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RESTAURANT CONSULTANTS ISSUE TOP TEN DINING TRENDS FOR 2006

NEW YORK, NY – International restaurant consultants Joseph Baum & Michael Whiteman Co. have forecast major new dining trends that will impact how Americans eat in the year ahead. Chocolate gets mass-market snob appeal; snacks muscle in on upscale restaurant menus; vinaigrettes are the new sauces; watermelon is the new tomato, fat is back, and others.

Joseph Baum & Michael Whiteman Co. creates high-profile restaurants around the world, including the late Windows on the World and the magical Rainbow Room, and for hotels, restaurant companies, major museums and other consumer destinations.

Their top ten trends for 2006:

#1. SMALL IS BIG: It doesn't matter whether restaurants are Greek or Chinese, Malaysian or Mexican, if they can downsize main courses or dress up snack food, they're doing the "tapas dance": Mini-sandwiches are in, along with shot glass flights of soups. Menus now have a new category called "Snacks." People will spend as much for a plate of three meatballs as for a bowl of meatballs and spaghetti because they don't have 90 minutes to chew over a traditional meal; because they're avoiding starchy food; because they're seeking lots of contrasting, intense flavors; because they think they're saving money. But: Small-plate menus get people to enjoy pricier wines-by-the-glass, and canny chefs will compose big-ticket degustation menus with hefty price tags. Even commercial bakeries are getting into the act with mini-muffins, mini-cupcakes and other downsized portions of sweets.

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#2. BITTER IS BETTER – CHOCOLATE’S GROWING CONNOISSEURS:

Forget Milk Duds. In a repeat of the wine and coffee experiences, people are clamoring for darker chocolate from exotic places. Consumers have a new vocabulary and want to know the cocoa content, where it comes from, whether it is estate grown – and they’re applying the notion of “terroir” to chocolate just as they do to pinot noir or their single-estate coffee. Look for: restaurants pairing specific chocolates with specialty cocktails; cheese-chocolate-port menus; exotic (and erotic) flavor combinations already hot on the retail level to appear in restaurants – chili-spiked chocolate, chocolate covered corn, balsamic vinegar chocolate; look for chocolate place-names on menus, and promotional chocolate tastings. Manufacturers are promoting dark chocolate as a hedonistic way to lower your LDLs and prevent arterial plaque (never mind the calories). Mars is opening a chain of chocolate lounges where they’re selling a Starbucks-like experience. Next: Super-premium *hot* chocolates in exotic flavor variations.

#3. A TREND FOR THE LITTLE GUY: As tastes become more sophisticated, niche players are opening small cafes specializing in chocolate, coffee and red wine – all three having a commonality of bitterness. Since bread has made a roaring comeback from last year’s anti-carb onslaught, top-drawer sandwiches play an increasing role in these cafés – so a new category of eating-and-drinking place is emerging. The concept is too narrow for big chain operators but the chocolate-coffee-alcohol snacking business could be big for the little guy.

#4. BATTLE OF THE BRANDS: Fast food chains lust after Starbucks’ morning coffee crowd. Starbucks’ want a piece of McDonald’s lunch. Dunkin Donuts wants a bite of both. Burger King’s launched high-octane BK Joe, brewed by the cup, McDonald’s is testing espresso and cappuccino; other fast-feeders will follow. Starbucks risks slowing service by test-selling three variants of Egg McMuffin at more-or-less McDonald’s price points. Dunkin Donuts, no doubt alarmed by Krispy Kreme’s short-lived boomlet, shifts from its blue-collar base by hiring a respected New England restaurateur to experiment with hot sandwiches, including various panini. No sightings yet of sofas stained with donut drippings, but: In England, McDonald’s tests coffee lounges with sofas and armchairs; in Scottsdale, McD has upholstered booths while others are toying with fireplaces. Hoping to grab everyone’s breakfast, Panera

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Bread's added fancy bagels and quiche-like soufflés, while on the macho end Carl's Jr. 830-calorie breakfast burger is topped with a fried egg, hash brown nuggets, bacon & cheese. Sounds remote, but two pizza chains have launched versions of breakfast pizzas.

#5. FAT IS BACK: Boutique and co-op brand breeders are putting the fat back in pork chops, charging more, and restaurant-goers are loving it. Avian flu aside, Kentucky Fried Chicken's tonnage of greasy breaded bird parts has taken flight around the world. Burger chains are straining to see who can cram the most calories onto a bun. Even "healthier" salads at fast food outlets come most often with fatty dressings and fried add-ons. Kobe-style beef, increasingly featured on upscale menus, is shot through with artery-clogging white stuff. Cheese trolleys proliferate – especially with top-notch American products. It's too soon to predict the return of pate, but behind is this is American's backlash at being whipsawed by complex and contradictory health messages for the last decade. We've gained so much weight that what once was seen a "plump" is now visually considered "normal."

#6. HEALTH – LET'S HAVE A OTHER ROUND: Remember those quaint 1990s heart-healthy symbols on menus? Growing claims and disclaimers will soon have menus resembling election year ballots. Allergy activists will push **gluten-free** symbols onto menus in 2006, along with more warnings about **nuts**, raw shellfish or undercooked poultry. **Salt** will top nutritionist's hit lists in 2006. On the positive side, **omega-3 fatty acids** will be added to more manufactured foods and that'll prompt menu labels, too. Supermarkets in England are toying with **color-coding food** according to good-for-you-ness (sounds like our Homeland Security's alert system); imagine what *that* might do to menus. Smart chefs will co-opt the role of nutritionists and dieticians. Meanwhile, so many **nutritionally enhanced beverages** are flooding the market that restaurants may soon need soft drink sommeliers.

#7. TWO THAT WON'T HAPPEN -- AGAIN: For the fifth year running, Indian cuisine will not sweep across the country despite food pundits' predictions. As for Spain, wait till next year.

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#8. DEMOCRATIZATION OF LUXURY: Economic uncertainty be damned – consumers are demanding their indulgences. Look for more accessibly-priced premium “enjoyment foods” on menus. These include extra courses of appetizers, cheeses or desserts; flights of mini food-and-wine pairings; specialty salts; microgreens; supplemental upcharges (for branded beef, pork (such as Korobuta, Niman Ranch) and poultry; line caught fish; wild salmon; boutique coffee and pedigree teas in plunger pots). “House-Made” means premium pricing for breads, flavored popcorn and potato chips, and cured fish and *salumi*. With the embargo on Caspian caviar, look for lots more restaurants featuring affordable American fish eggs. And upscale ice cream chains are scooping business away from traditional dip-shops.

#9. TWO COUNTER-TRENDS:

(#1) **“Fallen Architecture”** -- Many mass-market restaurateurs see: simplicity as a driving force in 2006, with food sitting flat on the plate without much in the way of frivolities and embellishments; declining interest in the weird combinations (except at the very upper level); childhood favorites strong, especially “nostalgia” desserts like tapioca pudding (who’d a thunk?); and more consumer choices -- as in the old diner days when a protein came with *your* two choices of starch and vegetable. Stated another way, the chef cedes control of meal to the customer.

(#2) **“Molecular Gastronomy”** -- On the other hand, a growing number of chefs are dazzling palates by rearranging molecules – converting cantaloupe into caviar, serving shrimp cocktail vapors, beguiling you with free-dried foie gras shavings. It’s Harry Potter meets ET! A chef in Boston analyses food with an infrared spectrometer nuclear magnetic resonance normally used by physicists. Liquid hydrogen vats are migrating from dermatologists’ offices to restaurant kitchens so hot things can be encased in cold shells. And you’d be amazed at what they’re doing with seaweed. It’s gone this far: New York chef David Burke is selling flavors in spray cans for home use, so now you can spritz chocolate flavor onto fresh fruit or goose up your pizza with tomato-basil spray. Just wait until sassy customers brings these cans into Burke’s own restaurant!

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10. BUZZWORDS FOR 2006: **Figs** are the fruit-of-the-year because they pair well with smoked meats, salty cheeses and salads as well as desserts; copycats are putting them on pizza and in panini. **Wacky ice cream appetizers** – yuzu ice cream with sushi, wild mushroom ice cream with foie gras, parmesan ice cream on grilled radicchio. **Bison**, in large supply, appeals to steak-o-philes for its healthy connotation. **Watermelon** is the new tomato in salads and even cooked dishes. **Seaweed** is going into salads, wrapping fish and flavoring pasta. Balsamic is last year: ferociously priced and impossible to find exotic **vinegars** are flavoring salads and sauces in upscale restaurants. Up-and-coming superfruits: **pomegranates, mangosteens, black sapote** (also called chocolate pudding fruit). **Specialty salts**, from out-of-the-way places (Kashmir, Peru, Bali) or blended with spices or herbs, will pop up on menus and food stores. Complex **vinaigrettes** that enlighten the palate are replacing sauces – composed of rare vinegars, tropical fruits and syrups and Asian spices, impossible to duplicate at home. We're betting on **newfangled guacamoles** made with everything but (or including) avocado. **Dishes for two or more, or for the entire table:** Huge roasts, big chunks of cheap cuts of meat braised and served tableside. Wines from the **Rueda** region of Spain and from **Slovenia**. Finally, with the government trying to water down the criteria for **organic food**, look for new words emerging to describe "uncontaminated" products.

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