

Deep Dish #2:  
Evolving consumer preferences for local and light fare  
By Rebecca Clarke

It's no secret that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted nearly every aspect of life. On the list of these impacts is the change that it has had on consumer purchases. Early on in the pandemic, consumers tended to buy more high-sugar, high-carb, high-fat ingredients and 'comfort foods' like pastries and cakes [2]. However, as the pandemic drags on, many consumers are pivoting back to healthier options.

Interview Insight: In one of our research interviews, an owner of Freshii, a 'healthy fast food' chain, states, "At the start of the pandemic, salad sales went down considerably and people opted for more carb-heavy menu items such as bowls."



A report from the International Food Information Council indicated the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in more than 20% of consumers making healthier choices when it comes to the food that they consume [2]. Moreover, the federal government has recommended Canadians make healthy choices during the pandemic and purchase foods such as apples, carrots, oranges, cabbage, rice, oats, quinoa, lean meats, fish, nuts, pulses and seeds. [3].

Consumers have been more inclined to increase the amount of immune boosting foods in their diets due to fears about the pandemic situation. The World Health Organization has stated that even though eating certain types of food cannot cure or prevent COVID-19,

people should still maintain a healthy diet throughout the pandemic to support overall good health and wellbeing (8).

Studies have shown that processed foods containing a large amount of simple carbohydrates, increase blood sugar in the body, which can increase anxiety and other mental health illnesses [4]. Therefore, it makes sense that during these times of uncertainty and isolation, people have been turning their backs on unhealthy food.

Interview Insight: The owner of a brewing company in London mentioned: "We certainly saw a trend in customers wanting comfort food and it stayed that way until the weather got warmer." They noted that there was a clear yo-yoing effect happening with people's diets as they transitioned away from consuming 'soul foods' that contained a lot of starch.



The National Restaurant Association has noted in their culinary forecast for 2020 that those in the retail food industry should consider offering healthier food options, such as healthy bowls and plant-based proteins, to meet customer needs (5). It is vital to think about those moves that can be made now that will better serve customers for the longer term [7].

Interview Insight: A café owner in downtown London, described that the pandemic has shed light on the fact that the restaurant industry should pause and make use of the opportunity to think about changing its structure.

Shelley Balanko, a senior vice president at the Hartman Group, a consumer research company, recently stated in an interview in *The New York Times* that consumers are very health-conscious [6]. Balanko believes this trend will stick beyond the pandemic as people recognize the economic and social benefits of maintaining good health and wellbeing [6].

Interview Insight: The same café owner mentioned that at the beginning of summer, their team decided to make a 'COVID-19 pivot' with the business. She stated that they started a delivery service where they sourced dairy products, chicken and pork from a local farmer and delivered it to customers along with healthy prepared food.

During these times, grocery stores, restaurants, bars, cafes, farmer's markets and other food retailers could incorporate these 'healthy eating' trends into their business strategies. For example, some restaurants have adopted local healthy ingredients into their menus supporting not only good health and wellbeing but also delivering benefits to hard-hit local economies. By leveraging these trends, the food retail industry will likely ride a wave of consumer interest in local healthy foods and beverages.

## References

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