



The best of both worlds

A new, post-pandemic normal is reshaping eating routines and occasions

Consumer eating habits and routines were already seeing a shift in early 2020 as Americans embraced a healthier approach to their diets and adapted their eating styles to fit increasingly busy lifestyles.

Then, COVID-19 came along and played a significant role in accelerating these trends, leading to decisive changes in not just what we eat, but the way we eat it.

While today’s consumers are now returning to some of their previous routines, such as dining out at restaurants and working out at the gym, many are still working remotely and socializing differently. In other words, they are looking for food and beverage solutions that meet new needs around socializing, entertainment and building community. That leaves brands with new opportunities to mix things up with regard to numerous trends – including convenience, snacking and serving up unique eating experiences.

That said, consumer attitudes about what, when and how they eat are highly individual. So that means their eating occasions are motivated by a wide variety of factors, including who they are eating with, how they think about weight and health and their cultural identity (just to name a few).¹

Researchers are currently exploring how these consumer attitudes impact shifts in eating habits. For example, schedules are important for many, according

to a report by Nutrition Business Journal and NEXT Data and Insights, which found that in 2022, just more than half of consumers still ate their meals at regularly scheduled times. However, timing doesn’t matter to everyone, with almost as many respondents (43%) saying they eat what they want when they want it, and 28% noting they rarely eat meals at the same time. Overall, consumers largely think of food as fuel and important for health... but pleasure remains an important factor behind their eating choices.²

A recent study from The Hartman Group indicates that the pandemic did have a seemingly irrevocable impact on eating occasions. The study found that some aspects of eating have normalized, while others have changed. For instance, as concern about COVID ebbs and flows, consumers are adjusting their precautions and eating routines to minimize the risk they see at the time.³ Eating at home certainly saw a spike in 2020, but it has not returned to the lower levels seen in 2019. What is also interesting is that while consumers may adjust when they eat out to fit their comfort levels, they are also using takeout and delivery services in ever-greater numbers.

Where eating occasions took place

	2019	2020	2021	2022
Home	75%	82%	76%	77%
At work	11%	7%	10%	10%
At a restaurant / school	10%	6%	9%	8%
Other away-from-home	5%	4%	5%	5%

Source: The Hartman Group. "Shifting Food Habits and Routines: 2022 Eating Occasions." February 2023.



The Hartman report also found that eating occasions have gone down slightly since 2019 and participation in all three meals also declined over this period. This suggests that with about 45% of consumers still working at home, the daily structure that determines meal times continues to erode.

While the novelty of cooking at home faded fairly quickly for most consumers in 2020, they did become more comfortable with cooking than they were in 2019. Today, that trend has persisted in that consumers will engage in greater levels of cooking and preparation when they feel like it – and seek out more convenience-oriented solutions when they don't.⁴

Meeting people where they are

This transformation of consumer eating habits and occasions is likely to bode well for the convenience food category. It comes down to consumers seeking greater control in their ever-more- hectic and variable lifestyles. For example, consumers are now seeking food and beverage solutions to help them utilize their time efficiently, but which also bring worthwhile eating and drinking experiences, according to a recent consumer report from Innova Market Insights.

Consumers in the United States, the Innova data shows, have been embracing quick-and-easy meal options and

on-the-go products. That noted, the analysts suggest there remains an opportunity to create new convenience-plus products with added value in terms of health benefits, sustainability attributes and freshness.

Innova analysts also point to another emerging trend from the eating occasions shift, which they call semi-convenience. While consumers are more open to cooking interesting foods at home, many still want the ease of ready-made sauces and meal kits that do some of the work for them.⁶

Flavor mashups are another trend continuing to see popularity, as consumers look to maximize food and beverage experiences when they are eating and socializing at home. Consumers (and especially younger generations) are once again becoming comfortable socializing with friends. Particularly when they gather at home, consumers are seeking products that provide unique experiences or that can be easily adapted for large or small groups or to meet different eating preferences and tastes.⁸

Snacks, already perceived as a convenience-oriented choice, will also see innovation as consumers continue to embrace snacks for varied consumption occasions. As people adopt snacking throughout the day, unique flavors and good taste will continue to be critical elements in emerging snack foods, Innova analysts noted.

DEGREE OF PREPARATION: 2022

No preparation
(ready to eat)

38%

Moderate preparation
(recipe, prep techniques beyond microwaving)

25%

Little preparation
(microwave only)

21%

Heavy preparation
(medium prep + cutting/chopping/
meat/produce)

16%

Nearly 40% of consumers cite a preference for snacks with novel and varied flavors, but 25% say they prefer mild, light, traditional options.⁹ This indicates that while consumers do want variety in snacks, formulators must continue to balance innovative ideas with familiar formats and tastes.

Eating occasions are clearly shifting, as consumers balance the need for control over their lives with good nutrition and meaningful eating experiences. This will certainly open the door to new products that meet these emerging demands for new options in both convenience and snack foods. According to the Hartman Group study on Shifting Food Habits and Routines, consumers now note they are willing to pay a premium for products that meet these needs and deliver on unique flavors and sensory experiences, especially millennials, parents and those with higher incomes.¹⁰

While premiumization will likely continue to be a key strategy for convenience products, these categories will also become more competitive.¹¹ In other words, brands will have to work harder to bring a unique point of differentiation to the table.

Partner with Cargill to create foods and beverages that cater to modern eating habits.



References

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- ¹¹ Mellentin, J. "Ten Key Trends in Food Nutrition and Health 2023." *New Nutrition Business*. <https://www.new-nutrition.com/>