New Food presents… the 'The 10 Top Trends of 2017'

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With 2016 been and gone – a year of tumult, surprise and consequence – 2017 represents for many uncertainty and uncharted territory, not least for those working in the food and beverage industry and the consumers enjoying their products.

That said, there are several predictions that we may be safe to anticipate over the next twelve months. The following (in no particular order) 'Ten Top Trends of 2017' from New Food is based upon tendencies likely to be recognisable in Europe, North America, North Asia and Oceania as well emerging opportunities in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and South Asia using research conducted by Mintel and Innova Market Insights to complement our own analysis.

1. Clean label

It is fair to suggest that clean label is no longer a trend – but rather a golden rule manufacturers must now adhere to based upon consumer expectation. Three quarters of US consumers claim to regularly study the ingredient labels of food products while 91% believe that products with recognisable ingredients are healthier, according to Innova research. Clean label now represents the second most important factor when choosing a product, after price. If, as further asserted by Innova, the clean label trend has indeed become a *rule* for manufacturers and processors… what exactly then does the term mean?

The definition is subject to interpretation and abuse. The term 'clean label' itself is free for general use as it remains a non-registrable trademark and consequently several manufacturers take advantage of its ambiguity, to define the term according to their respective profit margins and unacceptably so. From a responsible perspective, it should be considered to represent products that:

- Contain no additives or preservatives
- Contains 'natural' ingredients (but still the term 'natural' in turn lacks a clear definition)
- Organically produced
- Non-GMO, pesticide or antibiotic use in production
- Ingredient transparency

Empirically this can be seen by more and more dairy product launches claiming 'grass-fed' on their labels to use the example of just one industry. The global number in this sector doubled between 2014 and 2015 and has continued to grow since. Nestle, Kellogg and Campbell Soup are just three examples of multinationals that have committed to removing artificial ingredients from successful products in recent years.

It is clear that clean label has come to dominate consumer choice – even more so than brand loyalty according to Ingredion an ingredient solutions provider from Illinois. While this may be true, a clear legal definition of the term seems necessary to remove the fraudulent misleading of consumers when product marketing departments employ terms such as "artisan," "clean," "earth friendly," "local," "pure" and "simple" on product packages and web sites.

Consumer behaviour and preference seems to be shifting manufacturing and processing practice towards greater transparency. Let's hope 2017 continues this progression as we expect it to.

2. Plants

The desire for simplicity in the face of ethical awareness has spurned the plant revolution in correlation with the explosion of veganism and vegetarianism over the past few years.

Living in an information economy powered by the proliferation and democratisation of new technologies, the modern consumer contains inherent aspirations for healthier and cleaner lifestyles leading to the increased preference of fruits, vegetables nuts, seeds, grains and botanicals over the traditional carbohydrate and meat-fuelled diets of predominantly the European and North American past. The food industry's contribution to global warming, animal rights and increased nutritional awareness have founded a new generation that regularly choose plant-based alternatives. According to the Mintel Global New Products Database (GNPD), we've seen a 25% increase in vegetarian claims and a 257% rise in vegan claims in global food and drink launches between 2011 and 2016.

That said, the plant-based product shift is not necessarily a full change as many remain what we coin 'flexitarians' who prefer to snack irregularly as and when they wish to on healthier, 'natural' products such as nuts. One other example of this consumer behavioural shift affecting new product development is Evian's release of their Fruits & Plants flavoured waters and the "Do Plants" slogan from WhiteWave's Silk non-dairy milk brand in the US.

Furthermore, according to Mintel research, this trend is significantly established already:

"55% of UK adults include plenty of vegetables in meals and 24% incorporate superfood ingredients. Similarly, 35% of Chinese adults aged 20-49 who are hoping to achieve a healthy diet choose vegetarian food and 14% look for products with superfood ingredients. Meanwhile, 30% of US adults who purchase vegetables are trying to eat a more plant-based diet."

One particularly innovative response to the trend comes from Chilean startup Not Company that has developed an artificial intelligence algorithm in order to develop plant-based alternatives to animal products including milk, mayonnaise, yogurt and cheese.

For example, 'Not Milk' product is made with almonds, peas, rice, nuts, linseed, coconut and vanilla.

While plant-based products are widespread, we predict this trend to continue its exponential growth well into 2017.

3. Sugar alternatives

Many headlines around the world bore the sugar/obesity correlation scare stories, several covered by this publication. Therefore, it is safe to say that sugar alternatives, at some point in the near future, will define innovations occurring in the food and beverage processing and manufacturing industry. Both scientific, supranational and regulatory bodies have promised or already taken action on the matter as the topic of sugar consumption assumes toxicity amongst many consumers.

Now manufacturers face the problematic question: how best do we reconcile taste and health in popular products?

How significant a role might stevia and other natural sweeteners play in reducing sugar?

With Coca Cola launching Life containing stevia, a bold move in itself, we predict sugar alternatives to impact noticeably upon 2017 and rightly so given the worrying statistics several research institutions have recently produced. We predict soft drinks in particular to see a shift.

4. Food waste

Roughly one third, or approximately 1.3 billion tonnes, of the food produced for global human consumption is lost or wasted, according to the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations.

One third…

Fortunately, consumer awareness is spreading and the US government amongst others has responded. The States, one of the worst perpetrators, throwing away circa 133 billion pounds of food per annum, has consequently set itself a goal of halving this figure by 2030 "to create a generation of Americans who are sensitive to food waste". Many retailers and restaurateurs have also reacted responsibly to the issue.

Notably, in 2014, French supermarket Intermarché debuted several high-profile advertisements depicting misshapen fruit and vegetables with attached taglines such as the amusing: "An ugly carrot is a beautiful soup".

Furthermore restaurants around the world such as in the Netherlands, Finland and the UK, use an app to sell on food that would otherwise be thrown away at closing time.

"51% of US adults who purchase vegetables are open to buying less-than-perfect vegetables, such as those that are bruised or oddly shaped…"

It seems that roles are reversed and it is in fact retailers, restaurateurs and regulators that are shaping consumer perception and it is certainly is worth considering just how great a role manufacturers and their choice of packaging plays in the issue.

Quantity control is of the utmost importance. According to Mintel research 12% of Brazilian adults who recently consumed milk saying they rarely consume all the milk purchased before it goes out of date.

Bread is one of the most wasted food items in the UK, according to research from Love Food Hate Waste and researchers have found that over half of UK adults would consider baked goods with packaging that keeps them fresher for longer.

Positive publicity for 'ugly' or 'blemished' products finds itself manifest in events such as Feed the City in Belfast, Northern Ireland and will continue to do so in 2017 to the point where (we hope) the vast majority are aware of and actively attempt to reduce food waste.

5. Craft

The beverage industry has driven the craft trend. Back in 2002, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer of the UK Gordon Brown introduced the Progressive Beer Duty, which granted tax breaks to brewers below a certain size. The number of small brewers in the UK began to grow and craft beer has driven a renewed emphasis on originality of recipe and simplicity that harks back to the clean label and plant-based trends we predict to grow. According to Innova, “the number of food & beverages launches with a craft positioning increased by +15% in 2015”.

So how might we define craft?

Much like clean label, it is difficult ascertain an objective conclusion to this question… but we gave it a go all the same:

- An emphasis on the local
- Natural ingredients
- Original flavours and recipes
- Artisanal methods

The popularity of craft beer both in the UK and the US has convinced mainstream super brands such as Heineken that the ‘craft’ trend’s principles are worth investing in and we have thus seen Heineken H41 is part of the Heineken Lager Explorations, made with a wild yeast found in Patagonia, named after the latitude where it was found.

Subsequently, confectionery, bakery and soft drinks manufacturers are drawing influence from craft beer’s popularity with Hellman’s and many others tapping into the trend and we expect 2017 to present a real explosion of the ‘original, the ‘artisan’ and the ‘craft’ on retailers’ shelves everywhere.

6. A recourse to the traditional

In a year viewed by many as defined by turmoil and disruption to conventional order, consumers are thought to be seeking solace in the stable and traditional and this too will be visible in the food industry in 2017. Mintel call this recourse to the past a “dependable source of inspiration” for manufacturers as the global economic, commercial and social order is thrown into uncertainty by 2016’s political events. Crucially however, this does not necessitate a restriction on innovation – rather a modernisation of the traditional.

The success of Paper Boat beverages in India, which offer traditional Indian recipes, such as green mango-based aam panna, in modern grab-and-go packaging is one such example of this trend as Mintel point out. Elsewhere, Guinness Africa Special Stout incorporates native ingredients and featured the artwork of a local graffiti artist for its launches in Nigeria. In China, it is reported that 67% of adults aged 20-49 prefer to eat familiar breakfast soups, congees, wontons and noodles rather than newer or Western options.

Manufacturers might innovate and take advantage of this trend by explicitly acknowledging the importance of tradition and familiarity much like Danlac milk in Peru by its revival of the tradition of milkmen to sell Danlac in Lima's supermarkets, thus communicating their product as one of purity that respects its traditional roots.

Socio-economic circumstance might well provide a marketing opportunity for several manufacturing brands as we progress through 2017 with a modernisation of tradition driving forward a renewed valuation of previous successful ideals.

7. Time efficiency

Bruce Lee once said that "If you love life, don't waste time, for time is what life is made up of" and in some ways this has come to dictate how we live in the 21st Century: an era of endless rush and driving need for self-progression in a society that continually sets itself against the clock.

So what does the time-pressured individual choose when making food and drink decisions?

The pace of 21st Century life has already catalysed the evolution of the snacking phenomenon and according to Mintel research the number of global food and drink launches with on-the-go claims increased 54% between 2011 and 2016.

Adjacent to the on-the-go snacking trend, the away-from-home snacking positioning is also emerging, Innova further asserts. Popular words found on product packaging at present are "ideal for school boxes" or "perfect office snack."

At home however, we have and are seeing the shortcut age of food consumption that includes the emergence of:

- Extended-shelf-life herb purees,
- Quick cooking sides
- Home delivery services

Such examples of 'shortcutting' the meal-making process crucially avoid the sacrifice of nutritional value and personalisation potential.

We expect, as many already do, future products to potentially be obliged to display the 'time taken to make' on their packaging.

"30% of Canadian breakfast eaters say that breakfast products that require little or no preparation are important to them."

As the ready meal market expands, many consumers desire a shift towards the breakfast market – 42% of adults in China would like more choice in this respect say Mintel.

With an overarching shift towards consumer volition to make and consume healthier meals, many wish to reconcile the length of time taken to prepare such meals with their desire to improve the nutritional content of their diet.

In the US, Nearly half (45%) of the Hispanic consumer population complain that planning and making healthy meals is too time-consuming.

It seems there is a time pressure on retailers to answer to such consumer demands. We predict technology will come to pay a significant role. For example, the use of apps to personalise nutrition and grant easy access to time-saving diet plans or perhaps internet-connected solutions, such as the Amazon Dash branded buttons that have now expanded from the US into Europe.

Elsewhere in the beverages market, Nespresso's app-controlled smart brewing machine Prodigio that is available in Singapore, allows the consumer to initiate the brewing process remotely and subsequently receive a notification on a mobile device when the coffee is pronto.

Imagine the possibilities…

For us, a smart approach to satisfying the consumer is what they fundamentally expect now in a world dominated by the instant. We expect significant advances in this respect in 2017.

8. The democratisation of health and nutrition

It is well known that a consistently healthy diet is more expensive than one filled with fizzy drinks, chips and burgers (to employ a crude stereotype)…

Or is it…?

If so, does it really have to be…?

"Healthy food and drink are not 'luxuries'." say Mintel and we agree.

That said, lower income individuals and families often find themselves financially impeded from buying healthy items: typically the natural, organic or free from. According to data from the World Bank, this affects the 638.3 million classified as 'low income'. While a low household income does not directly cause health issues, these people are more susceptible due to a lack of access to fresh food, limited time and high levels of stress or anxiety. While fresh fruit and vegetables are not actually that expensive, an awareness and education gap opens up between socio-economic groups as those who can afford both the time and money to make or purchase ready-made health products overtake those who cannot.

As Mintel state:

"More solutions are needed from both brands and retailers that provide affordable options to everyone who is hoping to improve their diets and lifestyles."

With the 'premium' product claim one of the fastest growing over the last few years, perhaps it's time for retailers to consider a true democratisation of healthy and nutritional products as those who cannot currently afford the everyday organic ready meal, too wish to eat in line with its philosophy.

Leading the way are brands such as Danish retailer Fakta that offer a litre of private-label organic milk for €1.53 (US$1.67). We expect the affordability of the average product for the average consumer to become a priority for retailers in 2017.

9. Pre-bed food

Much like the snacking trend, we also anticipate the pre-bed food trend will gain traction in 2017. With fewer and fewer enjoying fewer and fewer hours of sleep due to a myriad of factors such as technological advancement and subsequent addiction, many look towards food and beverage products to encourage their winding down towards the end of the evening. With energy drinks and products consumed to catalyse stimulation, we are seeing the inverse concurrently grow and many wish to go beyond the archetypal herbal tea come 9pm on a Monday evening. We have observed this around the world, but a strong example is that of Kellogg which repackaged its All-Bran cereal with a lunar design in order to shift the cereal towards its consumption after an evening meal that can improve digestion and leave the consumer with "a feeling of lightness and revitalisation".

In line with the ever-growing modern emphasis on productivity, relaxation to ease the pressures of the day has too become increasingly important – many consider it a quintessential part of a healthy lifestyle. If the beauty industry can expand into night-time therapeutic and healing creams, applied just before bed, we don't see why 2017 won't be the year the food and beverage industry sees a boom in these 'pre-bed' products.

10. Seeds

Seeds have long been acknowledged as a nutritionist's favourite. Cheap, reasonably tasty and easy to manufacture and consume – they correlate well with the long-emerging snacking trend. As stated in Today's Dietitian by Liz Marr, naming it one of 2016's hottest trends, they are extremeness versatile:

"Consumers can enjoy them in meals, individually wrapped packages, and various snack foods."

We expect 2017 to bring significant innovations in the way in which seeds are manipulated and used in products, from their traditional, isolated consumption to a more integrated incorporation within existing products. For example, Kellogg's Ancient Legends Porridge Pot With Spelt, Barley, Oats, Chia Seeds And Coconut is an empirical example of the attempt to bring grains into the mainstream, Activia also using seeds and grains in their traditional yoghurt products – we are even seeing seeds and grains combined with drinks in the beverages market.

"The global nuts and seeds market is expected to grow annually by 1.7% for nuts and 10% for seeds for at least the next five years" as suggested by Transparency Market Research and we expect this trend to continue well into 2017 and beyond.

And thus that concludes our 'Top Ten Trends for 2017'.

While far from exhaustive, it's hard to argue against the notion that each and every one of these trends will gain momentum as we enter the new year.