



UNDERSTANDING INDULGENCE:

Why consumers are craving more comfort foods

American consumers have always been somewhat of an enigma when it comes to food and beverage attitudes. But that has seldom been as true as when it comes to the recent rising trend of indulgence foods. Although it is true that consumers have a growing preference for nutritious and healthy food choices, at the same time, they are more likely than ever to be loading up on carbs, fats – and in turn – calories.¹

There are no simple answers as to why consumers are behaving in this contradictory way, according to the LEK Consulting's biennial food and beverage study. It notes that 63% of consumers say they endeavor to eat healthy most or all of the time, but 85% also admit they give over to cravings for indulgent foods.

The report suggests that modern lifestyles are at the root of this behavior. Rising chronic disease rates have shed light on the importance of diet in health and well-being. Simultaneously, consumers are increasingly busy and stressed out. They are working longer hours and have less time to eat right, which prompts them to turn to indulgent foods as a convenient solution or way to chill out.^{2,3} There is significant evidence that this is not just about hunger. Comfort foods – with the sugars and fats they often contain – can provide comfort by counteracting feelings of stress.⁴

However, the rise of indulgent foods is also related to dramatic shifts in the way consumers think about certain foods, specifically fats and carbohydrates. Fats, for example, were once vilified as a cause of weight gain and heart disease, but emerging evidence now shows that one can make a good case for eating healthy fats to support weight management, and as healthy fuel for both the brain and body.⁵ Likewise, consumers now have an understanding that not all carbs are created equal and that some provide a natural energy source, while others can be an indulgent treat when desired.

Ultimately, consumers are choosing to indulge for a variety of reasons. But what this means for brands is a complicated picture.

There are basically four types of indulgence:

(Noted from a 2018 study from FONA International)

1

CLASSIC INDULGENCE

Consumers are treating themselves because they feel they deserve it. This might include a glass of wine or a dessert after a hard week of work, with no strings attached.

2

INDULGENCE AS AN EXPERIENCE

Indulging at a special occasion, such as the holidays or at a celebration or event.

3

AFFORDABLE INDULGENCE

Not everyone can afford a winter beach vacation, but they can justify an evening out or a food treat that brings satisfaction and comfort.

4

HEALTHY INDULGENCE

Enjoying a treat that offers great taste and flavor without as much guilt.

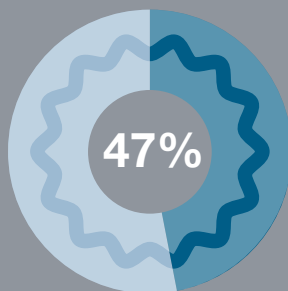
According to the FONA report, 39% of consumers are now eating indulgence foods and beverages two or three times a week. When it comes to food, chocolate is the number-one indulgence that comes to mind for consumers, with one in four calling it their top choice, while cake is noted next by 16%, followed closely by cookies at 15%.⁶

The classic style of indulgence, as defined above, does tend to be most common and popular. But that said, 60% of consumers do note that they try to limit portion sizes or frequency when indulging in something decadent.

Healthy indulgence is also gaining in importance for consumers who are looking for a balance between their desires for something sweet and maintaining health goals. Nearly 80% now say they feel good about themselves after choosing a treat that offers a happy medium.⁷

Indulgent products are also tied to the rising status of snacking.

With **47% of U.S. consumers** now saying they eat a snack as often as three times a day,⁸ indulgent product categories are driving growth.



According to the 2019 IRI State of the Snacking Industry report, permissible indulgence made up 24% of the snacking market and saw the largest growth of 3.9%, while true indulgence comprised 26% of the snacking category, with growth in second place at 2.9%.

All this bodes well for the continued importance of indulgent products in the American diet. Following are a few trends on the horizon.

The return of fats

As consumers do more research and take more liberty to decide for themselves what makes a healthy diet, fats have seen an impressive comeback in consumer attitudes. A number of trends have helped to bolster the reputation of fats, from emerging science on the importance of certain healthy fats in the diet, to the rising reputation of high-protein and keto-friendly eating. Perhaps most important is fat's new disassociation with weight gain. According to the 2019 Food and Health Survey from the International Food Information Council Foundation (IFIC), only 13% of consumers now link fat with adding extra pounds, as compared to 50% who currently make that association with sugar. Most especially when it comes to indulgent foods, many people still enjoy the satisfying taste and texture of full-fat products and see them as a food to enjoy without as much guilt.⁹ These trends have led to the emergence of products featuring perceived healthy fats, including avocado, nuts, coconut oil and even butter and ghee.

A healthy twist

Thinking outside the box and creating unique indulgent products that are also healthier is likely to gain traction with consumers, according to the Sweden-based brand consultant, the Healthy Marketing Team. The group notes that consumers don't just want indulgent foods that are "not bad for them;" they also want products that are "good for them."¹⁰ For example, they note that "superfoods" and "superfruit" ingredients are showing up in classic indulgent products such as ice cream, chocolate and cakes to add a boost of nutrition to decadent products that consumers can feel good about.

This is also playing out in indulgent products that offer portion control. In particular, consumers are watching their carb intake like never before, so foods that offer better carbs in smaller portions will give consumers permission to indulge.

Customized indulgence

Consumers not only want delicious indulgence; they also want these foods to provide experiences they can share on social media. Especially for millennial consumers, the concept of “Instagrammable” indulgence will likely gain momentum.

Brands that find a way to let consumers make indulgent food choices that reflect their own nutritional, emotional, mental and value-based priorities will have an edge. What’s more, allowing consumers to be a part of the process by creating a flavor mashup, adding a personal touch to the product, or designing a customized experience is already surfacing.



As in most food and beverage categories, consumers are demanding more from products – and indulgent foods are no exception. According to the Healthy Marketing Team, brands that innovate boldly and involve consumers in all parts of the experience will come out on top.

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