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**RESTAURANT CONSULTANTS PREDICT  
TOP 11 DINING TRENDS FOR 2008**

Restaurant consultants Joseph Baum & Michael Whiteman Co. have forecast eleven major dining trends that impact how Americans will eat in the year ahead.

Baum & Whiteman Co. creates high-profile restaurants around the world for hotels, restaurant companies, major museums and other consumer destinations. Their projects include the late Windows on the World, the Rainbow Room, the world's first food courts, and five three-star restaurants in New York.

**Their predictions and buzzwords for the year ahead:**

**#1. SPEED TRUMPS EVERYTHING:** Say hello to The Portable Generation. No one has patience anymore; in-and-out is being replaced by not even in. Millions of people will be ordering food to go via their cellphones. A harbinger: A flock of fast feeders are taking text-message orders that are paid for via the same web-enabled devices, promising the have orders ready when you arrive. About a third of cellphone orders already come from people in their cars.

Table service restaurants and supermarkets are getting into the act, packing up your orders and delivering them to you curbside – so you can show up looking like a slob. And if you're sitting down, restaurants want you out faster, so they'll be swiping your credit card tableside and you'll get your bill just the way you do at Hertz or Avis – while waiters watch how you calculate their tips.

Dining with colleagues at your desks? -- about 50% of office workers do this every day! A web-based startup will take everyone's meal choices from their individual computers, consolidate them and shoot a single order to a restaurant that you collectively select, along with pre-payment. No more frantic secretaries juggling which sandwich gets the mayo and which the horseradish.

**#2. EXPLOITING THE NICHEs:**

We call them “slivers” – food outlets with highly focused menus that explore interesting niches in the market (the explosion of coffee bars is a recent example). Hotels with dull lobbies should especially take note of this!

We're seeing ceviche bars that specialize in the raw seafood dishes of Peru. Steakhouses are sprouting charcuterie bars. Chocolaterias all over the country are pushing hot chocolate spiked with chiles and pink peppercorns, chocolate coated corn and parmesan cheese, chocolate martinis with glasses rimmed in hot fudge – all of them betting that the publicity about bitter chocolate being good for your health (damn the fat and calories) will keep customers coming.

Then there's the cupcake phenomenon, proving that people will line up for mediocre food if there's enough press support. In Colorado, a two-unit company specializing in variations of melted cheese sandwiches is trying to colonize the rest of America. In New York, a couple of players hope to make it big serving nothing the macaroni and cheese.

There's a mozzarella bar in California, mimicking an idea that's hot in Rome. Falafel joints in the US, Holland and Australia are trying to sell franchises. Several outfits selling breakfast cereals appear to be thriving, especially in college towns. Rice pudding shops just won't go away.

We're watching new kebab/yakitori/satay specialists, leading us to believe there's a live-fire wave coming.

Finally, a couple of Korean upstarts (and now lots of imitators) have taken frozen yogurt back to its roots -- as an acidic treat rather than something sweetly masquerading as ice cream. They're boasting of no additives, nothing artificial and no high-fructose corn syrup. It began in California but has spread so quickly that the big frozen yogurt chains are changing their merchandising.

**#3. GASTRO-BARTENDERS:** The folks concocting drinks at your favorite bar have gotten titular promotions: They've been elevated to "mixologists" as they search for ever more enticing ways of getting you looped. This coming year, they'll be especially concerned about your health, of all things. Trendy bars, restaurants and clubs will formulate cocktails from organic fruit juices, vegetable purées, and vitamin-filled sports drinks instead of gooey syrups on the dubious premise that if you're drinking anyway, you may as well also get your antioxidants.

Cocktails are being "enhanced" with herbs like rosemary, basil and lavender, and bartenders are playing with bergamot oil (think Earl Grey tea) and even saffron.

Superfruits – pomegranate, acai, goji berries – that last year were hot in health food stores are now so mainstream that they're appearing in alcoholic cocktails.

Bartenders also are creating desserts, in tandem with pastry chefs, so you'll be able to eat your cocktail.

Some loopy scientists have discovered that adding alcohol to strawberries and blackberries increases their antioxidant capacity. So watch for them, and other highly colored elixirs (like watermelon juice) to subliminally lure customers into thinking that the latest Cosmo variation is good for their health.

Of course, all this nonsense may encourage more drinking, but none of it addresses tomorrow's hangover.

**#4. NUTRITIONAL SCORING:** With health and diet concerns at the top of every consumer trend lists, watch for a flock of competing and overlapping systems for rating the good-for-you-ness of food products. There's a 1-100 scoring system coming from the Yale Prevention Research Center that deals with both good and bad stuff; another system being pushed by food manufacturers that somehow seems less disinterested; plus individual companies are emblazoning their own packages with arbitrary names that have little or no comparative meaning. Once again, consumers will get confused because the government won't do the work. But all these claims will put pressure on restaurant and hotel businesses – consumer will start asking why, if they can get scoring systems in supermarkets, they can't get any information on menus.

**#5 INNARDS AND ODD PARTS:** Consumers have discovered that their wonderful steaks and chops come from animals that have heads and tails as well ... and now there's a growing fascination with the odd parts that people used to reject. In part this stems from TV hoopla of "extreme eating" shows, but it also indicates that people are increasingly willing to eat food that comes far away from their zip codes. You can see this across the US as more and more people shop in ethnic markets.

We seeing tails, shanks, flaps, bellies and cheeks cropping up on middlebrow menus. Ravioli and cabbage leaves are being stuffed with all sort of unmentionable parts of animals. Increasing numbers of people are flocking to "testicle festivals" held in otherwise obscure hamlets, all in search of gastronomic thrills. Is tongue the next lamb shank?

**#6. THIS TREND MAY GO NOWHERE -- DESSERT RESTAURANTS OPENED BY PASTRY CHEFS:** Celebrity dessert chefs, no longer content to see their names just at the bottoms of some menus, are opening their own restaurants – largely, but not entirely, featuring pastry. They're popping up in New York, California, Japan, the UK, Barcelona, and as far away as Singapore. The trouble is: These chefs are straining for show-off dishes that leave typical restaurant-goers scratching their heads. Foie gras with bitter chocolate?; peanut butter and pears ?; mackerel with avocado, watermelon, black olives?; smoked trout caviar with rosemary biscuit and corn-crème fraiche ice cream?; pink peppercorn ice cream in red wine sauce?. Call us old fogies, but we don't think these will fly very far.

**#7. WACKY ICE CREAMS:** Maybe this one has more legs than the bizarre stuff above ... for oddball ice creams are showing up in unlikely combinations, some of them rather intriguing. Tuna tartare with wasabi ice cream almost makes sense. Cantaloupe sorbet with lavender-cured pork also might in the hands of a genius chef. Foie gras terrine with foie gras ice cream probably shouldn't be attempted outside a laboratory, but sweet corn ice cream with a grilled chocolate sandwich starts to sound yummy – even if it never makes the Baskin-Robbins hit parade. There's valid history behind these ice creams, since Italians have been consuming parmesan ice cream for ages, and no one laughed when Escoffier dabbled with asparagus ice cream.

Here's one to take seriously if you're near a Mexican enclave: *Paletas* are Mexican ice pops in such awesome flavors as mango-and-chile, sweet corn, strawberry-rice, and spicy cucumber-mango-jicama-orange – usually with chunks for fruit and spaces; ole, we say!

**#8. GASTRONOMY FOR CHILDREN:** Food for children is the next gastronomic frontier. There's a raft of cookbooks for young people, including *Kids Cook 1-2-3*, a big

hit in the US, England and Germany, whose author, Rozanne Gold, coined the term “gastro-pups.”

Also very hot: Kids cooking classes are erupting in restaurants and hotels across the country as chefs seek out ways to connect to entire families – and to fill their restaurants during off-hours.

At the same time, parents are rebelling against so-called kids menus – the ones with fried chicken fingers, greasy fish sticks, and gummy spaghetti. Because more and more kids are joining parents at restaurant dining tables, they – and their parents – want real food. That means child-size portions of regular menu items.

Other startups are franchising cooking academies for young people, and websites are devoted to kids and their food. There’s a store in New York selling only kids’ food, and an interesting new venture is selling pre-packed breakfasts, sandwiches and snacks to parents who only have time to shove ready-made components into a lunch bag. Several supermarket chains are selling kid-oriented dinners-in-a-bag as part of their prepared foods offerings.

Watch as beverage companies they try selling their “enhanced” high-priced waters to your children. Crayola – along with a clutch of cartoon characters -- has licensed its name for flashy-colored vitamin waters; Honest Tea is pushing pouches of fruit-flavored teas (called Honest Kids) for children; and some companies are packing waters in bottles that can be reused as toys, doing everything possible to make simple tap water appear uncool.

**#9. HAMBURGERS GO OVER THE TOP:** They’re becoming fancy and fanciful – and therefore very exciting – transforming a mundane, generic item into a luxury special. It began, probably, with Daniel Boulud’s extravaganza burger with braised short ribs and foie gras. Jars and bottles are now out: Chefs are pickling their own vegetables, making their own sauces, grinding their known meat. Lamb is a strong alternate to beef, and there are suckling pig burgers mixed with chorizo. Chefs are making fanciful combinations of chuck and short ribs, brisket and flap meat, all adding succulence.

And there are more Kobe beef burgers sold today than there are Kobe cattle. We’ve even seen this combination platter: Kobeburger, fries ... and a foie gras milk shake! Who eats these things? High-rollers in gambling joints, guests in luxury hotels, and Wall Streeters impressing their buddies.

But the concept is trickling down. Wendy’s made the newspapers with its Baconator Burger, McDonald’s joined the fray with its 13-pounder, and Hardee’s plopped a Philadelphia Cheese Steak atop its hamburger. Several build-your-own-burger chains are expanding, one claiming 300,000 possible variations, including one with bacon, cheese, a slice of pineapple topped with a fried egg ... don’t ask!

**#10. SMALL IS STILL BIG, BUT FOR HOW LONG?** The small plates phenomenon keeps on rolling – especially mini-desserts -- but tapas-style restaurants in a handful of cities have to reverted to conventional menus as customers discover they’re actually spending more and often getting less. Look for more menus trying to have it both ways -- with small- and large-size portions.

**#11. ETHICAL EATING AND GETTING THE JUNK OUT OF FOOD:** The British government formally linked artificial colors and preservatives to hyperactivity in

children this past September. Now food manufacturers and retailers in the UK and Europe are purging their products of everything that sounds like chemicals. Inevitably, we this will spill over to US retailers who will trumpet “junk-free” food.

As consumers here rebel against the “unnatural”, fast food and casual dining chains will be pressed to reformulate what they’re serving and what they say about it. Meanwhile fancier restaurants will increase talking the talk about buying locally-produced products, humane slaughter of cattle, sourcing fair trade coffee and chocolate, serving whole grains, reducing their energy footprints – all with higher menu prices.

So here’s the irony: As food companies scour the world for “natural” preservatives and flavor enhancers, avant-garde chefs who worship in the Temple of Molecular Gastronomy are adding more and more chemicals to their bizarre creations, hoping to teach old food new tricks.

And: There’s a potential backlash against bottled water, whose plastic containers clog our landfills and often are shipped half-way around the world for no particular reason. Watch for increasing numbers of restaurants to scrap bottled water and begin charging for filtering their local water.

### **BUZZWORDS FOR 2008:**

- “Gastro-travel” – more and more families are organizing vacations around food experiences. And they’re booking hotels based on what experiences are on offer – tours of local markets, cooking classes, interaction with local residents, chances to learn about history and geography.
- Outrageously expensive look-at-me desserts and cocktails, \$100 and up.
- US government pushes for lower salt in prepared foods, meanwhile OKs pumping chickens full of salt water. Big attack on high-fructose corn syrup.
- The battle for breakfast widens. Two years ago we predicted the war for breakfast as fast food chains geared up to steal Starbuck’s’ customers. Now big hotel companies are joining the fight, featuring extravaganza early-morning buffets. Their reasoning: It is the meal that most guests eat at a hotel, so that’s the best time to impress them. Eat enough and call it lunch.
- Pressure on restaurant chains to buy more “ethically”.
- Shochu – a lower alcohol vodka-like beverage, currently outsells *sake* in Japan and is gaining a big following here; new “superfruits” being discovered around the world, appearing as additives in beverages and desserts (and soaps and cosmetics); sparkling gin, vodka and rum for people too lazy to open separate bottles.
- Rose wines from around the world.
- Poached eggs appearing on more and more dishes – salads, Asian noodles, steaks and burgers.
- Korean food – we’re just starting to get comfortable with this cuisine.

- Latino food is on a roll – bolder flavors and brighter colors closer to home will begin to edge out Med-Rim. Look for increasing emphasis on cuisines from specific regions.
- Parti-colored cauliflower and carrots.

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**They also run trend seminars for large hotel and restaurant companies.**