

Abstract

What will we be eating tomorrow?

Future food trends and scenarios

Hanni Rützler and Wolfgang Reiter, futurefoodstudio, Vienna

Since the turn of the 21st century, the food and eating habits of so-called “affluent societies” have been undergoing radical and rapid changes and diversification as no era before. Now commonly referred to as food trends, they reflect the abundance-driven pursuits of individual well-being. The article describes the specific dynamics that food trends are in the process of developing, as well as which conditions are favourable towards the establishment of a new food culture. One among the many examples worth noting is the trend towards “snackification”, which is driven by changing standards of living and lifestyles. Other noteworthy trends such as “soft health” and “healthy hedonism” are also gaining a stronghold as they do not offer rigid sets of rules for what not to eat based on abstract nutritional values and calorie charts but instead use positive motivation like sensual enjoyment, taste, variety and quality.

Food trends provide orientation

The freedom to choose and take informed decisions combined with the large variety of available foods and culinary offerings facilitates a level of diversification that is increasingly transforming our eating habits and nutritional styles. Food trends make it possible for “each individual to navigate through the complex everyday world with the full range of freedom of choice and decision-making constraints”. To that end, they provide solutions for daily eating problems and produce responses tailored to ever-evolving needs and values: health-related, as well as ethical and environmental.

Food trends are dynamic

Food trends are not static phenomena per se. They continue to develop and grow; indeed, they diversify, become dynamic and stronger in combination with similar trends. A prime example is the evolution of “plant-based food”. The health megatrend and food trends such as “ethical food” and the vegetarian movement initially culminate in

veganism, which has not only fostered the development of new food products but also sparked a forceful counter-trend: the focus on quality meat. This has led to a hybrid development, namely the new “flexitarian” trend, which manages to unite these contradictory movements and to stimulate development on a higher level of complexity. Any food trend that attracts a substantial amount of followers and supporters and dovetails with other trends providing comparable answers to everyday problems and needs tends to dissolve as such and ends up in the mainstream. These trends then result in a new eating culture that is followed by a majority of consumers. Just such a trend development can be seen, for example, in the shift in our eating culture towards “snackification”. Food trends like “hand-held food”, “fast good”, “infinite food” and “the new breakfast” culminate in eating habits that differ sharply from our own, which are shaped by traditional patterns. Mini-meals are increasingly replacing the traditional “three squares”, a trend that can be observed in urban centres in particular.

Eating styles are the new lifestyles

Since the turn of the new millennium, there has been growing awareness not only of the health-related consequences of our food system but also of its environmental impact, as well as how to deal with abundance and farm animals. Consumers’ eating habits and buying patterns are being increasingly called into question while the production as well as consumption of meat in particular has become a focal point of debates. For all that, the consumption of meat in Europe is barely lower today than it was 15 years ago. But in the public mindset, at least, the turnaround is beginning to take shape, thanks to which our diet is no longer centred on meat. Other food trends in turn are overcoming the contradiction between health, fun and enjoyment as they forge new ways to an active and healthy lifestyle.

“Plant-based food” is where culinary taste interfaces with sustainable living. In future, this food trend will not be limited simply to vegan substitute products but will above all open up access to a new and incredibly diverse gustatory universe. Indeed, a new “culinary ecosystem” is also based on the actively supported revival of long-forgotten crops and a significant expansion of food resources being consumed.