

Tapping into Gen Z food culture to make healthy menu options cool and craveable

Janet Helm, MS, RDN UMass Chef Culinary Conference June 9, 2025





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Most diverse generation to ever live in the U.S., 48% being members of minority groups.



True "digital natives" that don't know a world without digital devices or social media.



Purpose-driven consumers that put a high emphasis on authenticity, transparency, and social responsibility, including environmental stewardship.



Yet, Gen Z is the most anxious generation...

...with many turning to food and beverages as sources of **comfort**, **nostalgia** and **escape**.

So, **emotional connection** through food is increasingly important.

FOOD HELM

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER The Anxious Generation

How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness

> WALL STREET JOURNAL TOP 10 BOOK of 2024

Jonathan Haidt Coauthor of The Coddling of the American Mind

Source: Pew Research

Managing stress and mental health

Gen Z is more aware of mental health issues and the importance of selfcare, leading to a greater emphasis on emotional and mental wellbeing.



86% agree that mental – and emotional balance is as important as physical health <complex-block>

#littletreat

59%_

consider indulging in foods and beverages as being important for their mental health

FOODHELM

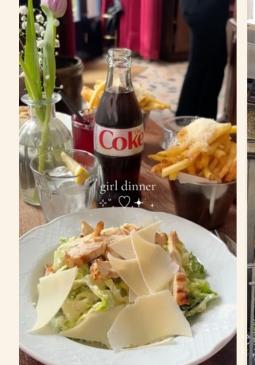
64%

are actively preventing or treating stress and anxiety

Duality of health and indulgence

Almost a quarter (21%) strongly agree that indulgent foods and beverages are an important part of a healthy, balanced diet.

"Healthy indulgence" is illustrated by the viral "girl dinner 2.0" trend of Caesar salad, French fries, and Diet Coke.





The century-old recipe for Caesar salad is also being reimagined in wraps, pizza, pasta, and leafy greens beyond romaine, including kale and arugula.

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Matcha Basque Cheesecake

Desire for desserts that cue health

Gen Z is drawn to desserts that combine healthy ingredients with guilt-free indulgence.

Growth of matcha, ube, avocado and dates in sweet treats.





Hormel Black Label Bacon with Cinnamon Toast Crunch

Seeking playful and unexpected flavor mashups

Gen Z is drawn to novel or sensory-driven products that offer a new taste, texture, or experience.

"Swalty" or sweet + salty is the new "swicy."



Baskin-Robbins brie and burrataflavored ice cream with almonds, pistachios, and swirls of apricot



Simplicity, humor, imperfection, and maximum sensory impact: vibrant colors, textures, and bold flavors. Cottage cheese flatbread, the new cauliflower pizza crust? Love of hacks and — innovative use of old ingredients in new ways.

Gen Z tastes are strongly influenced by social media

85% of Gen Zers admit that social media influences their purchasing decisions.

77% use TikTok for product discovery.







Kawaii culture indulges in cuteness, including pastels, animal, and flower motifs. 950M #kawaii food on TikTok



Social media is the new search

Step aside Google, **40%** of young people primarily use TikTok and Instagram for a more visually-rich form of search and discovery—and that's especially true for food.



TikTok

Q recipe for Turkish pasta

Тор Users Videos





Sharing my secrets as a Turl tutiyaskitch... 1-15

♡ 61.6

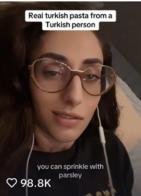
The Turkish viral pasta ! Anr

2024-12-4 **2024-12-4**

LIVE

Anna Paul's Turkish Pasta 🎙 Meresyourbi... 2024-12-1







Tteokbokki Rice _ Popular Korean street food



Buldak Chicken __ Korean "fire" chicken

Embracing global cuisines

Younger generations are more adventurous and seek out bold, international flavors, especially Asian cuisines.





Kimbap Rice Rolls _____ Sushi-like take-out in Korea

Korean-Mexican Mashup _ Birria ramen



Cottage Cheese Pasta, eggs, flatbread, and more

Protein-Grain Bowls _ Meal-planning favorite

Gen Z places a high priority on protein

Protein is top benefit young people seek from foods and beverages, and a "good source" is leading definition of a healthy food.





Greek Yogurt __ Sweet and savory



Growing preference for plant-forward eating

Increased desire for plantbased options, especially meat alternatives that celebrate vegetables and do not attempt to mimic meat.



Foodservice

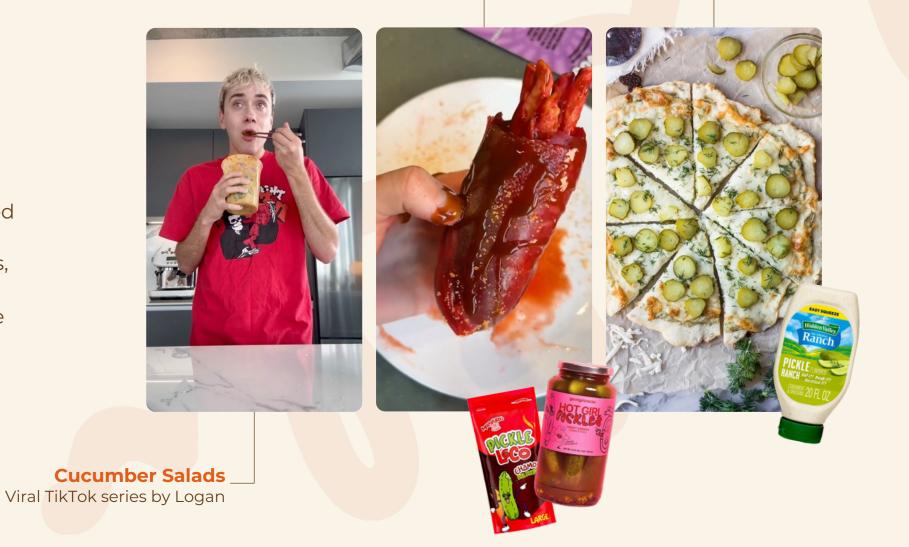


Retail



Pickle Snacks _ Chamoy and other flavors

_ **Pickle Pizza** The new pineapple pizza



Big love of pickles and cucumbers

Social media has helped fuel the popularity of cucumbers and pickles, which have become popular snacks and are showing up in unexpected places.

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Gen Z is crazy for condiments

Seeking heat, sweetheat (swicy), tart, and umami flavors.

92% of Gen Z say they'd go to a restaurant just for the sauce.





Known as the sustainability generation

Authenticity and transparency are essential values for Gen Z.

They seek products with clear origins – caring about where ingredients come from, how they're sourced, and the ethical practices behind products. MENU CATERING REWARDS OUR VALUES NUTRITION V FIND A CHIPOTLE SIGN IN / JOIN







While Gen Z cares about nutrition and sustainability

they're also heavily influenced by **comfort** and **nostalgia**—and often resort to childhood favorites, like chicken nuggets dipped into a sauce.

FOOD HELM



How do we tap into what Gen Z cares about to nudge them to healthier food choices?



Choice Architecture

Strategically arranging food options in the cafeteria, making healthy food more visible, accessible, and appealing—essentially 'nudging' students toward better choices.



Prominent placement

Placing healthy options like fruits and vegetables at the front of the line, at eye level, or on prominent display stands in the cafeteria.





ucberkeleydining



ohiost<mark>ate</mark>dine



Default options

Setting the default meal option to a healthier choice—such as plantbased options or a side of fruit instead of fries requiring students to actively opt out if they want a less healthy option. 81%

of college students chose a plant-based menu option when it was the default option.

tulanehospitality You asked and we heard you! PLANT-BASED OPTIONS HAVE ARRIVED AT MISSION BISTRO MADE-TO-ORDER STATION! vegans, and veggie-lovers: the Mission Bistro Made-To-Order Station on the second floor of the Malkin Sacks Commons now offers plant-based protein alternatives. On the days the station serves pasta there will be plant-based meatballs available, and tofu will be available when the station serves stir fry - the plant based proteins are even cooked on their own special square pan so there is no cross-contact! With the rotating format of the station, there's no getting tired of these

STOLEN.

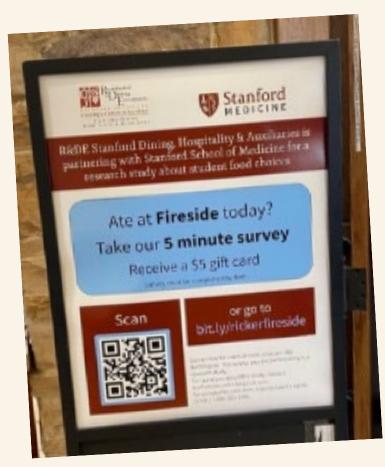
ANT-BASE

mission bistro



Nudge, don't push

A moderate, but not drastic, reduction in serving spoon size produced an 18% less meat served per day without reducing diner satisfaction. A more substantial 50% reduction triggered backfiring effects.







Visual cues

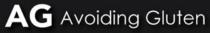
Using signage, posters, or graphics to promote healthy choices, such as highlighting the "vegetable of the day."



KNOW YOUR FOOD



V



- Vegetarian **CF** Climate Friendly
- PR Good Source of Protein

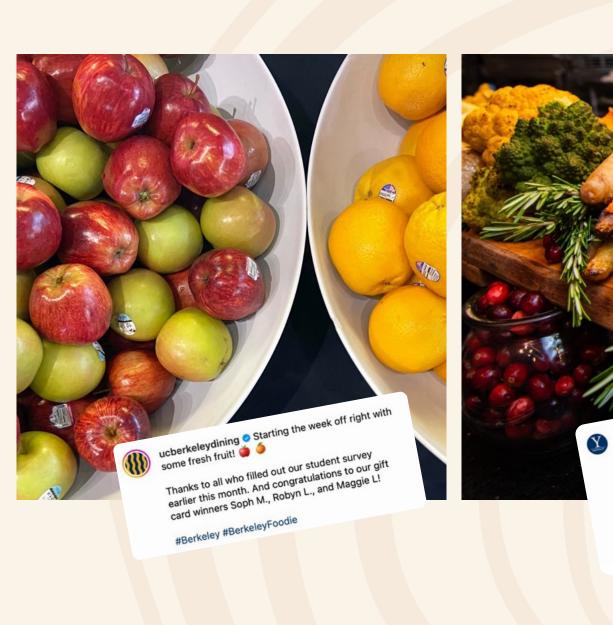
thecafsterling Notice a change on our menus? We switched up our dietary icons to make mindful AG = Avoiding Gluten • PR = Protein • VG = Vegan • V = Vegetarian • Globe = Climate Friendly



Variety and presentation

Offering a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables in attractive displays, like colorful bowls or platters.





yalehospitality It's always a joy to eat your veggies - but this time of year makes it even better! From roasted asparagus, brussels sprouts salad with roasted asparagus, brussels sprouts salad with rokkpeas and figs, and roasted carrots with fennel and agave - enjoy the fall harvest with vegetables infom local farms and partners highlighted from local farms and partners highlighted throughout your dining halls this week (Nov. 6 - 12). #yale #yalehospitality #localharvest #localproduce #harvest #harvestseason #eatyourveggies #campusdining #collegedining

Persuasion interventions

Making healthy options more appealing, including vivid imagery and messaging to educate and grab attention.







penndining University of Pennsylvania



Nutrition and culinary education

Combine choice architecture with nutrition and culinary education to increase food and nutrition literacy, and to reinforce the benefits of healthy eating.



wheatoncollegedining



Let's see how different campus dining programs are bringing the concepts of choice architecture to life.



And how you can adapt for your program to showcase and sell healthy menu items.



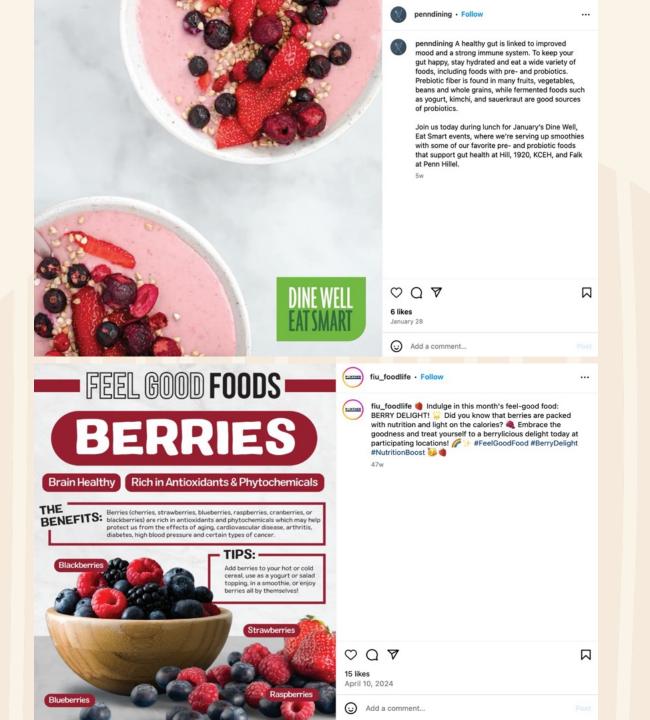
Image by Deepak Sethi. Licensed through iStock (Image ID: 1220922967)

Promote health benefits of menu options in cafeteria and online

reinforcing relevant attributes, from brain health to gut health.

Consider branding the offerings like "Dine Well Eat Smart" and "Feel Good Foods."

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Celebrate national food holidays

to highlight the taste, nutrition, and heritage of different foods.

Use enticing and descriptive names of these healthy dishes to make them more appealing.

du_dining_ · Follow HAP du_dining_ Happy National Hummus Day!!!! Fun fact ... Hummus has a history dating back to ancient Egypt (around the 13th century) 🥸 Get your fix today at 7spoons from 11a-2:30p Edited · 45w NATIONAL Hummus Day! QQV 22 likes May 13, 2024 Add a comment... DINING w wheatoncollegedining · Follow wheatoncollegedining How do you plan to celebrate National Avocado Day 7/31? With goodfor-you nutrients like potassium and heart-healthy fats, there's no reason not to celebrate creamy, tasty avocados all through the year. 31w vitty.with.2.ts Bought some avocados today! 🙌 🛛 😁 R 31w Reply O O V 19 likes July 31, 2024 Add a comment...



Expose students

to lesser-known fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and raise awareness of the health benefits.



What's !! What's !! that fruit?	 hokiedining - Follow hokiedining For everyone who guessed it was a rambutan - congrats, you're correct! This tropical southeast-Asian fruit is a cousin to the lychee, and the namesake of our soon-to-open Asian fusion restaurant. If you guessed right, you're automatically been entered into our sweepstakes leading up to the opening of Perry Place. Be on the lockout - if your rame is farawn, we will contact you with more information on how and when to claim your su-prize! # #hokiedining #VTdining 	,
	♥ Q ♥ 43 likes August 5, 2024	
	Add a comment	
Widnesday, March th WHOLE DAY FOR WHOLE GRAINS WHOLE GRAINS TASTE TEST OUR FARRO WITH MIXED MUSHROOMS RISOTTO 8 THE ZESTY BULGUR & LENTIL PILAE	 stanforddining · Follow stanforddining Celebrate the National Event: Who Day for Whole Grains by trying a whole grain you may not normally eat. We have Farro and Bulgur to taste test at Arrillaga Family Dining Commons dur lunch and Lakeside for dinner. #SampleWholeGrains #EatWell #wholegrains @wholegrains_council Edited · 101w wholegrains_council Sounds delicious! 101w Reply 	0
Location: Arrillaga Family Dining	♥ Q ♥ 42 likes March 29, 2023	
Commons during lunch service	Add a comment	

Or unfamiliar ingredients like seaweed



stanforddining and 2 others



Pag

stanforddining 2 of Have you ever eaten seaweed? Seaweed is not only delicious and sustainable, but is also high in fiber, vitamins, and antioxidants! Come and try some Wakame, Kale, & Quinoa Salad along with some Seaweed Infused

Pesto Pasta at Arrillaga today, from 11:30am to

56w

1:30pm! 🌿

calilifebylaila Seaweed is so versatile, one of my favorite foods. It's a great plant based option for fish lovers. $\hfill \bigtriangledown$

56w 2 likes Reply

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sohopen Amazing!! 56w 3 likes Reply

stanforddining #stanforddining #stanfordsdha #stanfordrde #stanfordfoodinstitute #sfi #tideshift #bluefoods #sustainableseafood #sustainableseaweed #seaweedtasting #wakamesalad #seaweedpestopasta #tastingtable #arrillagafamilydiningcommons

56w Renly



145 likes February 2, 2024

Add a comment...

Pos



Play up personalization

Offer DIY opportunities to have students customize a meal or snack, to 'make it my way.'







kstatedining Recap of the special build-your-own bowl event featuring Indian-inspired sauces!

FOODHELM



Offer guidance on how to build healthy meals in the cafeteria,

including this creative way using ChatGPT at Tulane.

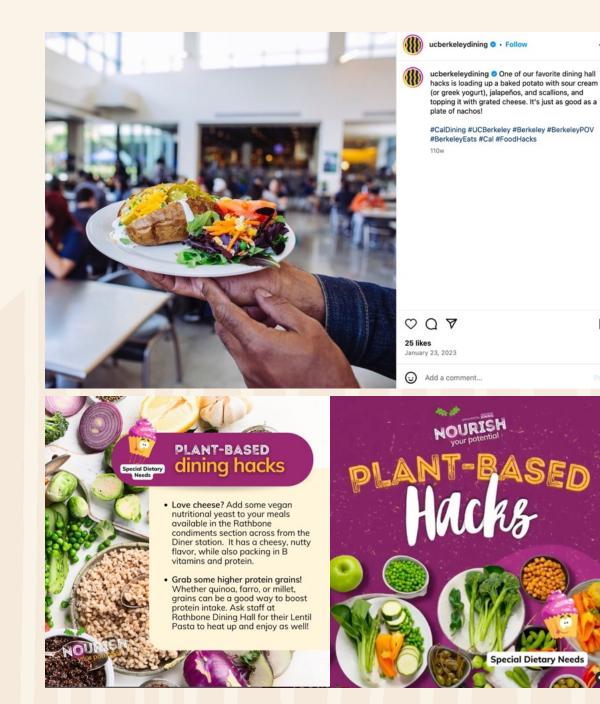


tulanehospitality Unsure what to eat for lunch? Ask ChatGPT We can all admit we've gotten pretty friendly with We can all admit we've gotten pretty friendly with ChatGPT in the past few years... Use AI in a new way by ChatGPT to create a balanced meal for you to enjoy at asking ChatGPT to create a balanced meal for you to enjoy at baste the Commons menu (found on Tulane.campusdish.com) into the ChatGPT textbox and watch AI work its magic



Share dining hacks to eat healthier

including tips that reinforce the delicious taste and impressive benefits of eating more plants.



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VEGETABL BUTCHER

REMINDER From beet "brats" to smoked carrot "lox," picking up vegetable butchery can provide a new twist on getting your vegetables.



emory_dining · Follow

emory_dining Treating your vegetables with a little TLC can create a meal packed with as much flavor and craveability as any meat-centric one. Why should you sharpen your knives and bring on the vegetables? Only 1 in 10 American adults get their recommended daily value of fruits and vegetables.

Learning vegetable butchery can help you bring more vegetables to your plate with inventive uses of plants that won't lead to "sensory-specific satiety," which is when you stop eating because you get tired of the food. (We get it. We've all been there!)

Get the buzz on vegetable butchery and the plant-forward recipes for Spanish-style Cauliflower Rice, Spaghetti Squash with Melted Leeks and Black Peppercorn, and Farro with Roasted Delicata Squash, Kale, and Sherry Vinaigrette at the link in our bio.

Will you give vegetable butchery a try? #TheBuzz #WellnessTips #PlantForward #PlantBased #EatYourVegetables

90w

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5 likes June 16, 2023



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emory_dining Colorful plates of food aren't just Instagram-worthy, they're more nutritious!

The pigments of various fruits and vegetables actually come from the presence of plant chemicals known as phytonutrients, so painting your plate with a variety of colors is the best way to make sure you get everything you need.

Red and pink foods like tomatoes, pink grapefruit, and red bell peppers prominently feature lycopene, an antioxidant that supports heart health. They also feature vitamin C, which helps support your immune system.

Beta-carotene gives foods like carrots, oranges, and sweet potatoes their bright orange color and converts to vitamin A in your body, which is essential for vision and immune function.

Antioxidants like lutein and zeaxanthin give dark leafy greens like spinach and collard greens their powerful health benefits. Cruciferous vegetables like broccoli are known to promote heart health and longevity!

Blue and purple foods contain anthocyanins, which are known to reduce inflammation and fight oxidative stress in the body. Although fruits come to

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7 likes 7 days ago

(...)

Add a comment...

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Create excitement

around plant-based items with chef challenges and recipe contests.



EARTH WEEK PLANT-BASED PROTEIN CHALLENGE





elondining · Follow

elondining Head to McEwen on Monday for the ultimate vegan cook-off: 11am-2pm 🖂 The Vegan vs The Non-Vegan is going down - two plantbased dishes packed with protein for you to sample and then vote for the winner. Con't miss out! #VeganCookOff #EarthWeek #HarvestTableCG

forwardfoodcollaborative What a fun event for Earth Week!

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xmunneyyy My moneys on Jonathan 👟 98w Reply

chaspoteatrice #goplants! 98w Reply

492

shoepornlover Hands down My vote is on @chefmylescooks of course 98w 1 like Reply

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ucberkeleydining O · Follow

ucberkeleydining Thanks for coming out to the first Plant-forward Recipe Challenge of the month! Our next challenge will be held at Foothill Dining Commons on Thursday, October 24, from 11-3PM.

A quick recap: our Berkeley Dining chefs have been challenged to create plant-based dishes featuring tofu, spotlighting one of Berkeley Dining's sustainable vendors: Hodo Soy, based in Oakland. Come try Foothill's recipe this Thursday before it runs out!

See you then! 😁

#BerkeleyEats #BerkeleyDining #BerkeleyPOV #Cal #UCBerkeley

eatimpactfood Yes go berkeley!! we love seeing more plant-forward dining options!

19w 1 like Reply

27 likes October 23, 2024

Add a comment..

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Involve students in the menu development process

including surveys, focus groups, student ambassadors and competitions to gather feedback and ideas.

Feature a 'recipes from home' series, including global foods.



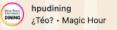




Offer nutrition, cooking and meal prep classes for students

Merchandise the fun on your social media channels.







FREE WORKSHOP

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DELICIOUS.

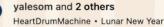
HEALTHY. INDULGENT.

meals at home.

🗰 MAR 20,27 + APR 3,10 🔗 4-5 PM **O** OGLETHORPE DINING COMMONS

eatingŏsmart







Show your support of eating local

Celebrate locally-grown, seasonal produce and local producers, including featured menu items and farmer events.





Connect students directly to **fresh produce**

making it easier and more enticing to eat fruits and vegetables: farmers market, produce boxes and dining dollars to buy fresh produce.







Y yalehospitality · Follow

yalehospitality Produce Box Pre-Orders: Go Live at 9AM 🦉 Enjoy the convenience of having our team pack an array of fresh offerings for YOU! This week's boxes featured heirloom tomatoes, escarole, kale, basil, garlic, rosemary, cucumbers, zucchini, peaches and more.

When do I need to pre-order by? Starts at 9am on Friday, July 14 but get your orders in before Monday, July 19 at 5pm!

What's in the box? Boxes are filled with a variety of the produce items we have available that week. The Small box for \$20 (feeds 2) and the Large box \$30 features identical items, with larger quantities. When will I pick up? Thursday 7/21 between 9am - 5pm

Where will I pick up? Next to Elm on the lower level of the Yale Schwarzman Center (168 Grove Street, at College Street intersection). Follow the signs!

Pre-Order via Link in Bio at 9am

#yale #yalehospitality #yaleuncommonmarket #campusdining #collegedining #indoormarket #freshproduce

60 likes July 15, 2022

cpcampusdining · Follow California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly)

Add a comment.

cpcampusdining Cal Poly students can buy fresh produce at Poly Produce on Mondays from 11 a.m. - 1 p.m. outside Market Grand Avenue using their Dining Dollars! Campus Dining also offers fresh fruits and vegetables at all of our markets across campus, including our amazing Salad Bar at Campus Market full of delicious options open Monday-Friday 10:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.

#calpoly #polyproduce

21w

amg1729_ At a 200% markup, of course

21w 3 likes Reply

danimca13 What about dinner and weekends for student 0 that live on campus?

21w 2 likes Reply

redwoodenjoyer This is a great start. Preferably students can buy local fresh produce during all business hours, every day.

21w 4 likes Reply

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C

235 likes October 7, 2024

Add a comment..

Show your values

Reinforce your commitment to sustainability, ethical sourcing, and social responsibility.





SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

with LUNDBERG FAMILY FARMS

April 25 fm 2:00 - 3:15 p.m. 209 DeBartolo Hall

In celebration of Earth Day, join us for an educational discussion with Lundberg Family Farms around sustainable agriculture.

Lundberg Family Farms produces the brown rice that's served in Notre Dame's dining halls.



Small Act. Big Impact.

Every meal is a chance to make a difference.



About a third of all humancaused greenhouse gas emissions are linked to food. But all food is not the same.



One of the most impactful things you can do for the environment is your choice of what you eat.



A-rated dishes signify low carbon impact while Erated dishes signal very high carbon impact.

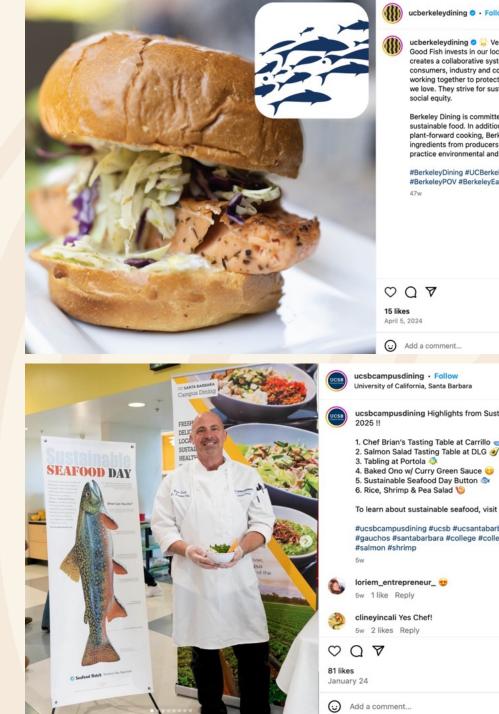
umassdining

DINING

Get students excited about fish and shellfish

Offer tastings of seafood dishes and reinforce your commitment to sustainable seafood.





ucberkeleydining O · Follow

ucberkeleydining 🥺 💥 Vendor Highlight 💥 Real Good Fish invests in our local fishing industry, which creates a collaborative system of fishermen and consumers, industry and conservationists, all working together to protect and celebrate the ocean we love. They strive for sustainable fishing and

Berkeley Dining is committed to serving nutritious & sustainable food. In addition to focusing on plant-forward cooking, Berkeley Dining prioritizes ingredients from producers that practice environmental and social responsibility.

#BerkeleyDining #UCBerkeley #Berkeley #BerkeleyPOV #BerkeleyEats #Cal

ucsbcampusdining Highlights from Sustainable Seafood Day

1. Chef Brian's Tasting Table at Carrillo 🥣

To learn about sustainable seafood, visit seafoodwatch.org

#ucsbcampusdining #ucsb #ucsantabarbara #ucsblife #gauchos #santabarbara #college #collegelife #seafood #fish

C

Students are passionate about environmental sustainability...

...and they want to know that you are too.

Yet "greenwashing" is quite common, and young people are increasingly skeptical and won't accept empty promises or false narratives.



ellecordova 🥏

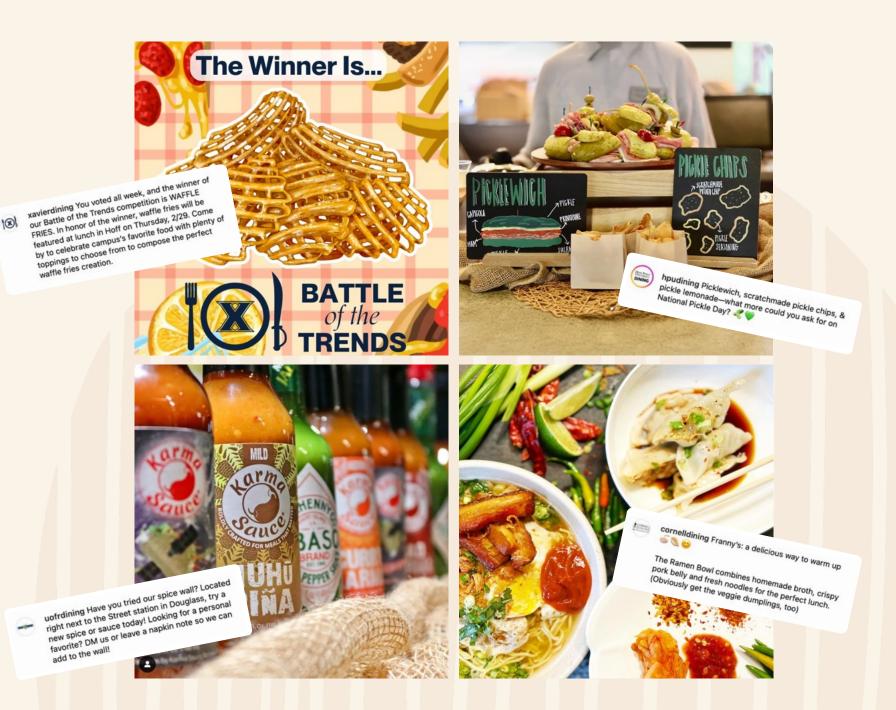


Get students involved in selecting trends they want offered

Feature a section of the cafeteria that offers a taste of the trends, with a better-foryou twist.

Introduce new foods featuring trending flavors, including global sauces.

FOODHELM



In summary, how are you telling your story online and IRL to nudge healthy, sustainable choices?



Think about ways you can...



Elevate the concept of 'healthy indulgence'

that Gen Z embraces, such as pairing salad with fries ('girl dinner 2.0').

Combine nutrient-rich ingredients with indulgent foods and flavors. SALAD & FRIES, NEED I SAY MORE?



ndcampusdining · Follow

ndcampusdining Mix and match your favorites to fuel your hunger. After a long day of classes, what could be better than a fresh salad and crispy fries?

#ndeats #campuseats

23w 1 like Reply

23w

hammesnotredame So true 🍀

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39 likes September 24, 2024

Add a comment...

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Bring excitement to fruits and vegetables

with bold flavors, colors, novelty and fun signage to generate interest in new items.





Showcase trending vegetables like mushrooms

in favorite familiar formats, highlighting nutrition and craveability.

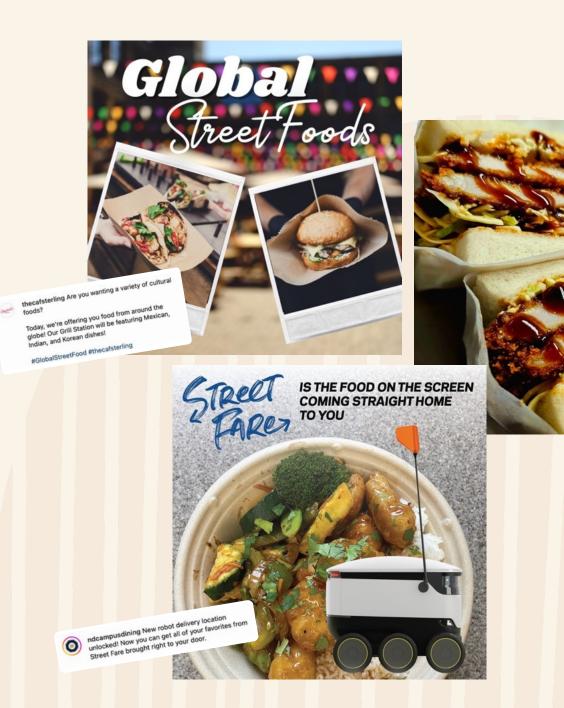


Plant Protein



Leverage interest in **global flavors**

especially trending street foods-to introduce new foods and generate interest in your program.



Ondcampusdining Street Fare Sandos for the wint 🥪 Craving something delicious? Try our new Chicken Sando or Durit Caurto, anoth sarvad with sur signative Caurto, Rairce the

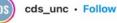
Craning sometring delicious? Ify our new Unicken Sando or Pork Sando, each served with our signature Sando Sauce that extense exacts hits to the nevel found

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Be authentic and transparent

in sharing stories about your sourcing and commitment to environmental sustainability.





cds_unc Curious about all the compost boards at our dining halls and our food waste efforts?

Victoria is dedicated to improving the environmental and social sustainability of our operations through local and responsible sourcing, waste diversion, and increasing food access. Most importantly, she wants to help students make sustainable dining choices here at Carolina and beyond.

Her favorite meal is Chase's shrimp and grits! (Fun fact: We buy exclusively North Carolina shrimp in the dining halls ())

If you have questions about sustainability at CDS or want to get involved, you can reach her via email at vlhill@ad.unc.edu or check out our website for more information. You can also sign up for our monthly Growth newsletter to stay up to date on upcoming events and new initiatives.

#gdtbath #wellfedandhappy #unc

Edited · 43w

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68 likes May 22, 2024

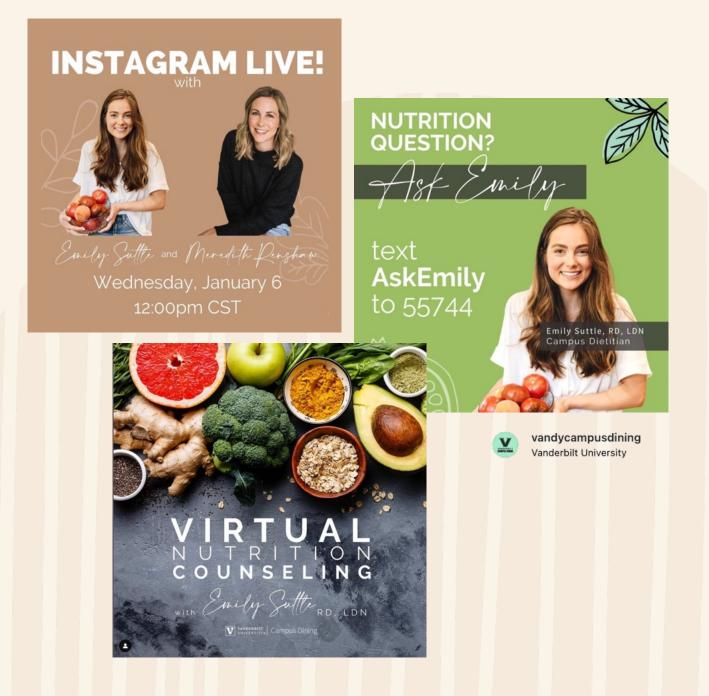
Add a comment...

Pos



Be creative in elevating the role of your campus registered dietitians

from featured menu items to Instagram Live and virtual nutrition counseling.





Never forget that people eat with their eyes first

So, don't underestimate the significant impact visual cues have on our perception of food, even influencing taste and enjoyment.







Thank you!

Questions?

