

Beef Is Taking A Back Burner To Chicken

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Beef, may not be “what’s for dinner.” After the recent report of mad cow disease in California, combined with the bad press that is already looming over the beef industry from “pink slime”, the beloved chicken might be making a resurgence on the foodservice scene, according to latest research from Mintel.

“In addition to the recent health-related issues surrounding beef, and the already high beef prices, we expect restaurants to start focusing their attention on other proteins,” says Kathy Hayden, foodservice analyst at Mintel. “Steakhouses have been struggling in this rough economy and have tried to compensate by offering smaller cuts or more ‘surf and turf’ options, but ultimately, chicken menu innovation is giving restaurant-goers a fresh and less expensive option while dining out.”

New data from Mintel Menu Insights shows the number of US menu items with poultry as an ingredient has climbed an average of 12% in the past three years and is expected to continue to increase in the next one to two years. The greatest growth has come from the casual dining segment followed by fast casual eateries.

Chicken fingers are the top poultry dish and have shown a 10% increase on menus from Q1 2009 to Q1 2012, dominating QSR and family/midscale settings, due in large part to children’s menus and appetizer lists. Buffalo wings continue to fly high in menu mentions, with a 19% increase in the same time frame. Where chicken sandwiches show a steep decline (-36%), chicken wraps are picking up the slack by increasing their menu mentions by 35%. Pizza is also jumping on the chicken bandwagon, with a 26% increase of chicken as a pizza topping.

The new trend of chicken snacks is also taking menus by storm. From McDonald’s Chicken McBites to Whataburger’s new Whatachicken Bites and White Castle’s Chicken Rings; snack-sized, dip-friendly chicken is a new part of the QSR roster. With so much competition, better quality (full-pieced, white-meat) chicken and distinct sauces are emerging as the ways to set one brand apart from the next.

“Chicken is a versatile ingredient,” concludes Kathy Hayden. “In the future, you can expect to see it used in more ways, from pulled chicken sandwiches and bowls to more home-styled meals, like pot pies and stews.”

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