



# Modernizing mealtime

The pandemic was definitely a seismic societal event, prompting abrupt changes to how we work, live, shop and cook. Some of these changes may be short-term, as we readjust to a post-pandemic world, but others may result in permanent changes that are a result of profound shifts in consumer attitudes and priorities.

The question for food and beverage brands is, what will have staying power and how will the event impact food preparation and meal solution demands over the near- and longer-term?

Recent research from The Hartman Group suggests that many of these changes have had a longer arc – beginning prior to the pandemic and representing more permanent changes in demographics, employment, cultural values, expectations and availability of foods.<sup>1</sup> As younger consumers reach adulthood, they develop different lifestyles and preferences. Plus, changing employment routines mean they have more time at home, along with a desire for additional variety.

A lot of these food trends were already taking effect, according to a 2017 Hartman study in which 61% of consumers said they “love to cook at home,” and even more (69%) noted a preference for easy-to-prepare dishes. The point is, demand for easy, convenient and nutritious mealtime solutions and snacks isn’t going away. In fact, it’s safe to say that consumers are doubling down on these ideas in 2022.

Basically, people are busier than ever, trying to juggle careers, family, fitness and their social lives.<sup>2</sup> And pandemic or no pandemic, this means life is stressful. Findings from Innova Market Insights suggest that nearly one in three

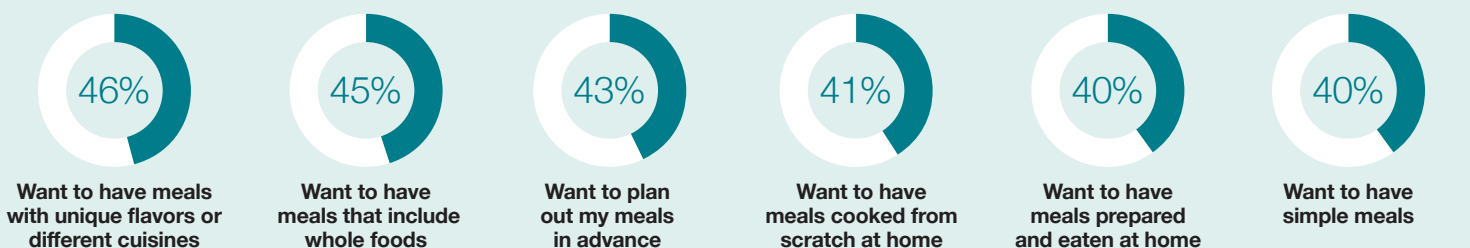
people experience stress at least once per day, and this tends to be more prevalent among younger demographic groups... although the impact of stress varies by age. Gen Z is more likely to note stress affecting their mood, while millennials more typically say that stress has dietary impacts, and Gen X most often notes sleep factors tied to stress.<sup>3</sup>

The Innova data suggests that no matter how stress influences their lives, consumers believe that diet is an important way to manage stress and busy lifestyles... and about one in four specify that they use convenience foods and snacks for energy, comfort or relaxation.

More recently, consumers in a 2021 Hartman Group study noted the rising importance of the “ideal meal,” which encompasses elements of four basic pillars: *Food*, providing nutrition, indulgence and health; *Cooking*, the need for skills and ingredients; *Company*, sharing meals with friends and family; and *Delight*, creating new memories and experiences.<sup>4</sup> Consumers prioritize these elements in defining their ideal meal, although definitions are widely variable from one consumer to the next. Study respondents most often said that balanced, “square” meals are an important step toward achieving their “ideal meal,” although convenience and taste are other key attributes.

## In pursuit of the “ideal meal”

Changes desired to achieve ideal meals



Source: The Hartman Group. “At the Dining Table 2021: American Meals and Cooking,” 2022.

Cooking at home is now clearly linked to eating healthfully, but it is also seen as an important way to have more involvement and take a hands-on approach to diet. Most consumers now believe that cooking at home is both more healthful and more economical than options like eating out or ordering in. This idea is most important among families, where home-cooked meals are linked to better nutrition and seen as critical for a child's social and emotional development.<sup>5</sup>

It's a lot of pressure. And while many consumers say they aspire to these ideals, they are often pressed for time and want to minimize clean-up. For example, 55% of the recent Hartman respondents said they love/like cooking, but almost as many (52%) consistently say they hate having to clean up after preparing food (20% strongly so).<sup>6</sup>

## Solid solutions

Although consumers do seem to understand that it's not always possible to achieve their "ideal meal," they are clearly looking for solutions and inspiration to help them get there. This has opened the door for a number of growing trends in the market. With health a priority, better-for-you products are in the spotlight. Consumers now report that they would like to see various health and nutrition claims on products, including sugar-free, additive-free and 100% natural.

Sugar reduction has been one of the leading trends in this area, with growing product activity and use of sugar-related claims. It's little wonder, as more than seven in 10 Americans consistently say they are trying to limit or avoid sugars,<sup>7</sup> and four in 10 globally noting they reduced their sugar consumption in 2020.<sup>8</sup> Product formulators have made great strides in this category in recent years, as new ingredients like stevia, monk fruit and erythritol now better replicate sugar's qualities and function, such as sweetness, mouthfeel, browning and bulk.<sup>9</sup> Many of these ingredients also have a natural perception that plays well with consumers looking for label-friendly and sustainable products.

This has paved the way for plant-based ingredients in both snacks and meal solutions, as consumers strive to get more natural, healthful ingredients in their diets. For instance, data from FMCG Gurus noted that 28% of consumers said they plan to include more plant-based foods and drinks in their diets.<sup>10</sup> What's more, as many as 60% of global households now say they eat meat-free meals at least once weekly.<sup>11</sup>

All this has been a particular boon for plant-based proteins, as consumers embrace plant-based lifestyles. But plant-based eating is also transcending the core alternative categories of plant-based meat and dairy alternatives. New products are going well beyond these foods and beverages, as plant-based claims now appear on a variety of products – from prepared meals to sauces and snacks.<sup>12</sup>



These trends are setting the stage for even more innovation and opportunity as consumers seek options to meet their individual needs for health and transparency, as well as specific aspirations for meal solutions. But modern meals will continue to evolve as younger consumers embrace new attitudes about what a meal should be. According to Hartman analysts, these young adults are moving away from three square meals a day toward smaller meals and snacks.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that brands have an opportunity to reconsider product positioning, product size and communications to better reach these shoppers.

Consumers also want to eat in more-interesting ways, so the door is open for products that inspire them to try new eating approaches and experiment with new cuisines.

But even as they desire meal solutions that push the envelope — not to mention time-saving and nutritious — taste remains a top priority. So choosing ingredients that check off all the boxes for sustainable sourcing, function and taste will continue to be essential.

Cargill can help you develop new solutions for meeting modern needs for convenience, nutrition and great taste. Learn more at [cargill.com/labelfriendly](https://cargill.com/labelfriendly).

#### SOURCES:

- <sup>1</sup> The Hartman Group. "At the Dining Table 2021: American Meals and Cooking." Data presented in webinar, Feb. 4, 2022. <https://www.hartman-group.com/webinars/42309508/at-the-dining-table-american-meals-and-cooking-report-highlights>
- <sup>2</sup> Innova Market Insights. "Food and Drink has a Role to Play in Supporting Busy and Stressful Lives." May 28, 2020. <https://www.innovamarketinsights.com/press-release/food-and-drink-has-a-role-to-play-in-supporting-busy-and-stressful-lives/>
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid. Hartman Group. At the Dining Table webinar.
- <sup>5</sup> The Hartman Group. "A Return to the Joy of Cooking." November 4, 2021. <https://www.hartman-group.com/infographics/1636401702/a-return-to-the-joy-of-cooking>
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid. Hartman group. At the Dining Table webinar.
- <sup>7</sup> International Food Information Council. 2021 Food and Health Survey. <https://foodinsight.org/2021-food-health-survey/>
- <sup>8</sup> Innova Market Insights. "Naturally Sweeter Approach to Reducing Sugar in Food and Beverages." August 12, 2021. <https://www.innovamarketinsights.com/press-release/Naturally-sweeter-approach-to-reducing-sugar-in-food-and-beverages>
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> FMCG Gurus. "The Evolution of Snacking Habits Over the Next Five Years." August 6, 2021. <https://fmcggurus.com/blog/fmcg-gurus-the-evolution-of-snacking-habits-over-the-next-five-years/>
- <sup>11</sup> Innova Market Insights. "Plant-Forward: Evolving Consumer Demands Drive Innovation in Plant-Based Eating." September 29, 2021.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid. Hartman Group. At the Dining Table webinar.