

# Popular Proteins

Today's hottest protein trends offer big flavor and value

**A**s consumer demand changes, suppliers and operators working with proteins continue to develop new products and offerings. Today's hottest trends center on consumer taste preferences and value.

## FLAVOR

Bold flavors are one of the biggest trends in the protein market, says John Howeth, senior vice president of foodservice and egg product marketing for the **American Egg Board**.

"Flavor is the trend," Howeth says. "Consumers expect different flavor options, so they can choose their own or mix and match. They want flavor, and they want control. So they may want heat, but sweet heat or spicy heat and different levels of heat. Ethnic flavors and condiments are growing in popularity—think sriracha, wasabi, fish sauce, harissa, and more."

Justin Davis, senior manager of insights and strategy at **Tyson Food Service**, also believes that ethnic flavors are on the rise.

"[Quick serves] make their living off quick convenience and high flavor, and so you think of Taco Bell, or Burger King, or these [kinds of] players, and there is a lot of momentum around ethnic flavors, spice, and heat," he says.

"[Operators] are taking this approach with 'How do I premium-ize chicken so that it's not just a fillet, it's roasted chicken that's carved and has a layer of pesto, or it's Cajun or rosemary chicken?'" adds chef David Jetter, senior manager of food-service product training and culinary strategy for Tyson Food Service. "It is, to [Davis'] point, embedded into this ethnic driver of flavor on the chicken."

Pork is also seeing a surge in bold flavor



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pairings due to its representation in many global cuisines, says Stephen Gerike, director of foodservice marketing and innovation for the **National Pork Board**. For this reason, consumers enjoy authentic Asian and Latin dishes featuring the protein.

"Pork is such a neutral protein it can take on bold flavors," he says. "What is so cool about pork is that these bold flavors that are being applied are actually authentic to these global cuisines."

But big flavor is just as popular in seafood. Nashville Hot Chicken, a spicy chicken dish that has catapulted to national fame, is being adapted to grilled fish and shrimp dishes, says Jason Henderson, vice president of research and development at Captain D's.

But traditional fish flavors are also making a comeback.

"We're seeing a resurgence of classic seafood flavors like lemon pepper, old bay flavors, cod, and beer batter," Henderson

says. “Almost any beer that I enjoy is a standard offering [as batter].”

However, despite changing flavor profiles, traditional batter-dipped fish still reigns as Captain D’s most popular offering.

“In terms of what sells, our No. 1 item is our Alaska Pollock—that’s our batter-dipped fish,” Henderson says. “That’s been the No. 1 item probably for the history of the chain, and definitely since I’ve been on board. It’s our legacy item. It’s what we sell the most of.”

## CUTS AND VALUE

Chefs are also using various cuts and presentation techniques to increase the value of each offering, while focusing on environmental sustainability and flavor, Tyson’s Davis says.

“We’re seeing this idea of mouth-to-tail and using the entire part of the animal, so getting away from just chicken breast

**“We’re seeing more of an emphasis on value menus than we have in the past.”**

or away from just rib eyes ... but using all parts of the animal, all the different cuts. There’s a lot of momentum driven by ... the next generation of sustainability around reducing waste and using an entire part of the animal,” Davis says. “Then there’s a value part of it, because you have these underutilized parts of the animal that you can get probably at a value.”

He also points out that dark-meat chicken tends to be more flavorful than light meat.

“Whether a drumstick or thigh or what have you, [dark meat] is typically a higher-flavor piece; it adds a lot to a dish, whereas the chicken breast is kind of

bland, and you have to add a lot of flavors to it to make it interesting,” Davis says. “A lot of chefs doing these fast casual things are starting to venture out with this. We see a lot of chicken-thigh sandwiches or artisan fried chicken with drumsticks or other parts of the bird.”

Another big shift is in how operators are presenting that meat to customers in order to increase value.

“An operator can take what used to be a 3-ounce piece of chicken center of plate, and that can now be 2 ounces and put in a salad to increase margins,” Davis says. “Most growth within chicken that we’re seeing is when it’s used as an ingredient.”

“I can take that and spread it over a salad, distribute it within, and it’s more appealing because of flavor profiles, color, and textures, and it looks like I’m getting more for my money,” Jetter adds. “There are some chains that have been genius in the way they approach chicken sandwiches. ... They have taken meat and what was a 4-ounce fillet or 3.5 ounces, and they are carving the

meat, so now I don’t have to worry about the consistency of the slicing of that fillet or worry about the bun coverage. ... It’s being smarter about how you distribute your protein or use a protein in a non-traditional format.”

This focus on cost efficiency is also migrating into consumer value menus.

“Across the meat industry, increased supply of beef and other proteins has lowered the cost for these materials, so we’re seeing more of an emphasis on value menus than we have in the past,” says Wayne Wehking, vice president of sales and marketing for **Birchwood Foods**. “Also, lower prices allow for more differentiation among types of product. Consumers are driving this increased demand for product differentiation as well.”

Protein trends continue to shift, and as consumer preferences shift, suppliers continue to change offerings to meet the demand.

