



**Chef Culinary
CONFERENCE 2026**



DATASSENTIAL

So, What's Good? The State of Food, the Economy, and Trends

PRESENTED BY

**Renee Lee Wege, Trendologist &
Senior Publications Manager**



Agenda

State of The Economy

How Operators are Coping

What's Good With Consumers

Trends Taking Off





Renee Lee Wege

Datassential Trendologist & Senior Publications Manager

[renee@ datassential.com](mailto:renee@datassential.com)

momager/CMO

DATASSENTIAL ONE

The Global Authority in Food & Beverage
Intelligence, Accelerated by AI

Insights that drive action.
Outcomes that drive revenue.

AI-accelerated intelligence built to fuel clarity and
confidence for actionable food & beverage decisions.
Powered by Datassential One.

INDUSTRY INSIGHTS

Access presentation-ready intelligence instantly

MENU & CONSUMER DATA

Personalize and validate your innovation strategy

CHAIN BENCHMARKING

Monitor competitors and compare pricing

SALES INTELLIGENCE

Target high-potential opportunities and boost your conversion rate

WHAT FOODIES ARE SAYING

TOP CONVERSATION THEMES

- | | | |
|----|--|--------|
| 1. | Comforting and Flavorful Shrimp Dinner Recipes | 15,420 |
| 2. | Soft Lemon and Berry Summer Cookies | 14,256 |
| 3. | Creamy Vegetarian Comfort Dinners with Freshness | 13,986 |
| 4. | Affordable Southeast Asian Street Food Pricing | 12,072 |
| 5. | Easy No-Bake Creamy Fruit Cheesecakes | 11,893 |

Ask a question in any food, flavor, or beverage to get started.

What snacks are more popular with Costco shoppers?

What the most polarizing vegetables?

What are the most loved non-alcoholic beverages among F&B Casuals visitors?

What are the most loved pizza varieties in the US?

AI Search

What desserts do foodies love most?

Do consumers like pickles more once they try them?

Is consumer affinity for gochujang growing, and with which

Which pizza varieties appeal most among convenience store users?

DIPPING SAUCES

inception

adoption

proliferation

ubiquity

DATASSENTIAL AI

BEST-IN-CLASS DATA & AI

Leverage proprietary data and AI built for the F&B industry

Contact us and explore the possibilities at Datassential.com.

© 2026 Datassential. All Rights Reserved.

DATASSENTIAL





CONSUMERS ARE FEELING THE SQUEEZE

49.8

Consumer Sentiment (Apr)
Down from 53.3 in March;
4.6% below a year ago

17.9%

Energy Inflation YoY (Apr)
Gas averaging \$4.24/gal,
up 28.4% from last year

overall U.S. unemployment

4.3%



4.5% in Nov. 2025
(a relative high)

foodservice unemployment

5.9%



7.1% in Feb. 2026





FOOD INFLATION IS WIDENING THE PRICE GAP

3.6%

Food-Away-From-Home
inflation (Apr 2026)
vs. 2.9% at grocery

3.8%

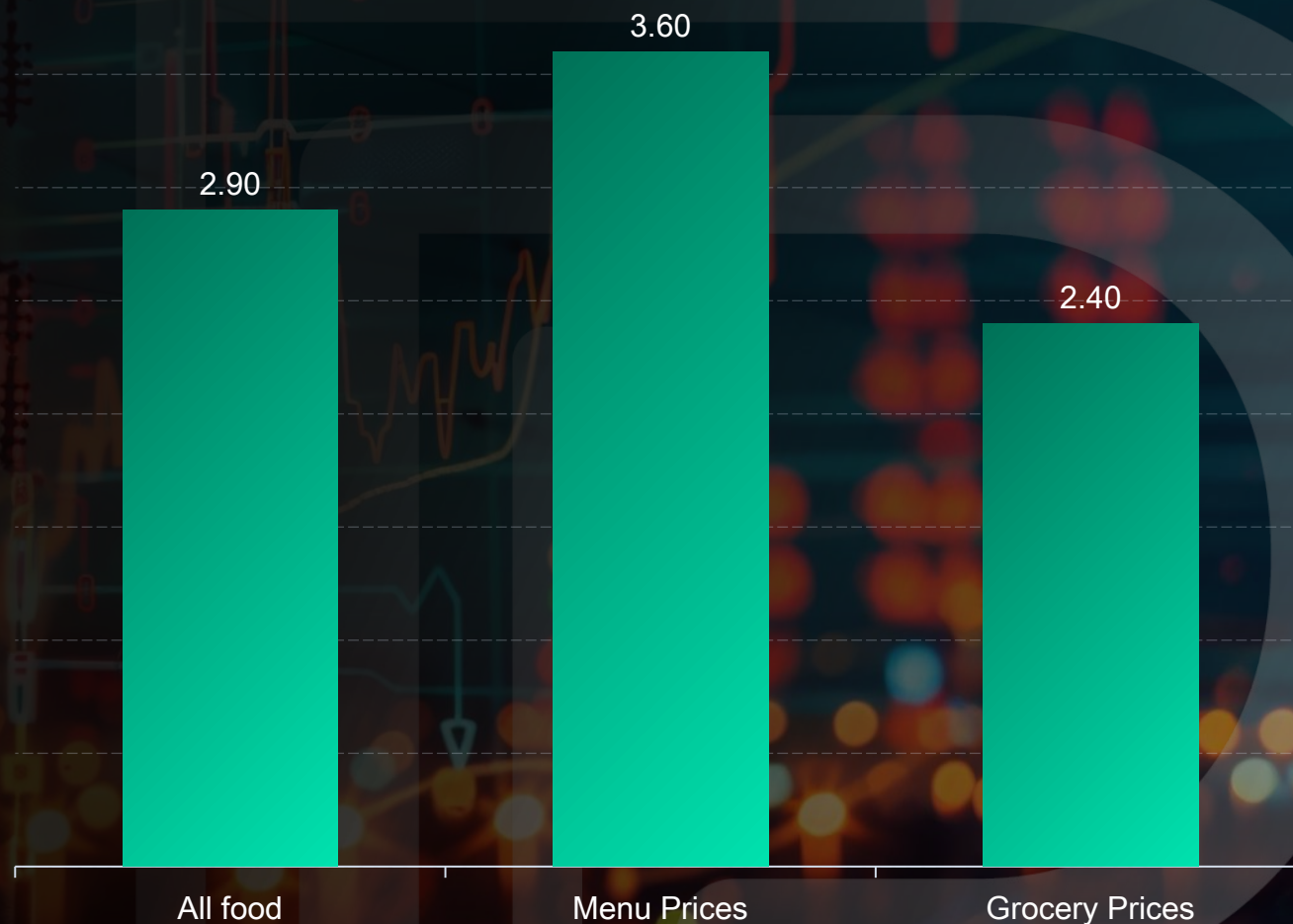
Full-service meal price
Inflation (Apr 2026)
(limited-service: +3.2%)



**Looking ahead,
food price inflation
is expected to
continue to grow
through 2026.**

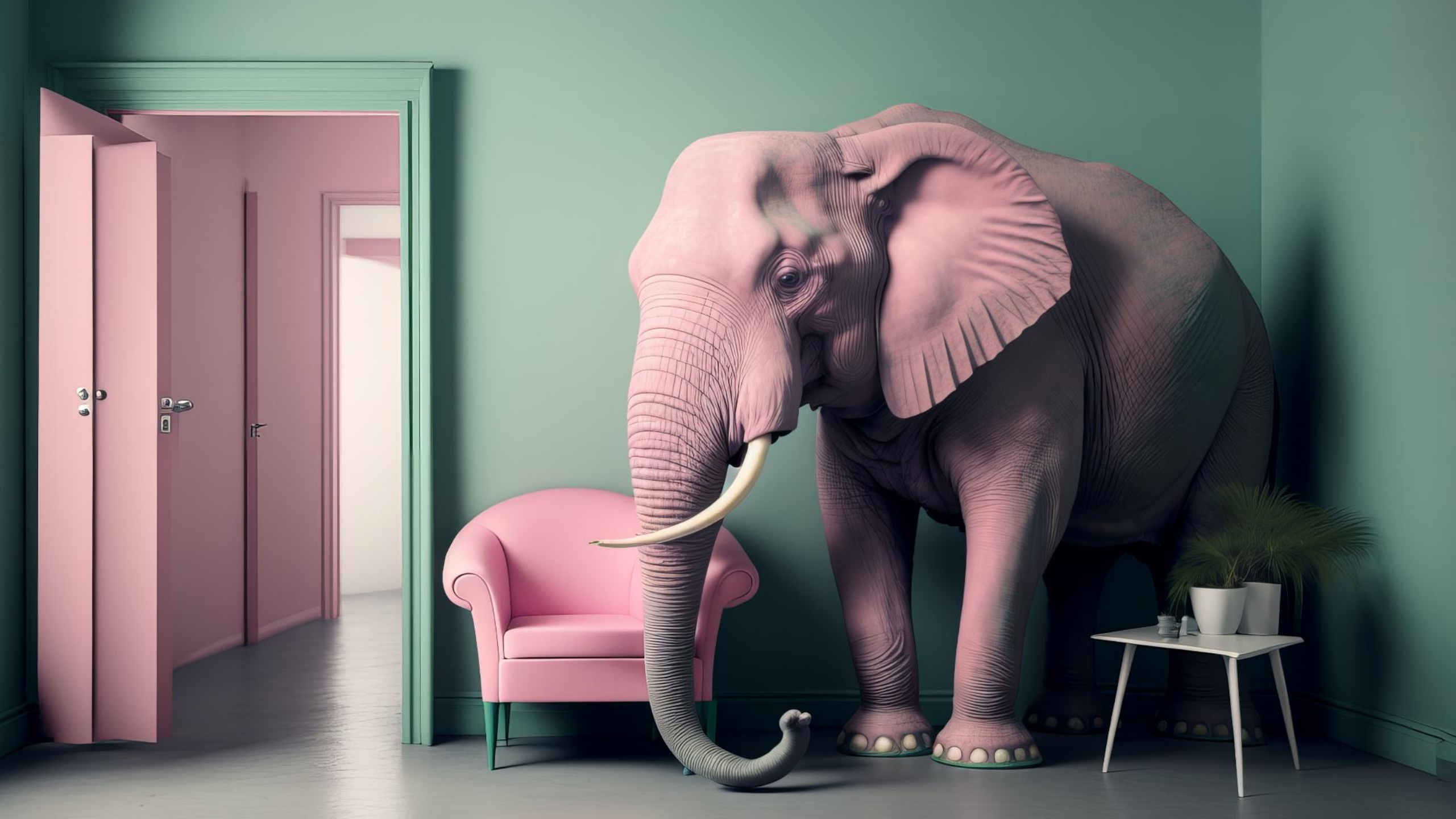
SOURCE: USDA, Economic
Research Service, Food Price
Outlook April 2026 Update

INFLATION EXPECTATIONS



Operators' Top Challenges

Food costs	76%
Labor costs	56%
Labor recruitment / hiring	31%
Retaining current staff	26%
Customers reducing how much they spend	22%





TARIFFS ARE MAKING OPERATORS' TOUGH JOBS EVEN TOUGHER

85%

of operators say
food
costs increased in
the last year

48%

say tariffs make it
hard to maintain
affordable menu prices

Operator: Sales Expectation For The Upcoming Month

**53% of operators
expect sales will be
higher next month**

**31% expect sales will
be the same**





OPERATORS ARE RUNNING OUT OF ROOM FOR PRICE INCREASES

76%

of operators raised
menu prices in the
past 12 months

58%

fear losing customers
if prices rise
any further



VALUE REMAINS THE COMPETITIVE BATTLEGROUND

92%

of operators say delivering strong value is a core priority

32% vs 10%

Untapped opportunity: consumers want overall discounts; only 1 in 10 operators currently offer them

What are consumers' most pressing issues?

Inflation / rising cost of living 71%

Healthcare 59%

Political instability & polarization 58%

International conflicts & crises 57%

A recession 54%

Consumers' financial situation

10% “I am getting ahead financially right now”

72% “I am getting by”

18% “Money is tight, and I am falling behind”



Consumer: Dining Out Expectation For The Upcoming Month

**41% of consumers
expect to dine out just
as often as last month**

**34% expect to dine out
less often or stop
completely**



How are consumers trying to save while dining at a restaurant?

Order fewer or no beverages with my meal	27%
Choose more affordable venues than usual	26%
Order cheaper menu items than usual	26%
Look for deals on restaurant apps or delivery apps	25%
Order fewer or no add-ons (appetizers, sides, etc.)	23%



TRENDS TAKING OFF



1. NEXT-GEN GLOBAL

Global food is requisite in today's world: here's where consumer taste buds are traveling next



CONSUMERS ARE 3.3x
more likely to
EAT GLOBAL CUISINES
AFH than at home



pop quiz!

**WHAT IS THE FASTEST-
GROWING CUISINE TYPE IN
THE U.S.?
A. AFRICAN
B. INDIAN
C. KOREAN**

FASTEST GROWING CUISINE TYPE

African

DEC '19 → DEC '25

1,425 openings

899 closures

+34.98% unit growth





FASTEST GROWING CUISINE TYPES

African

+34.98%



FASTEST GROWING CUISINE TYPES

Korean

+34.86%



FASTEST GROWING CUISINE TYPES

Indian

+33.65%



FASTEST GROWING CUISINE TYPES

South American

+31.23%



FASTEST GROWING CUISINE TYPES

Coffee / Bakery

+23.52%





30%

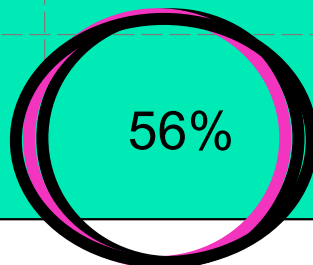
**OF U.S. CONSUMERS
WANT TO TRY THE NOT
SHRIMP & GRITS FROM
DAKAR NOLA**

West African thiéré (millet), Gulf shrimp, and tamarind jus.



WHAT CUISINES DO CONSUMERS WANT TO SEE AT RESTAURANTS NEAR THEM?

	Total	Gen Z	Millennials	Gen X	Boomers
Italian	64%	52%	64%	67%	68%
Mexican	62%	55%	63%	63%	62%
Chinese	57%	56%	56%	56%	60%



52%

**OF U.S. CONSUMERS ARE
INTERESTED IN “NEW CHINESE”
CONCEPTS (MASHUPS/FUSION,
REGIONAL CHINESE, ETC.)**





LEFT: Gnocchi Mapolese featuring beef cheek ragu, doubanjiang, and whipped tofu. RIGHT: Onion Dip with warm shrimp chips. | Geovedì, Honolulu, HI

37%
of consumers
want to try
dumpling
lasagna



Dumpling lasagna with duck sausage, mushroom ramen broth, egg roll dough, chili crunch, green onion at Rioja in



2. VIBE + EXPERIENCE

Now more than ever, consumers want their restaurant/food experiences to wow and excite them. Here's how to do it.





When forced to choose, most consumers say that enjoying the experience is the most important part of dining out, more so than saving money.

What Is The Most Important Aspect Of Dining Out?

59% it is most important to enjoy the experience

32% it is most important to save money

TREEHOUSE CHICAGO

ON WEDNESDAYS WE DO

GIRL DINNER AND CHICK FLICKS

\$15 GIRL DINNER SPECIAL
MARTINI, CAESAR SALAD & PARMESAN FRIES
MARTINI OPTIONS: DIRTY, COSMO, OR ESPRESSO

WED MAY 27
HOW TO Lose a Guy IN 10 DAYS



MOVIE STARTS AT 7PM

RSVP AT
TREEHOUSECHICAGO.COM
149 W KINZIE ST, CHICAGO, IL 60654



Tree House Chicago



CONSUMERS ARE
2.8x more likely to
TRY A NEW FOOD
AFH than at home





bar snacks

POPCORN\$5

Lemon-Pepper Chicken

+633%

**growth of lemon
pepper wings on
menus over the past 4
years**



3. WELLNESS x INDULGENCE

**It's about balance and treating
ourselves to something we can
also feel good about**





34%
OF
CONSUMERS
SAY LITTLE TREATS
CAN BE BOTH HEALTHY
& INDULGENT



61%
OF CONSUMERS
ARE INTERESTED
IN HIGH PROTEIN
FOODS/BEVERAGE
S



80
SUPERSTAR
COMPOSITE
SCORE

64%
UNIQUENESS

Playa Bowls' Tidal Wave Smoothie
with vanilla protein & blue
spirulina



Key Takeaways

1

THE GOOD: Despite a decrease in consumer sentiment and budget squeezes, 44% of consumers expect to dine out as much next month as last.

2

THE BAD: Factors like gas prices, inflation, and rising costs have operators squeezed tighter than ever, and many operators are in a catch-22 with pricing.

3

THE TASTY: Global will get consumers out of their homes/dorm rooms – look to New Chinese or African; leverage items as flavor for a unique spin on tried-and-true foods; meet consumers where they are with indulgent but healthful treats.





Thank You



Want more F&B insights? Join us live!

Save your seat for the best dialogue in the industry. Learn the latest trends, get exclusive looks at proprietary research — from seasonal flavors to foodservice industry forecasts. This is a series you don't want to miss!

[DATASENTIAL.COM/UMASSCHEF2026](https://datasential.com/umasschef2026)