



Menu trends main focus at NRA show

By [Valerie Killifer](#) Editor
24 May 2007

It was standing room only Monday during an education session given by Nancy Kruse, president of The Kruse Co. Kruse's session "On the Menu: What's Hot, What's Not and What's Next" focused on seven major menu trends: flavorful foods; ethnic adventures; healthy perceptions; contemporary comfort; convenient options; affordable indulgence; and culinary fingerprints. Kruse said the trends were tracked based on the top 200 restaurant chains. She also analyzed trends based on seven menu hot spots: breakfast, appetizers, salads, sandwiches, sides, center of plate, dessert and beverages. Here are a few highlights:

Breakfast According to the 2006 report from Packaged Foods, "The Revolution in Dayparts: Breakfast in the Foodservice Market", the current domestic breakfast market is worth \$65 billion. In eight years it is predicted to swell in value to \$83 billion. Kruse says breakfast has been the least active when it comes to new product introductions, but the last several years the daypart has become a major area of hope. McDonald's has always been the industry leader when it comes to grab-and-go breakfast offerings, but Starbucks, Au Bon Pain, Dunkin' Donuts and other major fast food and quick-serve players are making serious breakfast headway. (Taco Bell, Wendy's and Subway all recently announced their foray into the breakfast business). Kruse said breakfast trends lean toward grab-and-go products such as Au Bon Pain's Sausage, Egg and Cheese sandwich; comfort items such as Denny's Lumberjack Slam; and ethnic accents such as Carl's Jr.'s Steak and Egg Burrito. While Kruse said the majority of breakfast growth has come from the quick-serve market, fast casual breakfast growth is increasing. The fast casual article, [Brawling over breakfast](#), points out that market research indicates a growing number of breakfast eaters want a more upscale experience, opening the door for fast casual operators to grab a bigger piece of the breakfast pie.

Salads Salads are one of the fastest-growing categories on the menu, says Kruse. With quick-serve and fast casual eateries such as Panera Bread, McDonald's, Arby's and Saladworks, among many others, offering premium salads to diners has almost become a consumer mandate. Kruse said salads fit the majority of the "big seven" menu trends: flavor foods, ethnic adventures, healthy perceptions, and culinary fingerprints. Three of the big salad trends include salads as a main dish, with fruit on top and the use of dramatic dressings. Caesar salad continues to be one the most popular salads, and with the addition of a protein such as fish, chicken, steak or ribs, it fits the trend of salads as a main dish, Kruse says. "Just about everything that walks on four feet, that swims or flies has made an appearance on top of a Caesar salad," Kruse said. She used Hops Boneless Short Ribs Caesar as an example along with Logan's Roadhouse Mesquite-Grilled Salmon Caesar. When it comes to salads with fruit on top, Kruse said Panera Bread's Fuji Chicken Apple Salad and McCormick & Schmick's Curried Shrimp and Blueberry Salad are two prime examples. Arby's has also done a nice job on their Market Fresh salads, including their Martha's Vineyard, which also incorporates apples as a main ingredient. Kruse said in the fruit category, restaurants should look for more exotic fruit ingredients such as papaya and more specific varieties such as Fuji apples. Additionally, more ethnic ingredients are making an appearance, such as McDonald's Asian Salad with Edamame (an edible soybean). Kruse said historically salad ideas have come from the casual dining restaurant segment, but now "there are as many good ideas bubbling up from quick-service as there are trickling down from the casual dining category." In terms of dressing, bold flavors and healthier alternatives are meeting consumer demand. Einstein Bros.' use of an Orange-Pomegranate Vinaigrette (Pomegranate is also a huge flavor trend right now, says Kruse) and Houlihan's Banana-Ginger Vinaigrette also were highlighted.

Sandwich Top trends in the sandwich category include warm sandwiches, better breads and creative condiments, says Kruse. Additionally, the uses of indulgent or upmarket proteins, such as prime rib, are showing up on menus across all restaurant segments. Kruse said warm sandwiches enhance the sensory appeal experienced by consumers. But secondly, and most importantly, she said, warm sandwiches could be seen as a way for restaurants to "put their foot in the door at dinnertime." Dinnertime is proving to be an increasingly important daypart for fast casual and quick-serve chains looking to increase their dining footprint. And with the addition of signature breads and fresh produce, the sandwich category is experiencing a menu shift. Kruse said simple sandwich applications, such as Au Bon Pain's Thai Chicken Sandwich with Peanut Sauce, appeals to the consumer interest in healthy ingredients and ethnic flavors. Additionally, chains are introducing sandwiches with ethnic backgrounds such as Corner Bakery's New Chicken Pomodoro Panini.