

# Play With Your Food

*HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AND VIRAL TRENDS  
SHAPE WHAT—AND HOW—WE EAT*



 **Sabert®**  
® makes food look great®

# GOOD FOOD IS MEANT TO BE SHARED.

**93%**

**OF CONSUMERS  
REGULARLY  
ENCOUNTER FOOD  
ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

MCCAIN, 2025

In a world where nearly 96% of consumers use at least one social media platform\*, it's no surprise that it can influence behavior, choices, and ultimately stomachs.

Browse TikTok or Instagram on any given day, and you'll find yourself lost in a realm where food is more than nutrients; it's entertainment. Ketchup ice cream, butter boards, and "pickle flights" have taken over screens and are reshaping the way we eat, what we crave, and how we engage with each other.

A trend might start as a hashtag, but it could end up with people lining up for the latest pastry they saw online. The digital and real worlds are blending, making what we eat more public than ever.

As a global leader in food packaging solutions, we've been involved in the foodservice industry for over 40 years and have gained valuable insights. We understand that food is– and will always be – at the center of our lives.

That's why we work hard to develop innovative, sustainable food packaging offerings to help protect and preserve what we love most.

The future of cuisine is about community, conversation, and creating moments that people can't help but post. Whether you're a foodservice operator, a chef, or an aspiring influencer, all you have to do is scroll, share, and dig in!



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# The Rise of Viral Food Trends

Not so long ago, dining trends originated from restaurant kitchens, magazines, culinary television shows, and even celebrity chefs. Now the tables have turned.

If something explodes on TikTok or Instagram, it's only a matter of days before restaurants rush to adjust their offerings to catch the internet wave. News outlets scramble to cover the fare that is cooking up the most buzz. Digital influencers are opening up their own food establishments. There are even analytics companies whose entire job is to track which dishes are having their fifteen minutes of fame.

It wasn't always this way. In the early days, social media was used to post about what you were eating for lunch that day. Perhaps you would add a filter or a hashtag to make it more interesting. Review sites like Yelp and Google also started gaining traction, encouraging customers to share what they loved (and didn't) about a local joint.

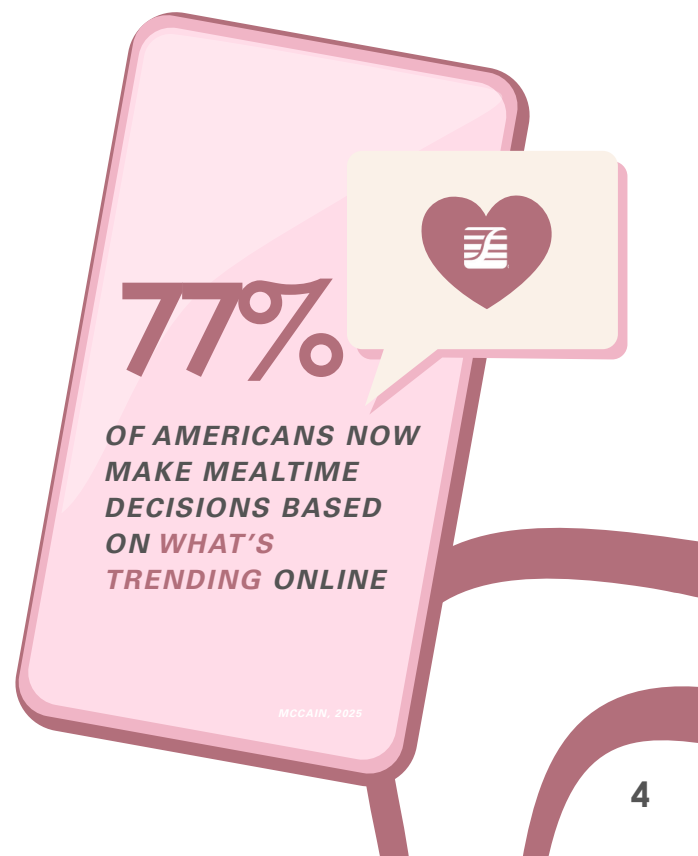
As platforms evolved and rose exponentially in popularity, social media algorithms began to prioritize content that's eye-catching and shareable. From rainbow bagels to over-the-top milkshakes, the more colorful, unique, or outrageous, the more likely it is to go viral.

On the flip side, if a diner experiences poor service or eats a bad batch of French fries and broadcasts those reviews, a restaurant's reputation could be at serious risk.

Social media is also creating an online community where foodies feel like part of something bigger, as if they belong. Viral food challenges, such as the "girl dinner" trend, are a perfect example. It started as a relatable TikTok video about the kind of meal you throw together when you don't feel like cooking (think mac and cheese and chicken nuggets).

Then, overnight, everyone started to post their own versions of a girl dinner. This idea illustrates how people are virtually connecting with food and each other in relatable ways.

It's not to say food challenges don't come with controversy, like feeding into gender stereotypes or promoting unhealthy eating habits. However, what it does show is that by participating in whatever the next craze is, you are taking a seat at the largest digital dinner table ever.







# How Social Media Decides What's for Dinner

Social media isn't just showing us food that looks good. It's telling us what to buy, what to make, and where to eat. From culinary hacks to artful sauces, consumers are making decisions based on what they see online.

On TikTok, users can watch as someone whips up a five-minute mug cake or mashes together cereal with pancakes. The videos are quick and fun, making the cooking process look easy.

**74%** OF DINERS USE  
**SOCIAL MEDIA TO**  
**DECIDE WHERE TO EAT**

RESTROWORKS, 2025

Presentation also matters. Eateries are tinkering with their menus, designing dishes, and incorporating trendy ingredients for maximum online impact.

**The setting is almost as important as the flavor.**

Instagrammable cafes and TikTok-friendly food trucks encourage app sharing moments through eye-catching décor, photo opps, and culinary feats that appear as good as they taste.

The real trick is to create a space so cool people can't help but pick up their phones and share.





Even food packaging plays a role, with operators leveraging custom branding to get their name out there and capitalize on word-of-mouth marketing.

And it's not just about looks. Social media reviews and influencer endorsements now drive dining decisions. A 2024 OpenTable report found that **67% of diners trust foodie content creators more than traditional restaurant critics.**

Google and Yelp also still play a role. Approximately 44% of respondents turn to social media for restaurant recommendations, while nearly 39% continue to check review platforms for additional opinions and ratings.

While one strong post can boost a restaurant's profile for months, staying top-of-mind requires a steady stream of positive online buzz.



**73%**

**SAID THEY VISITED A  
RESTAURANT IN THE  
LAST THREE MONTHS  
BECAUSE OF A  
SOCIAL MEDIA  
REVIEW THEY SAW**

NRN, 2025







# How Food Influencers are Moving the Nosh Needle

Food influencers have reshaped how (and where) we grab a meal. If you've ever gone across town for "best burger in town" after seeing it online, you already know the impact. And when a social media personality starts raving about cottage cheese pancakes, sales of cottage cheese are probably about to spike.

Content creators love to create trends. Their material is part entertainment, part culinary education, and part FOMO generator. They make menus bolder, restaurants feel livelier, and turn eating out into a social event. **It's not just dinner anymore – it's content.**

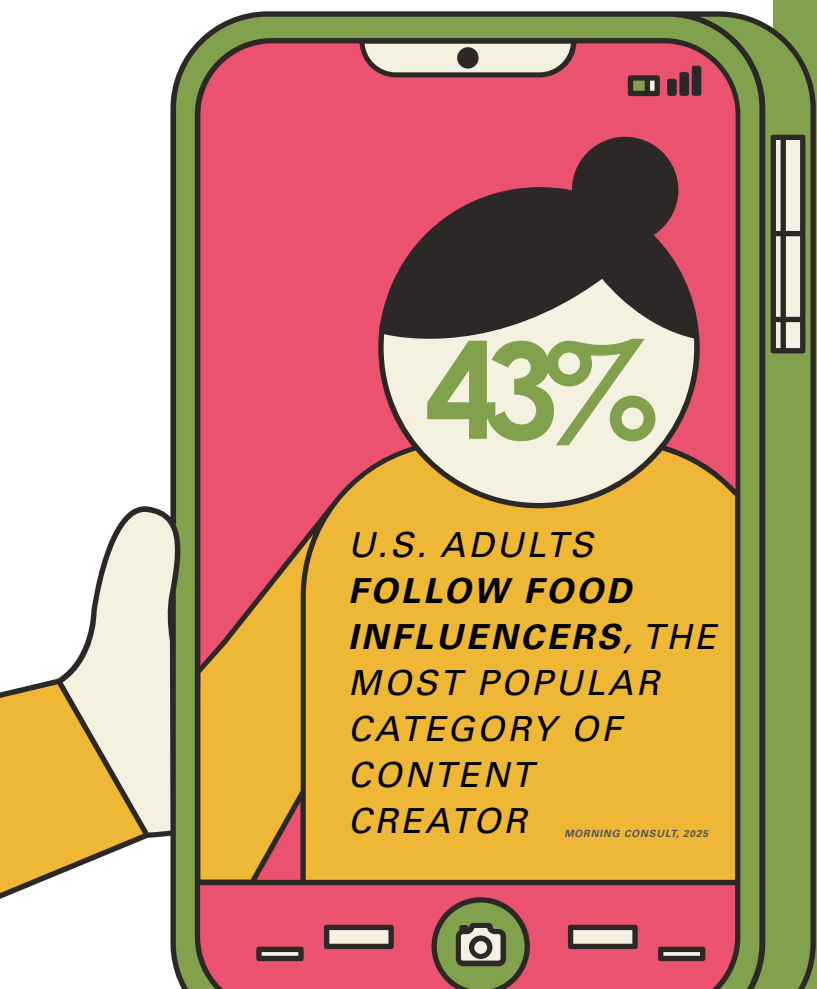
Digital tastemakers use a few different tactics: social media posts, paid partnerships, and hype creation. Sometimes they do all three at once. If a big name showcases a video of a wild new dish, viewers notice. Followers trust these personalities in a way that goes beyond traditional advertising.

Restaurants are in on it, too. They are investing in influencer sponsorships, inviting them to special tastings and pop-up events. A viral post can pay off in spades, especially with younger generations who love snapping their own pics and bringing their friends along for the fun.

It's not all about followers, it's about trust. Creators start to feel like friends by documenting their lives, their experiences, and building a community around them. Yet, influencers must walk a tightrope between their public persona and private life. Authenticity is key, and audiences can spot something that feels too staged or inauthentic.

Creators should always be upfront about collaborations, post behind-the-scenes content, and continue to highlight those personal stories. For diners, it's never been easier to discover imaginative flavors, hidden gems, and new takes on old favorites.

For eateries, working with influencers is a way to **drive awareness, create connections, and keep customers coming back for more.**



## HOW TO PARTNER WITH INFLUENCERS

*Working with digital creators helps businesses in two ways: they gain more visibility, and they foster authentic engagement. When done right, these partnerships create content that turns likes into orders and followers into customers.*



Partner with local creators to drum up real excitement, especially for launches, menu rollouts, or special events.



Keep Instagram and TikTok active with regular, eye-catching posts that show off the food, the atmosphere, and the people behind the scenes.



Listen to feedback from influencer visits and use it to tweak your dishes, drinks, and guest experiences.



Share user-generated photos and glowing online reviews to turn loyal customers into enthusiastic brand advocates.





# The Double-edged Fork

## *The Influencer Impact on Health and Habits*

Not all social media food crazes are created equal. Increasingly, researchers are examining the impact of the virtual world on real-world health, as well as consumer food choices and behaviors. It's easy to forget that not every trend you see on your phone is harmless. For all the buzzworthy watermelon salads and photogenic smoothie bowls, there's just as much sugar overload.

The platforms that made international cuisines and home cooking accessible have also turned eating into a kind of performance, one that doesn't always end well. Take the endless number of "food challenges."

Some are silly and harmless, but others can get out of hand. **The CDC reported a 15% jump in ER visits among teens in 2023, linked to viral eating stunts.** Chugging gallons of milk or swallowing spoonfuls of cinnamon might rack up views, but it's not a good recipe for your well-being.

And then there's the more subtle side effects. Research shows that looking at mouthwatering, visually appealing food pictures can make you feel hungry and increase the desire to snack, even if you weren't starving to begin with.

Digital creators play a big part in this story. Some, perhaps unintentionally, promote a steady diet of excess or offer meal tips that may be unsafe.

A contingent uses its influence for good by promoting healthier eating habits through nutritious recipes, plant-based diets, or sustainable food practices. **But it's not all negative.** Social media has opened the doors to new cuisines and global flavors, encouraging creativity in the kitchen.

The influence of social media on food is complicated. Yes, it can spark inspiration and connection, but it can also encourage unhealthy choices and unrealistic expectations.





# Food Packaging as the Main Course

It's easy to forget about what's holding your food together when you're focused on flavors or snapping the perfect photo. Whether it's on a grocery shelf or at the takeout counter, **packaging is usually the thing consumers see.**



Bold colors, clever designs and playful fonts help a product stand out and pop on camera. When considering off-premises dining, solutions that keep food safe, maintain its integrity, and present it well can ensure meals not only look appetizing but also taste good, from the restaurant to the couch.



Companies can also use packaging to turn a snack into a shareable moment. Custom branding and sustainable options provide establishments with the opportunity to tell their story, from environmental practices to local sourcing programs. For instance, operators can choose molded fiber pulp compostable bowls, signaling to customers that they care about the planet.

While packaging is still a way to keep cookies fresh or prevent grease from leaking through, it also **influences how diners experience the food itself.**



# AI On the Menu



According to the 2024 IFIC Food and Health Survey, **51% of consumers are interested in using artificial intelligence to help them make safe and nutritious food choices.**

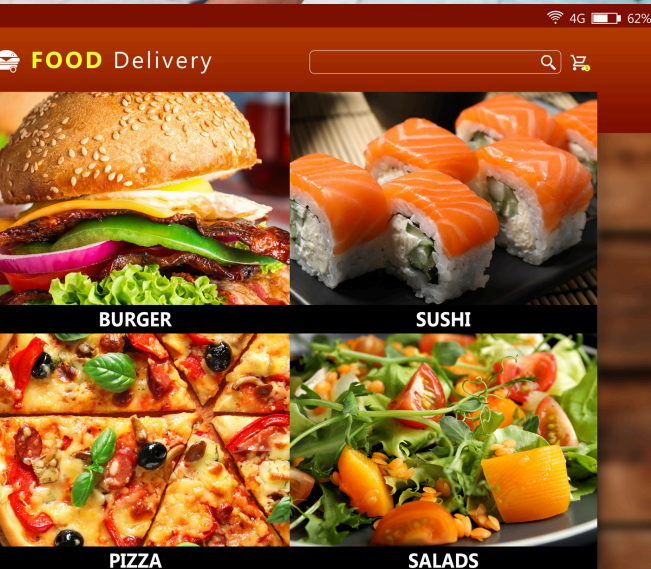
We'd be remiss if we ignored the next big food influencer: Artificial Intelligence. AI is starting to play a bigger role in the way we shop, cook, and even pick restaurants. Mobile apps can now suggest recipes based on what's already in the fridge or pantry.



Some factor in nutritional goals or how much time you have to cook. Dining decisions are getting easier and a lot more personalized.

Now, AI-driven platforms can recommend restaurants by analyzing your past preferences and dietary restrictions. Restaurants use AI to tailor their offerings based on what's trending or what regular customers order.

Food delivery apps can use algorithms to encourage you to try new cuisines if you've been ordering from the same place over and over again. Despite the cool factor of AI, trust remains a question for consumers.



At every turn, AI is nudging, suggesting, and quietly shaping the way we eat—whether that's at home, on the go, or at some pop-up halfway across the world. Food is becoming more tailored, less wasteful, and a whole lot easier to navigate.

***The question isn't just "What's for dinner?"—it's "What does my data think I'll love next?"***

# Attention Shoppers

Social media is becoming the not-so-secret recipe for grocery store operations.

While online buzz can fuel what people order for dinner or which eatery they want to try next, it's also becoming a serious supermarket business opportunity.

When a recipe goes viral, operators take notice.



**50%** OF GEN Z USE  
**TIKTOK FOR FOOD  
INSPIRATION**

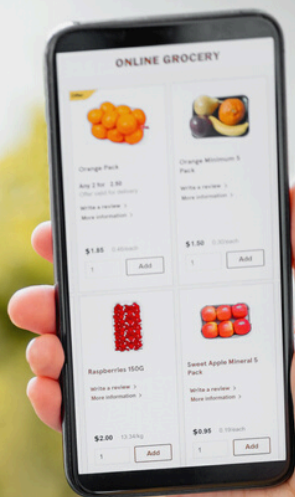
THE NATIONAL FROZEN & REFRIGERATED FOODS ASSOCIATION (NFRA), 2025

According to a 2025 FMI – The Food Industry Association survey, **53% of consumers are using meal ideas found on social media at least once a week**, prompting them to head to the grocery and frozen food aisles to purchase the necessary ingredients.

**52%** CONSUMERS SAID  
**SOCIAL MEDIA HAS A  
BIG IMPACT ON THE  
GROCERIES THEY BUY**

GATESMAN, 2024

Grocery stores are taking it a step further by capitalizing on what's trending, quickly promoting the necessary ingredients in-app and in-store to encourage sales. Even some major chain retailers have launched their own recipe videos on TikTok and Instagram to inspire shoppers, becoming as much about food discovery as they are about restocking the pantry.







# Food, Feeds, & Gen Alpha

If you want a glimpse of where the future of food is headed, pay attention to the kids. With eight in ten US tweens and teens owning smartphones\*, they have **never known a world of food without screens.**

For many families, mealtimes can be influenced by the latest hashtags. They are just as likely to ask for a bowl of ramen for dinner as chicken tenders.

At Sabert, we set up a "Food Lab" for "Take Your Kids to Work Day" to gauge their relationship with food. We started by exploring how they discover new foods. The internet and online reviews were high on the list, as well as the appearance, which included fun shapes and colors.



## 61%

**OF PARENTS SAY  
THEIR *GEN-  
ALPHA* KIDS HAVE  
A BIG INFLUENCE  
ON WHAT THEIR  
FAMILY EATS**

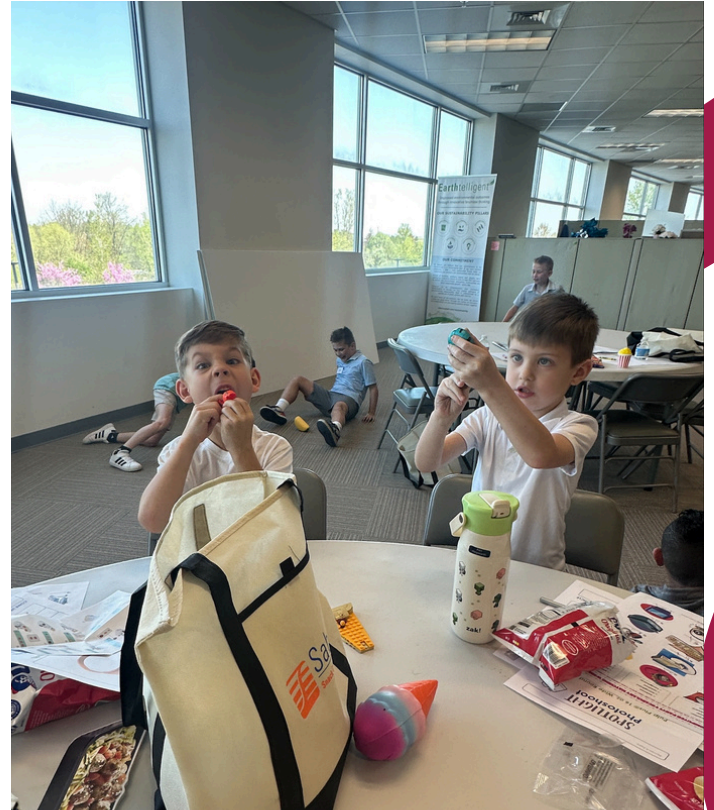
\*MINTEL, 2025



We also asked the kids to imagine their own viral food creations, feeding into their desire for experiences that they could share and show off.

Packaging also played a role here. They liked **interactive features, such as audible locks, and also gravitated to custom printed containers** that popped.

So if you want to know what's next for food, start paying attention to the youngest eaters at the table. They're not just following the trends, they're inventing them.



## Tips to Capture Gen Alpha's Interest

- Think about both the visual appearance and the experience
- Lean into global cuisines and flavors
- Consider unusual food and ingredient mashups
- Highlight eco-friendliness





# Trending Trends

The latest foodie obsessions on social media are driving real changes in what people crave, cook, and talk about every day.

## HEALTHY IS ACTUALLY COOL AGAIN

Plant-based deli meats are everywhere, and everyone's into zero-waste meals that feel good and do good. Eating clean is about making food that is fresh and intentional.



## EVERYONE'S A FOODIE NOW

TikTok has turned Southeast Asian seafood and butter boards into household names. People are increasingly open to trying something new, and suddenly, no ingredient is too unusual.

## DIY FOOD HACKS ARE EVERYWHERE

Quick, quirky recipes and food hacks (like mug cakes or homemade ramen upgrades) are spreading fast. People love trying and sharing snackable, scroll-stopping ideas.

## SUSTAINABILITY AS A SHARED EXPERIENCE

Upcycled ingredients, eco-friendly packaging, and sustainable choices are going mainstream.



## RECESSION COOKING

Budget-friendly, recession-proof recipes and food recommendations are gaining popularity as people navigate economic uncertainty. According to TikTok, the hashtag #budgetmeals has seen a 20% increase in posts from March to April.



# Social Media's Favorite Foods

*Disclosure: It can change in a hashtag*

## Powered by Protein

Protein is powering social media feeds, fueling the shift toward hearty, high-protein meals. Consumers are ditching powders and bars in favor of real, fresh-prepared meals, such as wings, bowls, and high-protein yogurt.



## Gourmet Hot Dogs

Ketchup and mustard are getting a condiment upgrade. High-end hot dogs are now accompanied by various sidekicks, such as truffle mayo and inventive dipping sauces.

## Snack Culture

Snackable food content thrives on TikTok, where quick, visually striking snacks like chamoy pickles and Korean corn dogs regularly go viral. These bite-sized trends capture attention through bold flavors, creative mashups, and global influences.



## Throwback Desserts

Old-school favorites like banana pudding, dump cakes, and Jell-O molds are becoming viral stars, making nostalgia feel fresh again. With their soft textures and familiar flavors, retro desserts remind us there's nothing wrong with sticking to what works.

## Whimsy

Datassential reports that millennials and Gen Z are embracing maximalism. Whether it's chaos cakes or chaos cooking, consumers are gravitating to whimsy and playfulness.

**86%**

OF CONSUMERS ARE  
VERY OR SOMEWHAT  
INTERESTED IN A  
WHIMSICAL  
RESTAURANT  
ENVIRONMENT

DATASSENTIAL, 2025







# **Play with your food. *Not with your food packaging.***

When you partner with Sabert, you're not just choosing a food packaging manufacturer. You're choosing a partner who is committed to your success.

As our customers' trusted sustainable food packaging solutions provider, we help today's food companies and retailers meet the surging demand for sustainable packaging with a diverse multi-substrate product portfolio that reaches the highest levels of safety, performance and design.

***For more information, reach out to  
your Sabert Sales Representative or  
visit [www.sabert.com](http://www.sabert.com).***