



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

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UMass Chef Culinary Conference  
June 9, 2025







# Gen Z





**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.





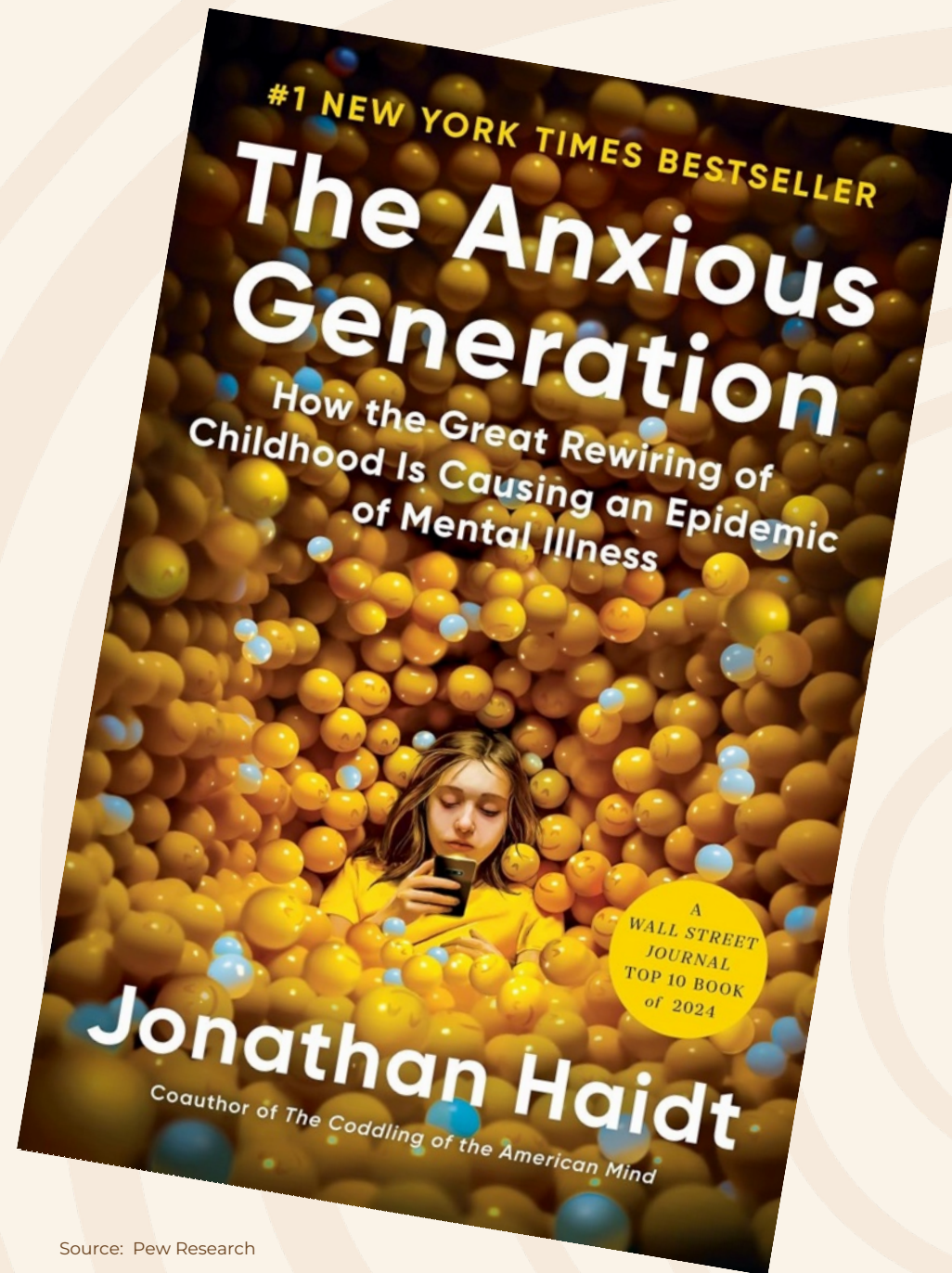
**Purpose-driven consumers**  
that put a high emphasis on  
authenticity, transparency, and  
social responsibility, including  
environmental stewardship.



## 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.



Source: Pew Research



# Managing stress and mental health

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

64%

are actively preventing or treating stress and anxiety



86%

agree that mental and emotional balance is as important as physical health



#littletreat



59%

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



# 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.

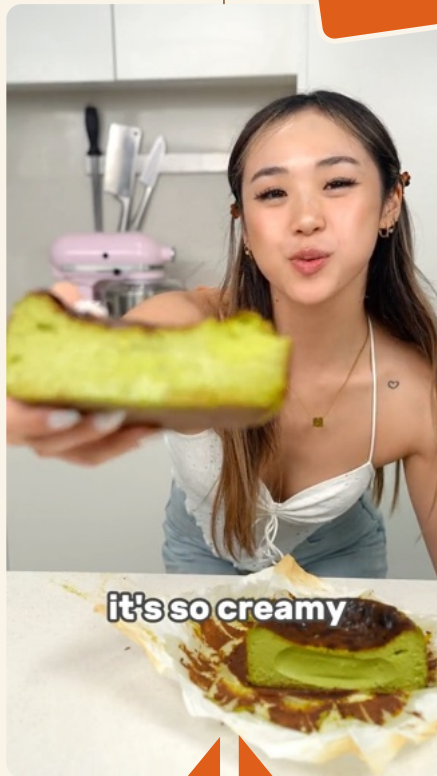


# Desire for desserts that cue health

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

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

Matcha Basque  
Cheesecake



+41%  
Matcha  
on menus

1,963  
Matcha  
retail products

#healthydesserts  
385M  
views on Tiktok



Ube Crinkle  
Cookies

Avocado  
Truffles



Date  
Brownies



# 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.”

Goodpop and Ore-Ida  
French Fry Pop



Hormel Black Label Bacon  
with Cinnamon Toast Crunch



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





Simplicity, humor, imperfection, and maximum sensory impact: vibrant colors, textures, and bold flavors.

## 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.

Cottage cheese flatbread, the new cauliflower pizza crust?

Love of hacks and innovative use of old ingredients in new ways.



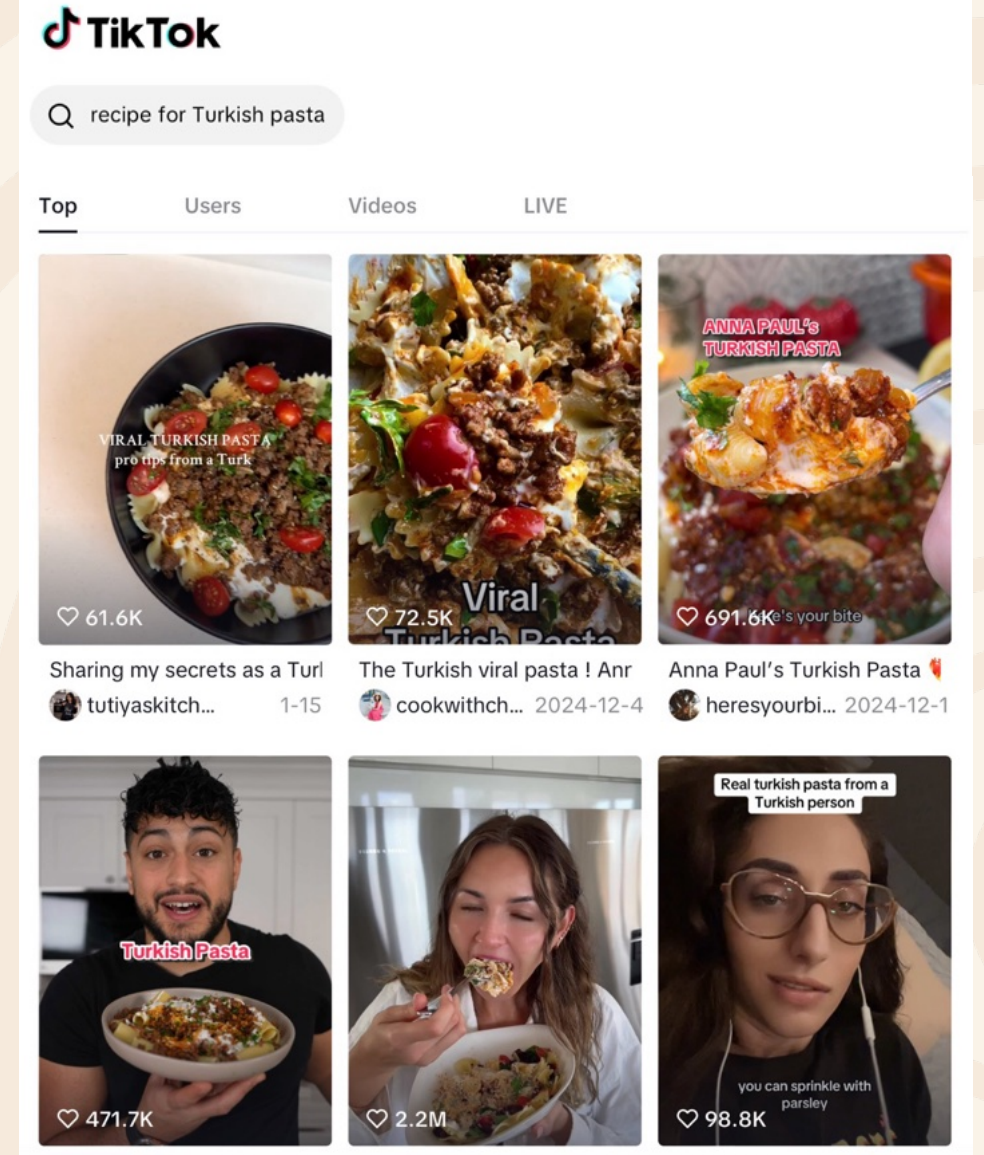
Kawaii culture indulges in cuteness, including pastels, animal, and flower motifs.

**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.





# Embracing global cuisines

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

**Tteokbokki Rice**  
Popular Korean street food



Top 10  
restaurant  
trend

**Buldak Chicken**  
Korean "fire" chicken



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



**Korean-Mexican Mashup**  
Birria ramen



# 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.

## Cottage Cheese

Pasta, eggs, flatbread, and more



## Protein-Grain Bowls

Meal-planning favorite



## Greek Yogurt

Sweet and savory



## Foodservice

## Retail

# Growing preference for plant-forward eating

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



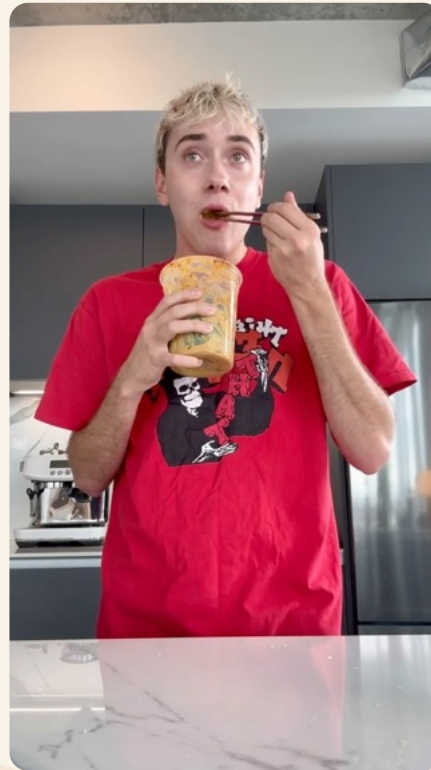


# Big love of pickles and cucumbers

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

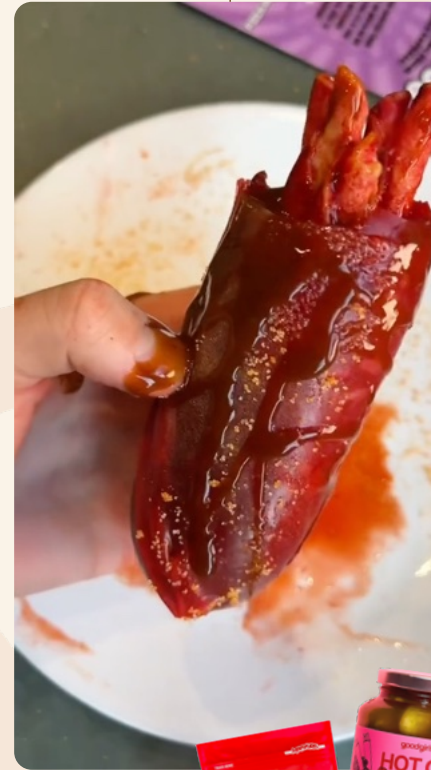
## Pickle Snacks

Chamoy and other flavors



## Pickle Pizza

The new pineapple pizza



## Cucumber Salads

Viral TikTok series by Logan





# Gen Z is crazy for condiments

Seeking heat, sweet-heat (swicy), tart, and umami flavors.

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

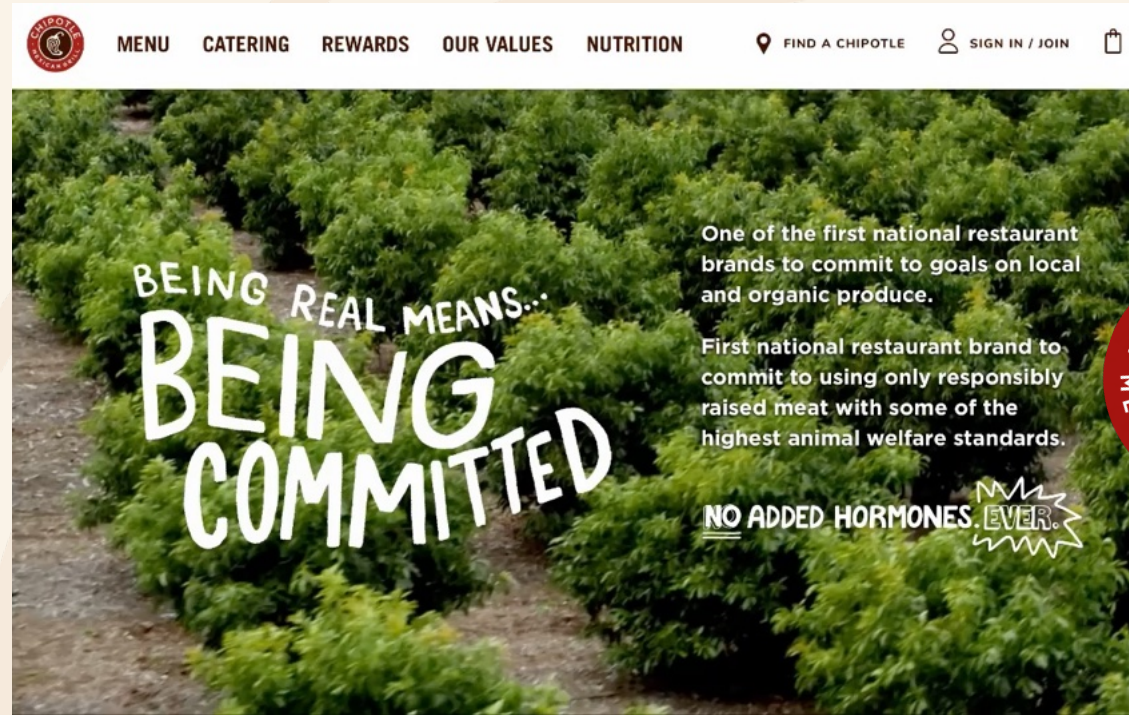




## Known as the sustainability generation

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.





## 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.





A young woman with long dark hair, wearing round sunglasses and a pink shirt, is smiling broadly while holding two ice cream cones. The cones have yellow and red scoops. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with other people.

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



A hand is shown holding a small white plate with shredded white cabbage and orange carrots. The plate is being held over a cafeteria-style food line. In the background, several other plates and bowls containing similar shredded vegetables are visible, arranged in a row. The lighting is bright, and the focus is on the hand and the plate it is holding.

## 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

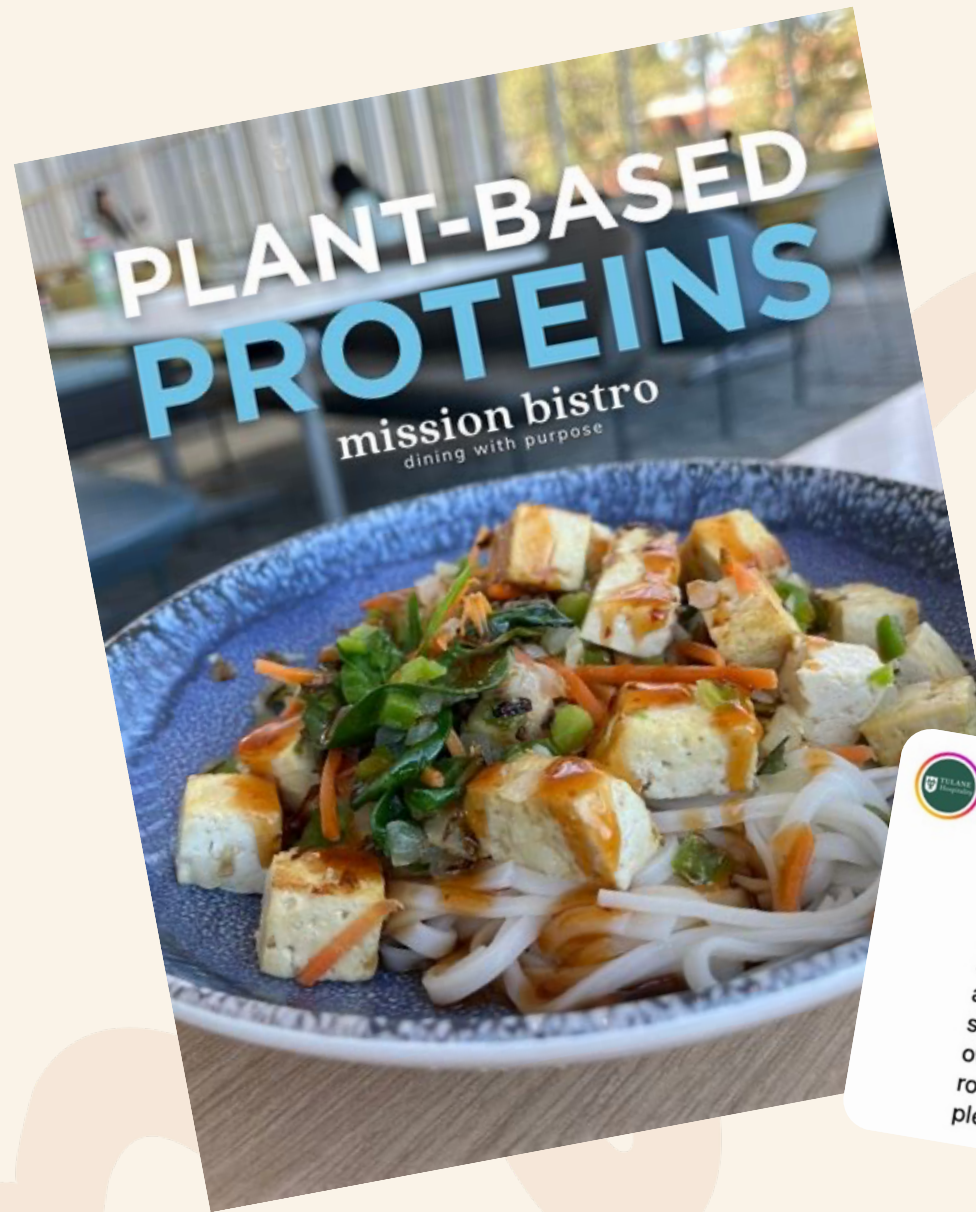


ohiostatedine



## Default options

Setting the default meal option to a healthier choice—such as plant-based 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!! 🥕🌱 Attention all vegetarians, 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 plentiful plant-based pleasures!

# 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."

emory\_dining Curious about unusual vegetables? Meet #fennel, a fresh aromatic vegetable that can be eaten raw, sautéed, roasted or even be the star in soups and sauces. Head to marketplace today to try it in our #madefromscratch Italian sausage and fennel soup.

Still looking to spice things up today? Add a few dashes of @atburns hot sauce. It's local, it's 🌶️, and it's available at DCT now.



## KNOW YOUR FOOD

**VG** Vegan

**AG** Avoiding Gluten

**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 eating easier! 🌱

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.



 **ucberkeleydining** Starting the week off right with some fresh fruit! 🍏🍏  
Thanks to all who filled out our student survey earlier this month. And congratulations to our gift card winners Soph M., Robyn L., and Maggie L!  
#Berkeley #BerkeleyFoodie



 **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 fennel chickpeas and figs, and roasted carrots with vegetables and agave - enjoy the fall harvest with vegetables 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.



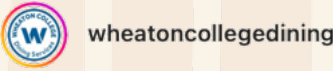
elondining



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.







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



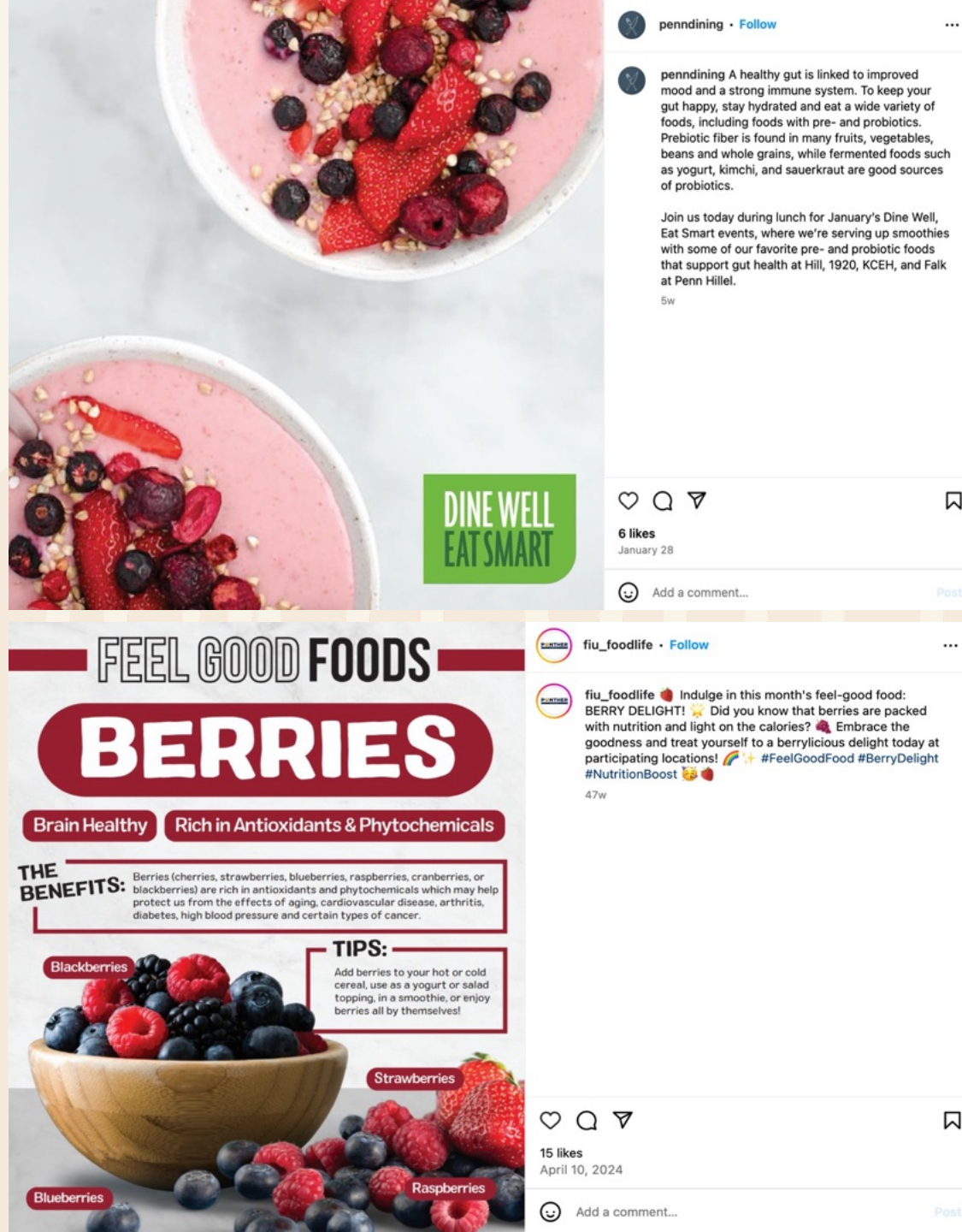
And how you can  
adapt for your program  
to showcase and sell  
healthy menu items.



# Promote health benefits of menu options in cafeteria and online

reinforcing relevant attributes, from brain health to gut health.

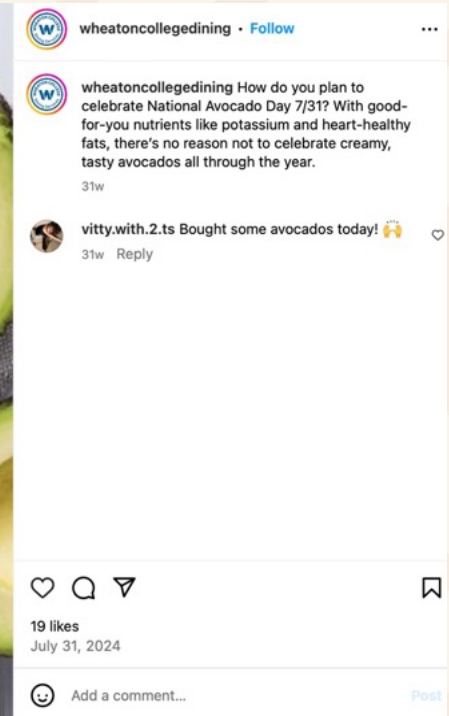
Consider branding the offerings like “Dine Well Eat Smart” and “Feel Good Foods.”



# Celebrate national food holidays

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

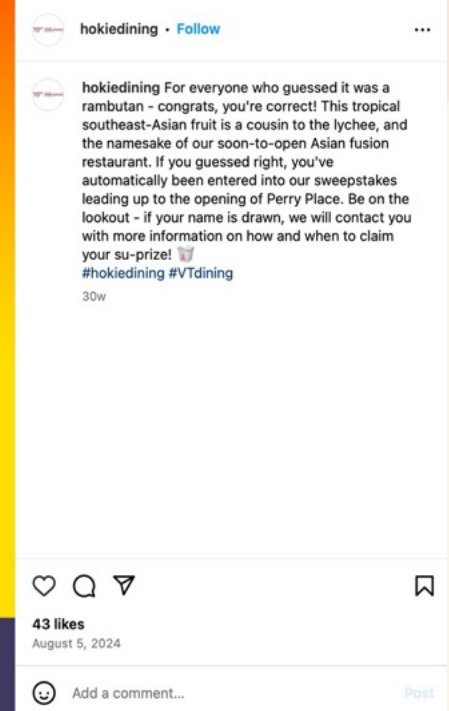
Use enticing and descriptive  
names of these healthy dishes to  
make them more appealing.





# Expose students

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



Or unfamiliar  
ingredients  
like seaweed





## 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!



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

including this creative way  
using ChatGPT at Tulane.

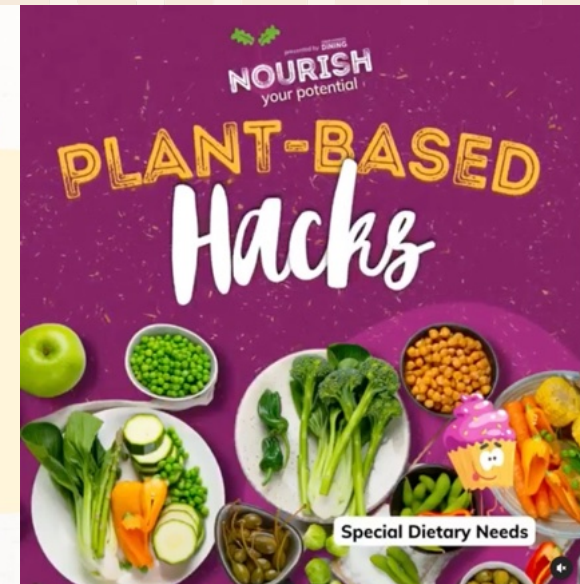
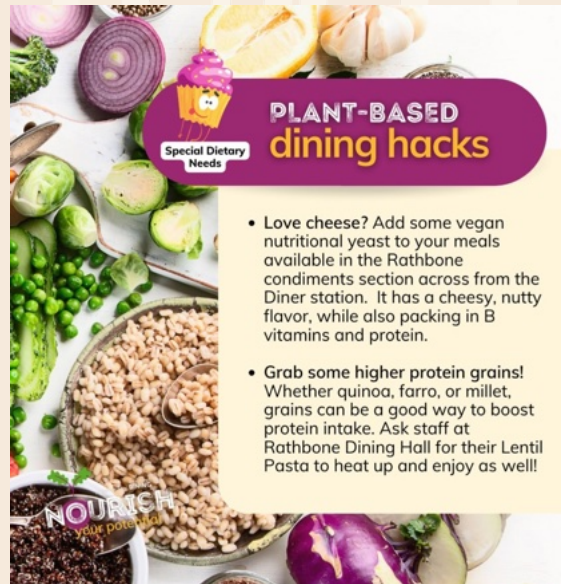
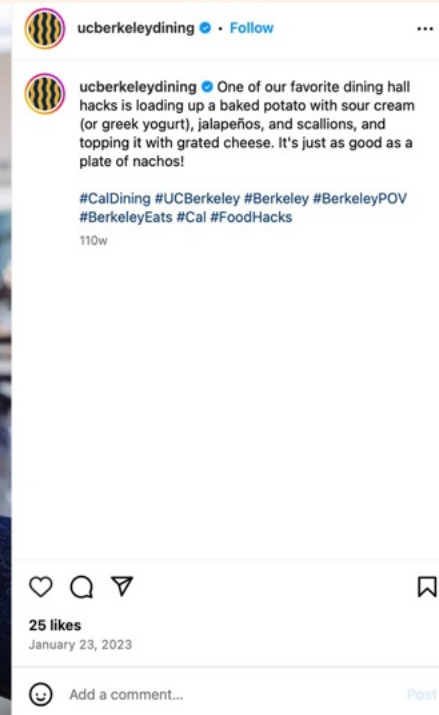


tulanehospitality Unsure what to eat for lunch? Ask ChatGPT! 🤖 We can all admit we've gotten pretty friendly with ChatGPT in the past few years... Use AI in a new way by asking ChatGPT to create a balanced meal for you to enjoy at the Malkin Sacks Commons! 🍔 🥗 🥤 Simply copy and paste the Commons menu (found on [Tulane.campusdish.com](https://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.







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



5 likes

June 16, 2023



Add a comment...

Post





emory\_dining · [Follow](#)



**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



7 likes

7 days ago



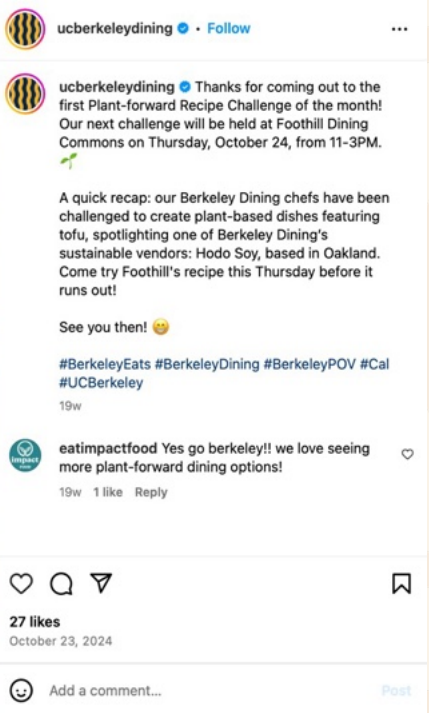
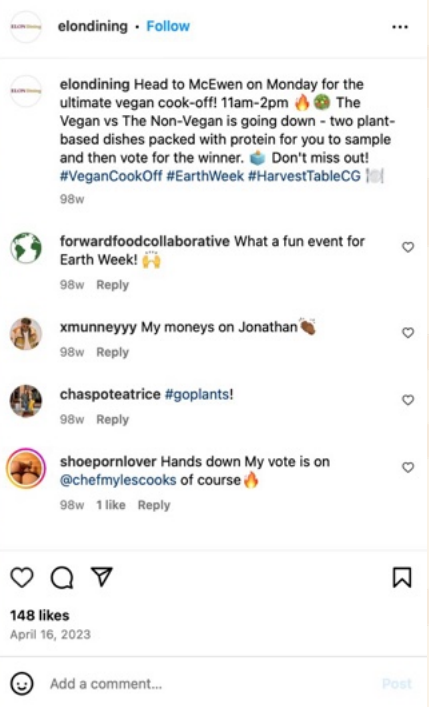
Add a comment...

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# Create excitement

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

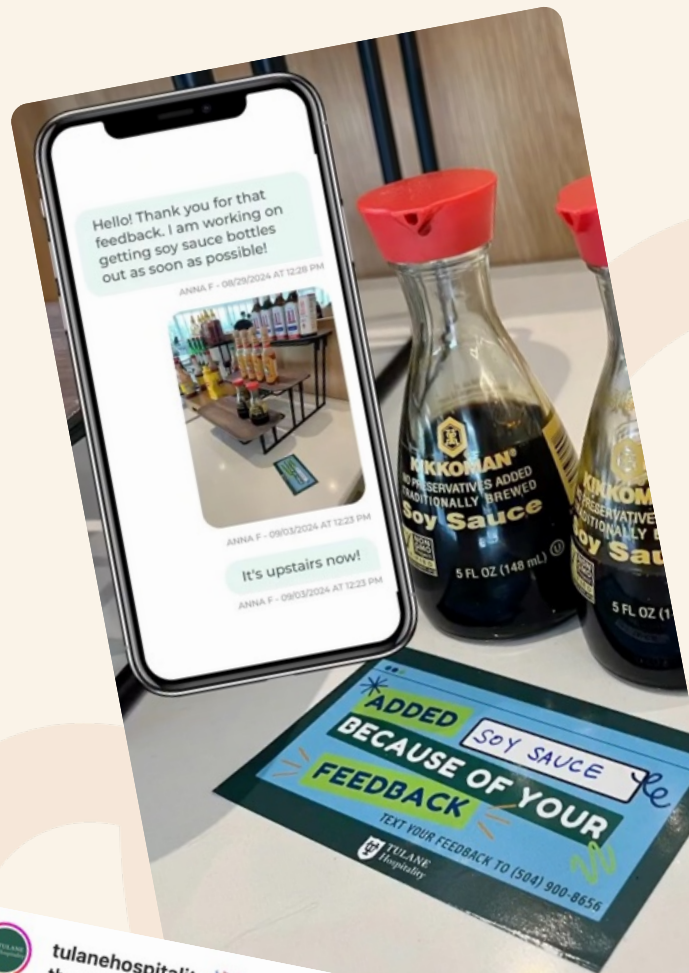




# Involve students in the menu development process

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.



hpudining  
¿Téo? • Magic Hour



FREE, But Sign-Up Required  
For Participation (limit 10  
students)  
Thursday, March 21st 5:30-7 pm  
Iacocca Cafe-Mountaintop

with  
DIETITIAN,  
KERI LASKY,  
MS, RD, LDN



yalesom and 2 others  
HeartDrumMachine • Lunar New Year



# Show your support of eating local

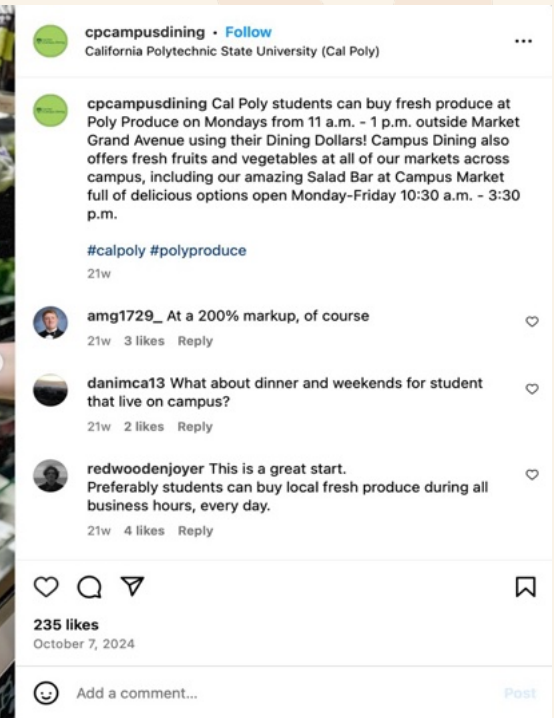
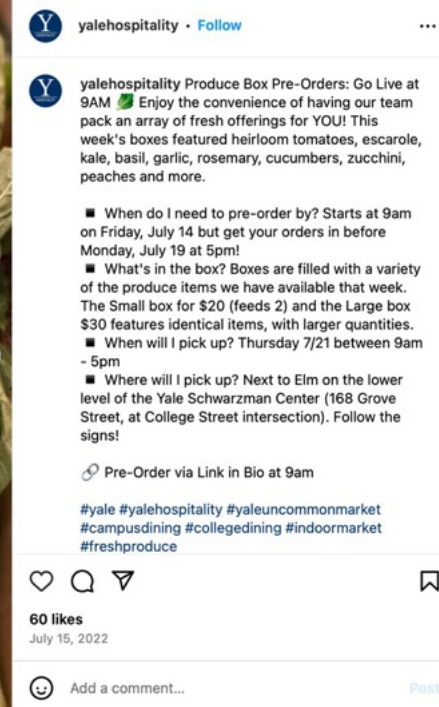
Celebrate locally-grown, seasonal produce and local producers, including featured menu items and farmer events.





# 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.





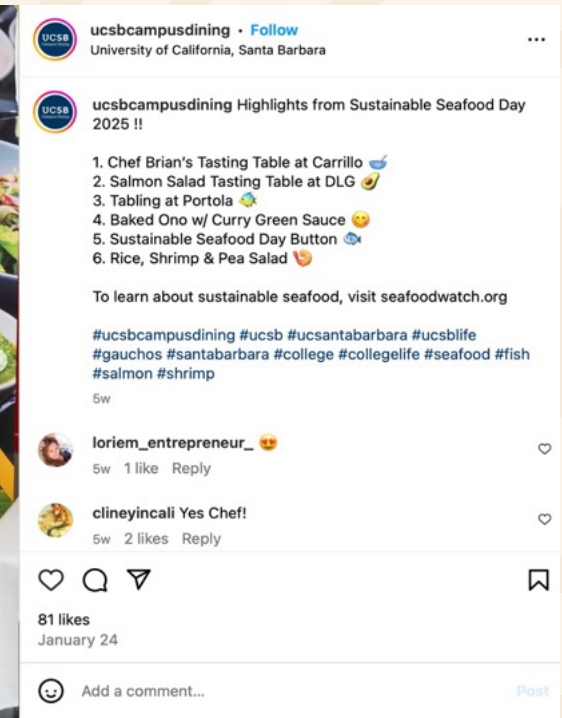
# Show your values

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



# Get students excited about fish and shellfish

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

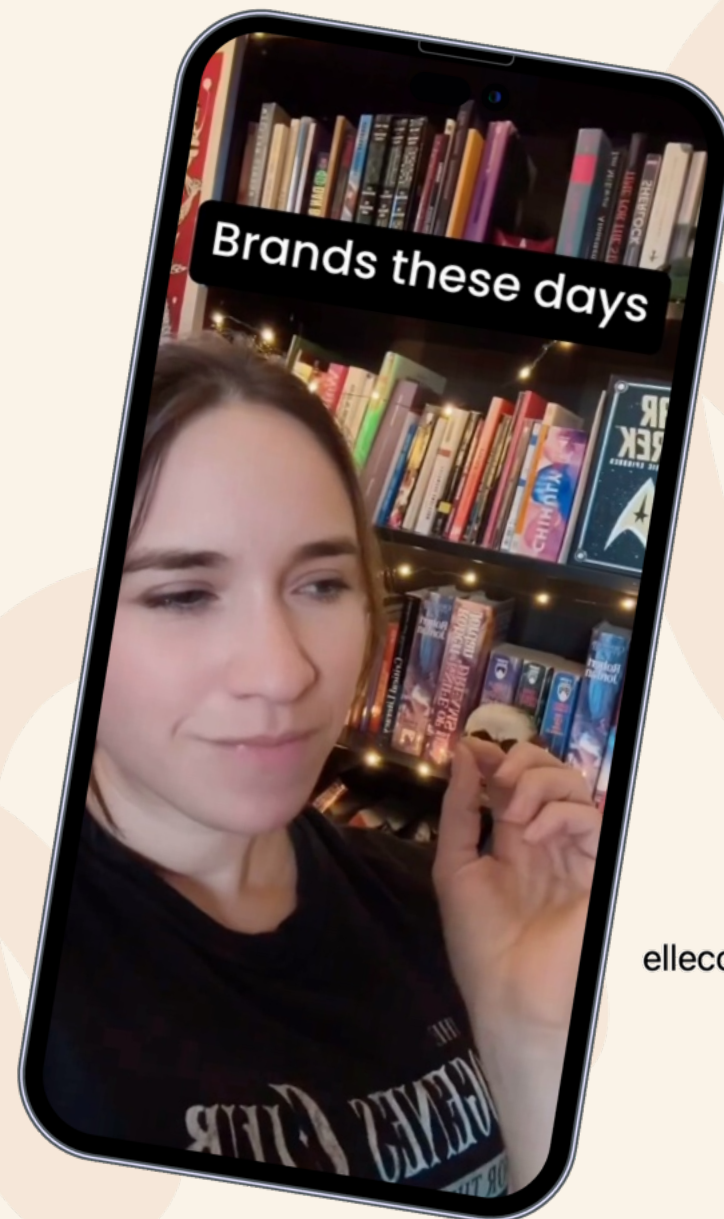





# Students are passionate about environmental sustainability...

...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.

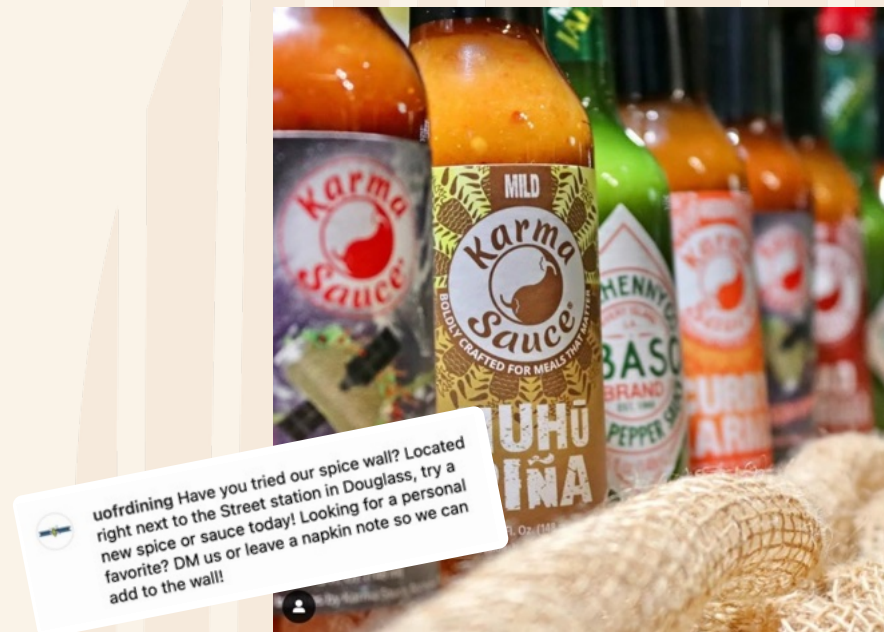


ellecordova 

# 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-for-you twist.

Introduce new foods featuring trending flavors, including global sauces.





A photograph of three young adults, two women and one man, sitting at a table and eating. They are all smiling and looking down at their food. The woman on the left has long dark hair and is wearing a light-colored top. The woman in the middle has dark hair tied back and is wearing a purple t-shirt. The man on the right is wearing a red beanie and a yellow t-shirt. They are holding glasses and plates of food. The background is a bright, out-of-focus indoor space.

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





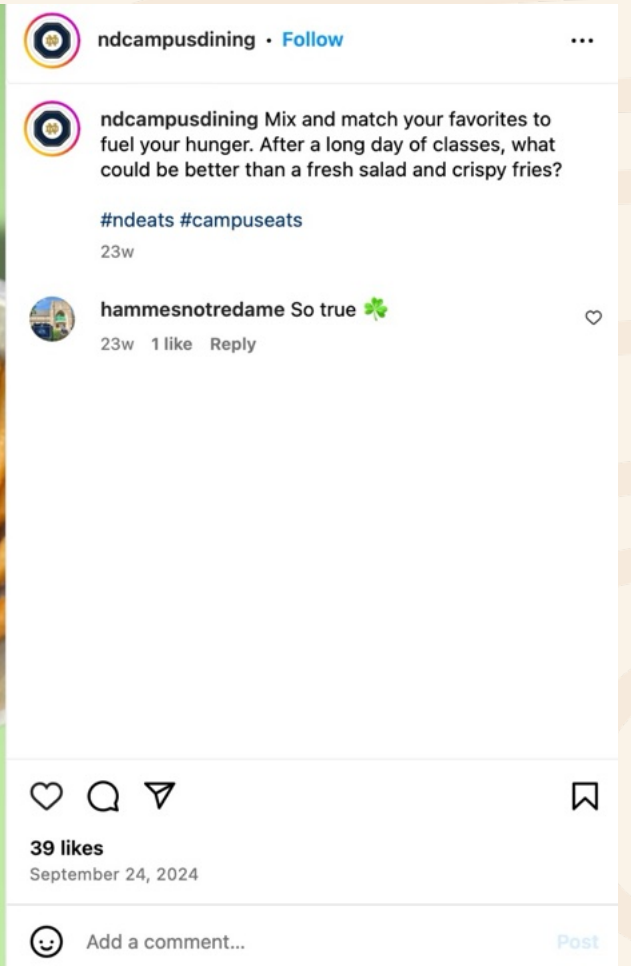
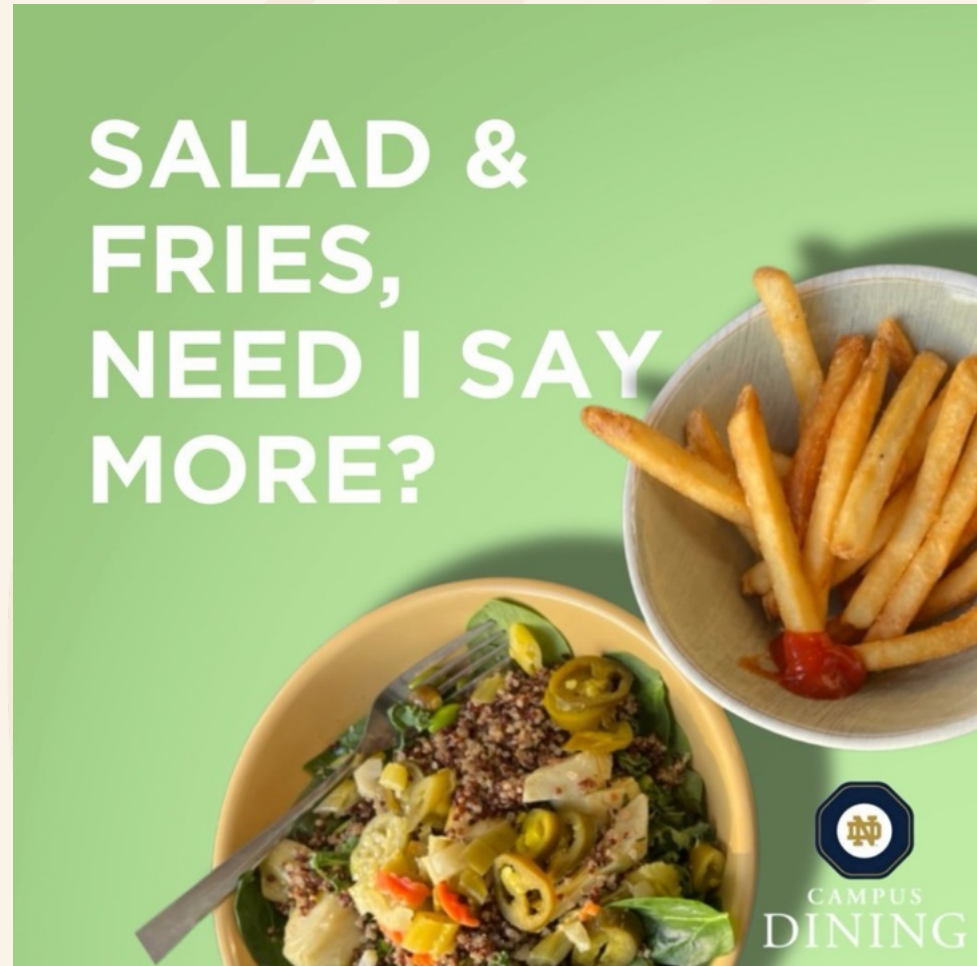
**Think about  
ways you can...**



# 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.



# 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.



emory\_dining



lehighdining




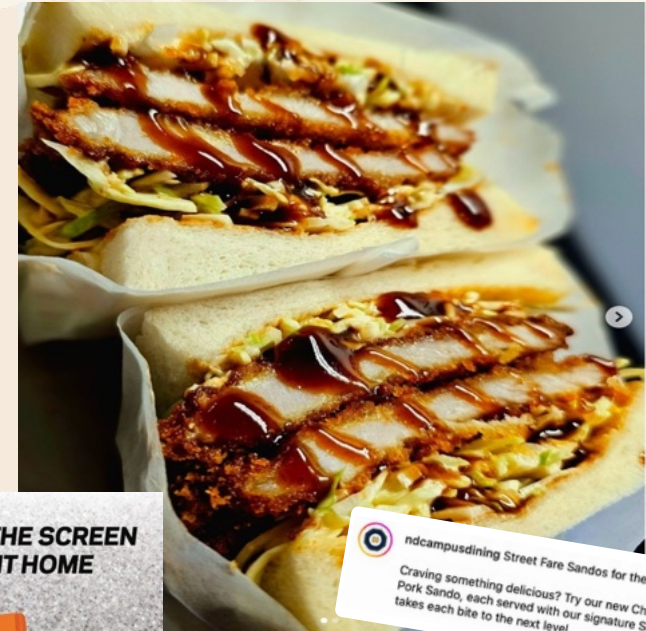
fiu\_foodlife

# Leverage interest in global flavors

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




 thecafsterling Are you wanting a variety of cultural foods?  
Today, we're offering you food from around the globe! Our Grill Station will be featuring Mexican, Indian, and Korean dishes!  
#GlobalStreetFood #thecafsterling



 ndcampusdining Street Fare Sandos for the win! 🍔  
Craving something delicious? Try our new Chicken Sando or Pork Sando, each served with our signature Sando Sauce that takes each bite to the next level.

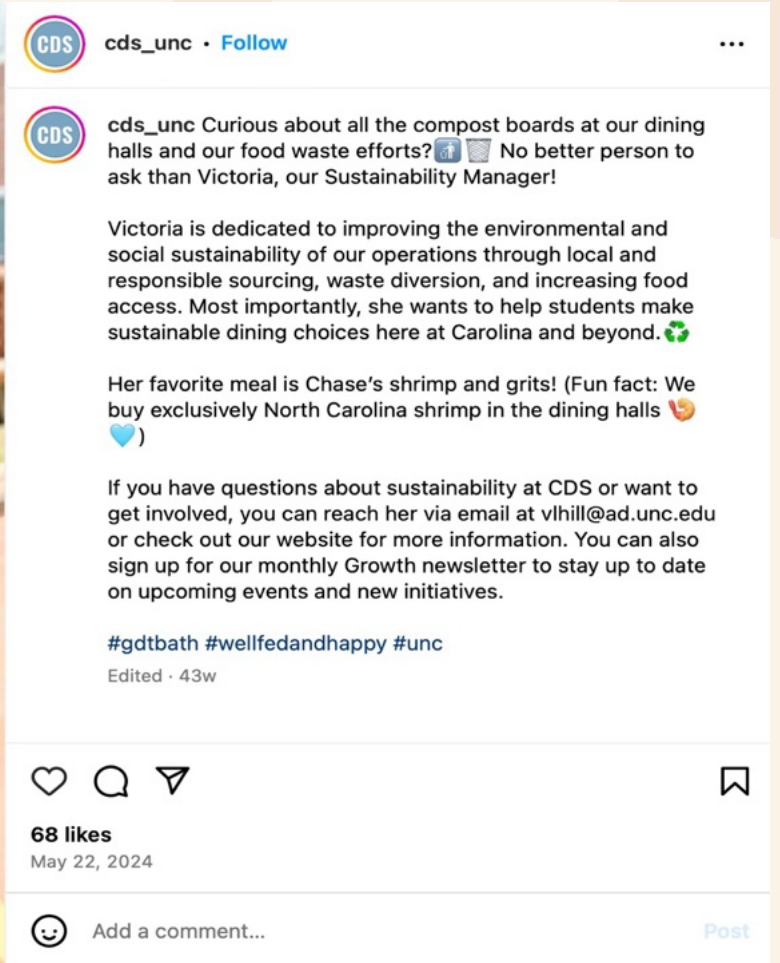


 ndcampusdining New robot delivery location unlocked! Now you can get all of your favorites from Street Fare brought right to your door.



# Be authentic and transparent

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



# 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?



Image from Elon Dining Services (@elondining) on Instagram. Posted October 21, 2024