

Diners given more options as restaurants offer food cooked the way they want it

Food cooked to order the way the customer wants it is emerging as one of the key trends in Horizons' latest Menurama survey, which tracks new foods and dishes from the menus of high street pubs, restaurants, quick service outlets and hotels.

While steaks, burgers and sandwiches have generally been served prepared to order, other dishes such as pasta, salads, melts, Mexican dishes, and pizzas are now being offered with a greater element of choice.

'Increased customisation of dishes is something we are starting to see more of,' said Horizons' director of services Paul Backman. 'It is a great marketing tool and puts the customer in control of what they are eating. It costs operators very little in terms of time or additional food cost but could give them the edge over their competition.'

'The ultimate build-your-own cuisine is Mexican street food, which we have seen growing in popularity in the UK with Mexican-themed restaurants expanding fairly rapidly. Fajitas, burritos and wraps all give the customer greater choice, which is what today's consumer enjoys.'

Operators with build-your-own dishes on their menus include international pizza and pasta chain Vapiano, which sells freshly made pasta and pizza bases cooked in front of the customer with a choice of sauce or toppings, pub chain Varsity which offers a choice of ingredients to go into its Pho noodle soup, and Premier Inn which offers breakfast 'your way'.

The 'have it your way' label is becoming increasingly prolific on menus - whether it be sandwiches and melts at Hungry Horse in white or brown bread, wrap or baguette, or a sirloin steak at Las Iguanas with a choice of relish or toppings. Holiday Inn's menu offers a burger with a choice of toppings including: grilled back bacon and Taw Valley mature Cheddar; Somerset brie and cranberry sauce; and Wagstaff cured ham, fried egg and Lincolnshire Poacher cheese.

High street chains Subway, and Mexican brand Chilango, have built successful operations on the build-your-own concept. At Subway customers move along a line building their sandwich around a choice of meats, salad and sauces. While at Chilango diners choose from burrito, taco or salad with the meat of their choice and whichever salsa sauce they want.

'We are likely to see the 'build-your-own' concept used on menus much more as operators seek to offer consumers something different. It's a simple concept, and certainly not new, but it's a move away from prescribed dishes to offering consumers exactly what they want. It's all about giving them control and choice,' added Paul Backman.

Horizons' latest Menurama survey also revealed:

'Increasing premiumisation of dishes, particularly desserts. Examples include 'luxury chicken tikka masala' at Wetherspoon, 'luxury fruit bread' at Starbucks, and 'chocolate lover's delight' - a choice of three tasters at Beefeater.

'Growing popularity of sliders - plates of bite-sized portions for sharing such as mini-burgers, sausages on sticks, or salmon fishcakes.

'Innovative desserts such as 'lemon ice cream cake' at Sizzling Pubs, 'tuckshop ice cream cake' at Greene King, 'millionaires shortbread ice cream cake' at Little Chef, 'salted caramel cheesecake' at Browns, 'salted caramel and chocolate tart' at M&B metro professionals pubs, and 'salted pecan bar' at Starbucks.

The Menurama survey found that meal prices are slowly rising. Year-on-year an average adult non-meal deal dish price increased 1% from £6.23 to £6.33. Over the past six months the average cost of a starter rose by 2.4%, while main courses rose just 0.3%, and desserts were up 0.5%.

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Editor's Note

Horizons provides fresh insights into the foodservice market, based on longstanding involvement and knowledge about the market and its supply chain. The company provides facts and reports, guidance and learning, workshops and networking for operators, manufacturers, distributors and investors in the UK and across Europe.

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