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## CONSULTANTS PREDICT 13 TOP RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOOD TRENDS FOR 2009

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Their predictions follow ...

## DUST OFF THOSE MEATLOAF RECIPES. TOUGH TIMES ARE HERE.

**The global economic meltdown is forcing profound changes in the hotel and restaurant world. Costly frills are out. Wanton indulgence is now bad manners. Here are 13 major trends plus a flock of buzzwords to look for in the year ahead.**

**1) THE BISTROS ARE COMING, THE BISTROS ARE COMING!** Restaurants, especially hotel restaurants, are lagging economic indicators: They take so long to design and build that a turn in the business cycle catches them flatfooted.

Because they're lagging indicators, whenever you see first courses costing more than last year's main courses; whenever you see waiters dressed in name-brand clothing that you can't afford; whenever restaurant designers are featured in consumer magazines; and whenever you see corks popping on triple-digit wines like there's no tomorrow – that's when you know tomorrow has arrived.

So all those new restaurants that recently were hell-bent for opulence and dripping with luxury will now be part of the cyclical “bistro-ization of America.” And if not bistros, look for “osterias”, which are the Italian equivalent.

**2) ON THE HOTEL END**, there had been a single-minded focus on luxury targeted at expense-account types who, more and more, are getting pink slips instead of bonuses. What's more, high-margin business banquets and private parties are being cancelled (stockholders are hissing mad at corporations spending \$500 a head for lavish dinners), making big dents in hotels' food and beverage profits. So the days of foie gras and truffles are over for the foreseeable future and culinary ambitions are tumbling. As menus are downscaled, and dining rooms "bistro-ized", one wonders how consumers will react to eating coq au vin and mashed potatoes in inappropriately extravagant and glitzy dining rooms. Look for clever disguises covering over last year's excessive opulence.

**3) ALSO ON THE HOTEL END**, a very large question: Will those Big Deal Hotel Restaurants Carrying the Names of Absentee Star Chefs become economic albatrosses, or will they indeed prove to have stable drawing power? We look for fewer hotels turning their restaurants over to star chefs. The cost of building these things often outstrips potential profits, and when times get tight, hotels can do without. Besides, we're running out of star chefs.

**4) ITS "COMFORT FOOD" TIME AGAIN** as people attempt to escape the ravages of the Dow. Exotic seafood topped with micro-greens and frou-frou is out of bounds in the face of 401(k) deprivation, so the old standbys are coming back. But, as with men's ties, not in quite the same way. Yes, **MACARONI-AND-CHEESE** ... but also certain Asian pasta dishes (such as **PAD THAI** and sesame noodles) for their equivalent creaminess without the palate fatigue; and **RIGATONI CARBONARA** for the same reason. **SPAGHETTI AND MEATBALLS** will make a roaring comeback ... but with creative meatballs.

**5)** Chicken soup loyalists will have more than noodles and matzo balls to choose from, as comforting **ASIAN NOODLES IN BROTH** edge onto menus (look for *pho* from Viet Nam, *ramen* from Japan, and *laksa* (from all over Southeast Asia).

**6)** We'd be surprised if **TURKEY LEGS** don't pop up on menus around the country, as well as lots of **BRAISED AND FRIED CHICKEN** – this time in various ethnic flavorings, particularly from twice-fried Korean chicken chains that are growing in popularity wherever you find concentrations of Korean expats. Also on the comfort food front, watch for **THE MASHED POTATO VARIATIONS** – combined with creamy and pungent cheeses, for example, or with multiple winter vegetables: potatoes and pureed cauliflower, potatoes and parsnips with a bit of bacon, potatoes with butternut squash and ginger ... all the right *creative* comfort flavors and textures to dress up a homey meatloaf.

**7) BREAKFAST** at any time of day will become the new comfort food. Grits, waffles or steak and eggs for lunch and dinner.

**8) EATING LOWER ON THE HOG – OFFAL IS EXCELLENT:** Last year we predicted a great upswing in **innards and odd parts**, and this year we'll see even more. Guanciale (pigs' cheeks), pigs' feet, tripe, lardo (cured pork fat), artisan salami, beef cheeks, tongue, neck meat, oxtails ... and chicken livers taking the place of costly foie gras.

**9) TINKERING WITH THE MENU:** Casual dining chains are confronting their worst fear – that customers, pummeled by the meltdown of their pensions, will no longer drive an extra mile for the same mozzarella sticks they can get just down the road. These chains – whether Applebee's or beleaguered Bennigan's or TGIFriday's and their look-alikes – have rushed back to their test kitchens seeking ways to distinguish their food from the pack of copycat competitors. The danger these giant companies face is that they may all – as they've repeatedly done in the past – come up with similar solutions. The upside, if they really can distinguish themselves, is better choice at better prices for the consumer.

**10) LUXURY RESTAURANTS** that got away with \$75-and-up price-fixed dinners will be *unbundling their menus*, allowing cash-strapped patrons to control their checks by ordering a la carte. A la carte restaurants will add lowball price-fixed dinners to their menus, hoping to attract people by offering bargains. You'll see more and more

placemats, and costly tablecloths will disappear as owners cut costs; linen placemats will give way to paper ones, and many restaurants will actually serve meals on bare tables. Watch for overpriced wines and cocktails to start slumping, too; those \$12-\$15 drinks are still profitable at \$9.

**11) EVEN BETTER FOR CONSUMERS:** Smug owners who've treated customers as supplicants will turn ultra-friendly -- "Yes, sir, you certainly can share that main course." Many Americans will suddenly find tables available during normal dinner hours rather than a 6:00 or 9:30. Hotels in particular, will need radical staff retraining.

**12)** Look for an **UPSURGE IN SMALL PLATES** offerings as operators seek to add lower price points to their offerings. **HAPPY HOURS** will become relative bargains as hotels and restaurants hope customers will order lots of small plates instead of dinner – but those prices will have to fall, too (five bucks for two deviled eggs might not cut the mustard).

**13) UNDERGROUND RESTAURANTS:** There'll be big growth in "black market" restaurants this year ... one-night-only unlicensed dinner ventures staged by skilled home cooks (and occasional professionals) in warehouses, garages, cellars, vacant nightclubs and personal dining rooms. \_With ambitious menus, these dinners are by invitation only ... word spreads via blogs, text messages, notices on Craigslist. Prices vary from pretty expensive to pay-what-you-like, menus offer no choices, and often it's BYOB – giving guests great reasons to uncork their treasured Burgundies.

"Gastronomic speakeasies" are mushrooming because: they offer a sense of adventure ... sort of like slinking out to buy some cocaine; people are seeking alternatives to standard restaurant experiences; in some cases guests help prepare the meal; they get to meet like-minded foodies in unconventional surroundings; and they're "sticking it to the man" by patronizing entrepreneurs who have no health department license, pay no taxes, insurance or social security to the cooks and waiters that these promoters hire for the event.

**BUZZWORDS FOR 2009:** **Maple syrup** – in vinaigrettes, in sauces, as glazes on savory food. **Brussels sprouts**. **Mozzarella bars** – there’s one in LA, one in New York, and a San Antonio pizzeria recently opened a “burrata bar, so expect more restaurants promoting hand-pulled mozzarella in various forms. **Shisito peppers** and **pimientos al padron** – thumb-size peppers from Japan and Spain that vary randomly from hot to sweet, showing up as blister-fried bar snacks and atop grilled meats. With more and better types of **mangos** are entering the country, they’ve become the sweet fruit of choice. **Porchetta**. House-made **pickled vegetables** are enlivening the palate, especially when served with fatty foods such as charcuterie. House-made **charcuterie** is taking off as chefs demonstrate their artisan talents. **Osterias**. **Spray cans** of olive oil and balsamic vinegar for interactive customer experiences. **Stevia**. **Ultra-slow cooking**, either in pouches (sous vide) or in ovens (four-hour chicken at 250°) that yields less shrinkage so that portions look larger, more succulent, and easier control in restaurant kitchens – so long as no one gets poisoned. **Duck Eggs**. **Breakfast** all day long. **Nutella**. **Old fashioned Dutch gin** with lots more flavor impact. Comfort food like **baked beans** in gourmet concoctions, and **peanut butter**. More drinking places calling themselves **gastropubs**. **Korean** food (tamed for western palates) as **kimchee** goes multi-culti; **Peruvian** cuisine, as we predicted last year, will make big strides; and other Andean countries’ foods will emerge this year. **Basque** and **Catalonian** cookery, as people explore the flavors of northern Spain beyond their local tapas bars. **Salt** will be the new trans-fat and there’ll be attacks on bottled beverages, especially **energy drinks**. **Superfruit** flavors and extracts added to gins and vodkas. **Chickpeas** are the vegetable of the year.

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

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