2015–2018, the narrative began shifting. Several forces drove it:

- The rise of clean label and "real food" movements
- Growing skepticism of ultra-processed foods
- Research on satiety and metabolic health
- The popularity of high-protein diets (paleo, Whole30, etc.)

This is when health started moving from "what foods remove" to "what foods provide"

The Positive Nutrition Era (2020s–present)

Over the past 5–7 years, the shift has become much clearer. Health is now increasingly defined by nutrient density and functional benefits, including.

- Protein
- Fiber
- Gut health
- Metabolic health
- Immune support

Functional benefits have gone mainstream.

Consumers are seeking foods and beverages that support specific health goals including **digestive health, immunity, heart health, and sustained energy.**

Functional benefits are no longer limited to supplements or niche wellness products; **they are now integrated into mainstream foodservice.**

REAL-WORLD BEVERAGE EXAMPLES:

Peet's Coffee & Tea Immunity Glow

Juicy pineapple, blood orange purée, and a splash of black tea, all packed with vitamins C, D3, and zinc.

Smoothie King Gut Health Watermelon Smoothie

Strawberries, Greek Nonfat Yogurt, Apple Juice, Watermelon Juice Blend, Protein Blend and Gut Health Enhancer.

Taco Bell Tropical Punch Rockstar Energy Refresca

A tropical punch–flavored beverage featuring Rockstar® Focus Energy, packed with Lion's Mane, B vitamins, guarana, and taurine.

Where cravings meet credibility.

A protein callout, clean ingredient claim, or functional benefit doesn't necessarily make a burger healthy, but it can make it feel like a smarter choice.

If a guest can justify ordering an indulgent item because it offers more protein, fewer additives, or a functional benefit, that small cue can be enough to win the occasion.

37% **of consumers say menu items that combine indulgence with health cues are appealing.**[2]

The result is a powerful middle ground: foods that satisfy cravings while offering just enough upside to feel justified. In today's foodservice environment, health messaging isn't about replacing indulgence; it's helping sell it.

Menu examples developed by Acxion Chef, Briana Hestad:

Micro-rita Flight

A flight of three mini margaritas! Bold in color, bright in flavor, and crafted with a functional twist.

The Pink
Tequila Reposado, passionfruit juice, dragon fruit syrup, coconut water

HYDRATION

The Gold
Mezcal, pineapple juice, turmeric, and peach syrup

ANTI-INFLAMMATORY

The Green
Tequila Blanco, fresh lime juice, and matcha syrup

CLEAN ENERGY

Raspberry Danish Protein Latte

A bakery-inspired latte layered with espresso, raspberry jam syrup, and oat milk, topped with a silky protein sweet cream cheese cold foam, and freeze-dried raspberry pieces.

PROTEIN

Blueberry Cheesecake Protein Roll

A warm gooey cinnamon roll swirled with blueberry compote, and finished with a protein-rich Greek yogurt and cheesecake cream, topped with crunchy oat crumble, and a dusting of freeze-dried blueberry powder.

FIBER

PROTEIN

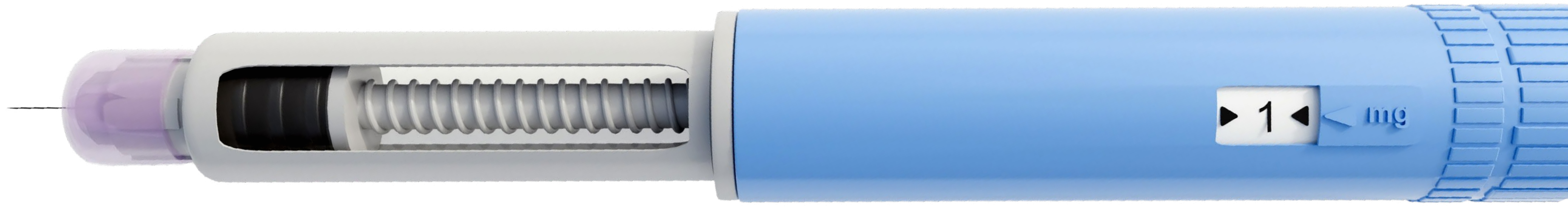
ANTIOXIDANT

Green Goddess Steakhouse Frites

Crispy fries topped with grilled steak, roasted tomatoes, and arugula, then finished with a creamy herb packed green goddess yogurt sauce drizzle and shaved parmesan.

PROTEIN

GLP-1 & intentional indulgence.



It's also important to consider how GLP-1 medications are reshaping how consumers indulge. **Users are shifting toward smaller portions, higher quality, and more intentional consumption.**

MASTER CHOCOLATIER SINCE 1845

As Lindt CEO Adalbert Lechner recently noted, **consumers using GLP-1 medications are still seeking indulgent foods, but in a more intentional way with small rewards that offer moments of bliss rather than mindless munching.[6]**

Lindt reported that U.S. sales of premium chocolate

increased nearly 17% among GLP-1 users in 2025,

compared to 6.5% growth among non-GLP-1 consumers.[6]

The spending data tells the same story:

1. GLP-1 users cut their total food spending by about 9% in the first year, but once they've settled into new eating habits, spending rebounds.[7]
2. The real sales impact comes from new users entering the adjustment phase, not total adoption.[7] As that influx stabilizes, so does the drag on food sales.
3. And because GLP-1 medications can extend life expectancy for obese users by anywhere from 6 to 14 years, the industry ultimately gains more years of customer spending than it loses—even in the hardest hit categories.[7]

A new nutrition framework has landed.

The New Pyramid

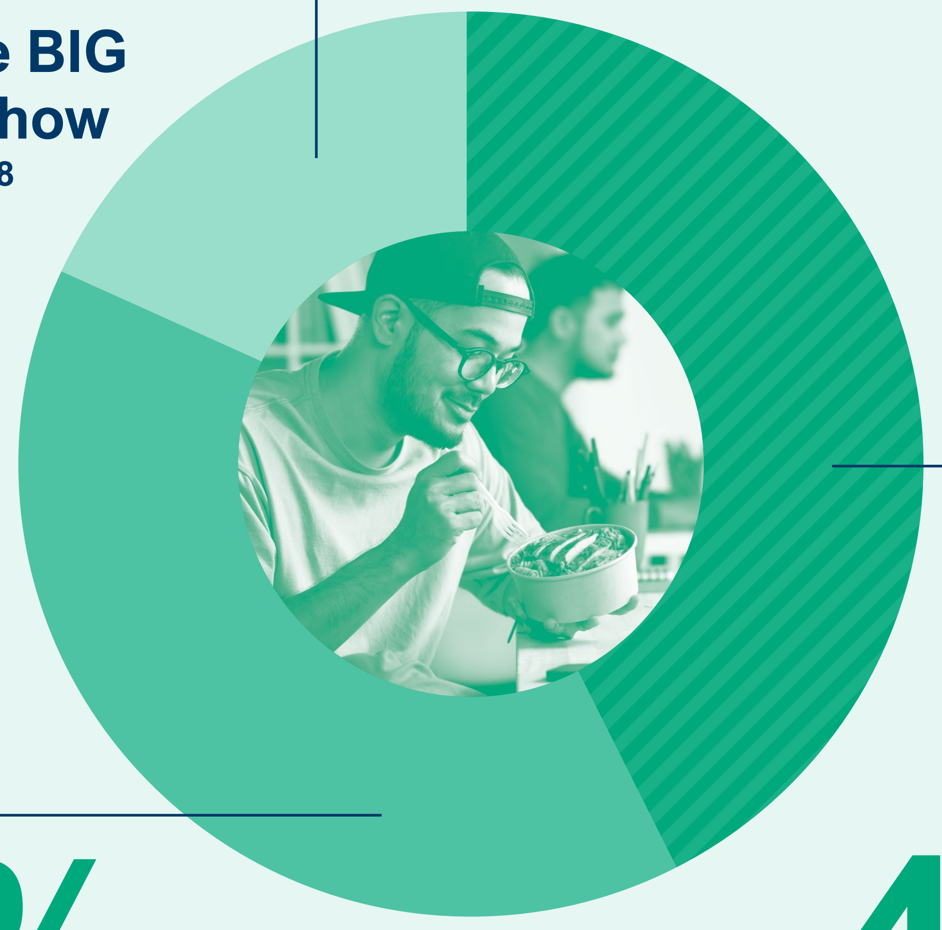
The shift toward positive nutrition is being reinforced by one of the most significant changes in U.S. nutrition guidance in decades.

The latest 2025–2030 U.S. Dietary Guidelines introduce what many analysts describe as an “inverted food pyramid.” **Rather than emphasizing grains as the foundation of a healthy diet, the updated model prioritizes whole, nutrient-dense foods and high-quality proteins.**[8]

They also emphasize reducing ultra-processed foods, refined carbohydrates, and artificial additives, signaling a broader shift toward real, minimally processed ingredients.[8]

CONSUMER RESPONSE

18% plan to make BIG changes to how they eat[8]



40% of consumers plan to make SOME changes to how they eat[8]

43% of consumers DON’T plan on making changes to how they eat[8]

04

Where Health is Actually Leading in Foodservice

Where better-for-you is gaining real traction.

Health-Forward Fast Causal

While indulgence continues to dominate many restaurant occasions, health is clearly shaping specific areas.

Health-oriented limited-service restaurants are among the fastest-growing segments in foodservice.[9]

In 2024, LSR salad and health-focused concepts grew units by 7.4% and sales by 22.2%, making them the fastest-growing segment in the Datassential 500.[9]

Leaders such as Sweetgreen, CAVA, and Playa Bowls all posted double-digit growth during the year.[9]

Newer concepts like Matter (New York, NY) take the model a step further, allowing guests to build meals around protein & fiber targets rather than restricting food categories altogether.

Where better-for-you is gaining real traction.

K–12

In K–12, health is a regulatory requirement. Updated USDA nutrition regulations took effect July 1, 2024, beginning a phased rollout of new standards.[10]

FOR EXAMPLE:

Starting in school year 2025–2026, schools had to meet
new product-based limits on added sugars.

By school year 2027–2028, schools must ensure that
added sugars account for less than 10% of weekly calories
in both breakfast and lunch programs.[10]

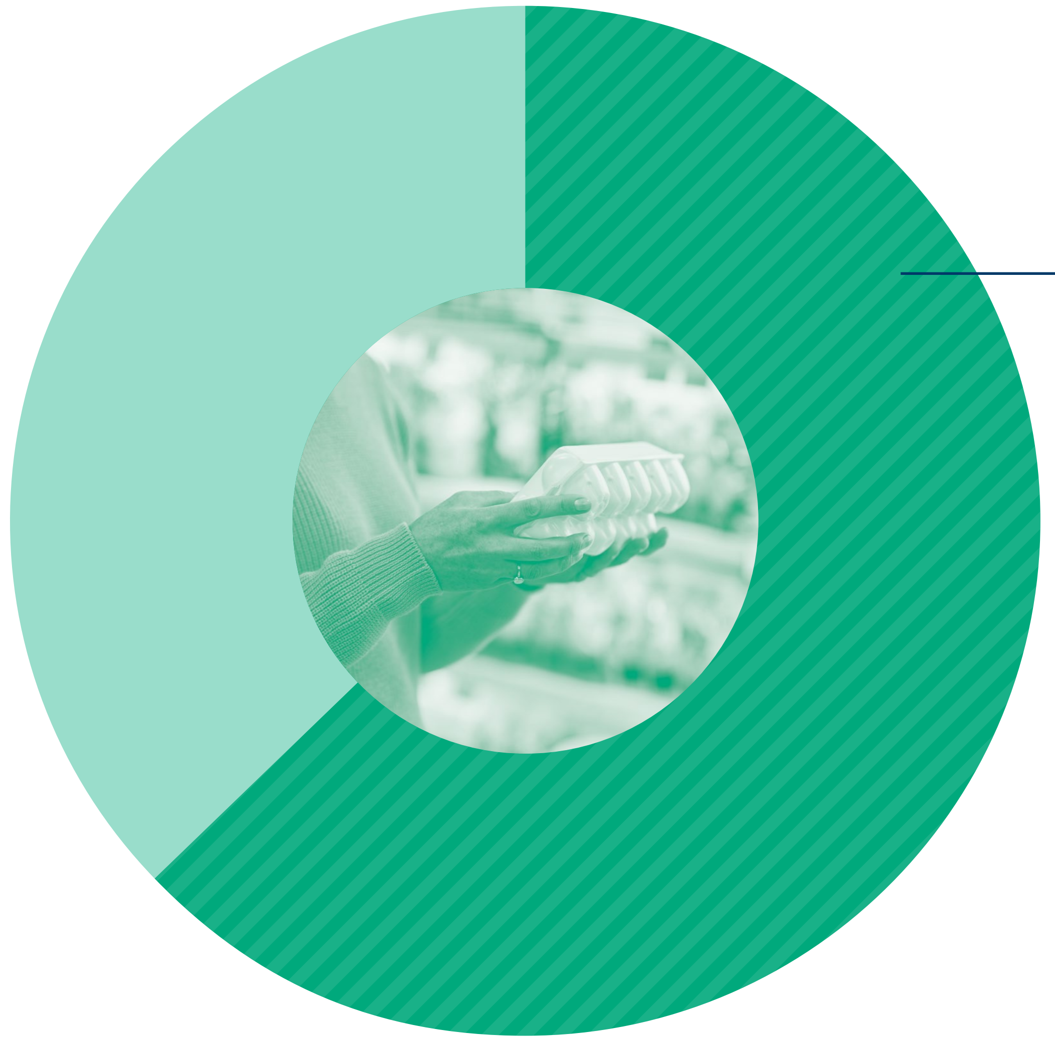
In 2027–2028 schools also must implement sodium reduction targets, requiring an approximate
15% reduction for lunch & 10% reduction for breakfast
from current levels.[10]

Where better-for-you is gaining real traction.

Convenience Stores

Historically, C-stores have been one of the most cravings-driven foodservice channels, built around roller-grill hot dogs, fried foods, and sugary beverages, ranking among segments with the lowest expectations for healthy options.[2]

That expectation is changing.

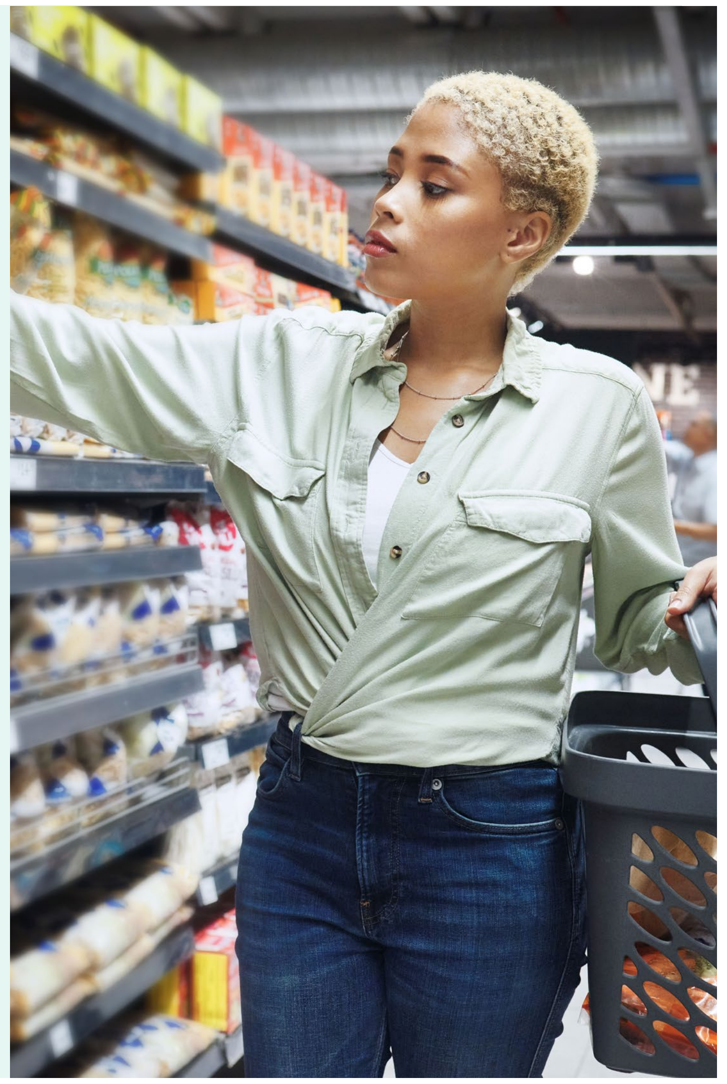


63%

say they are more likely to visit a C-store if healthy food options are available.[11]

C-store operators increasingly see better-for-you items as a competitive advantage,

helping them attract higher-income consumers and compete more directly with quick-service restaurants.[11]



05

What This Means for Operators & Suppliers

Experience-first dining still dominates.

Dining out remains fundamentally cravings-led. **Flavor, indulgence, and experience will continue to drive traffic and menu innovation.**

Implication

Winning brands will lead with craveability first, layering in quality ingredients and subtle nutrition signals that justify the choice.

Positive nutrition is the new health language.

Health messaging is shifting away from restriction and **toward nutrient density.**

Implication

Suppliers and operators should focus innovation on ingredients that add value to indulgent foods, delivering more nutrition per bite without sacrificing flavor.

Permissible indulgence is the sweet spot.

Consumers don't want to choose between indulgence and health. **They want indulgent foods that feel like smarter choices.**

Implication

Menus that combine craveable formats with cues like premium sourcing, protein content, clean ingredients, or functional benefits can win occasions that might otherwise default to eating at home.

Not every operator should play the same health game.

Health expectations vary by occasion and concept. **Routine dining occasions (like those served by health-forward fast casual) can lean into wellness.**

Implication
Successful operators will design menus around their core occasions and guests, rather than trying to bandwagon on every health trend.

06

About Acxion Foodservice

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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

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foodservice

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 AI 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 us save time, improve conversations, and create advantage 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.

[1] Technomic 2025 Health in Foodservice Multi Client Study
[2] Technomic Health: Perception vs. Reality June 2025
[3] Bank of America Institute, Taste test: Where consumers are dining out, February 2026
[4] B of A Global Research, Monthly restaurant spending: Spend growth up modestly m/m in February, March 2026
[5] Datassential 2026 Trends Report (October 2025)
[6] Reuters, Lindt says weight-loss drug users are eating more chocolate, not less, March 2026
[7] Capital One, Food & Restaurant Industry Outlook, February 2026
[8] Datassential 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines: The Consumer Perspective (February 2026)
[9] Datassential Top 500 Report (June 2025)
[10] USDA, Updates to the School Nutrition Standards, Updated February 2026
[11] Technomic Health in C-Stores November 2025