Sabert
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2026

FOOD PACKAGING TRENDS

SABERT LEADERS HIGHLIGHT WHAT'S NEXT

TOMORROW'S TABLE

Food packaging remains in the spotlight as the world keeps changing, influencing not only how food is preserved and protected, but also how brands connect with consumers and show their commitment to a better tomorrow.

In 2026, the foodservice sector will face new challenges and opportunities that will shape the industry's future.

With over 40 years of leading the way in packaging innovation, Sabert strives to be **our customers' trusted sustainable food packaging solutions provider**. We partner with food companies and retailers to help them meet the growing demand for packaging that reaches the highest levels of safety, performance, sustainability, and design.

In this trend report, we break down the key insights and forward-thinking strategies every industry leader needs as they prepare for what's next in food packaging. The landscape is changing — and together, we're ready for it.

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2025: A YEAR OF RESILIENCE AND RECALIBRATION

From the economic chess game to a sustainability regulations reality check, 2025 was a wild ride for the foodservice industry.

The Tariff Effect

Tariffs topped the headlines, creating economic uncertainty and supply chain pressures. Operators and suppliers had to adapt fast, pushing them to prioritize domestic production. What began as a disruption became an opportunity, as the sector demonstrated its agility and resilience, responding to challenges more effectively than anticipated.

EPR No Longer a Buzzword

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) transitioned from an abstract concept to a real cost factor. With Oregon and Colorado implementing fees that hit invoices and budgets, packaging decisions suddenly carried financial weight beyond material costs.

Consolidation Continues

The industry saw ongoing significant mergers and acquisitions involving distributors and packaging manufacturers. It's unclear how these moves will affect customers, innovation, pricing, or supply chain dynamics.

"EPR was once an unknown entity. Now it's real, and it's shaping packaging decisions.

Even if only a few states are affected for now, companies need to understand how their packaging choices will impact their costs."

Michael Van Loh
Vice President,
North America Sales
Sabert

THE SUSTAINABILITY SCRAMBLE

Customers want it all: packaging that's sustainable, effective, and economical. Regulations will push the industry toward greater accountability and innovation. Expect stricter mandates on material composition, labeling, and extended producer responsibility—driving a shift toward truly circular packaging systems.

In 2026, the search for the "sustainability silver bullet" will intensify. Compostable hybrids, lighter-weight plastics, and paper solutions will all play a role. Operators face mounting pressure from both sustainable packaging regulations and customers to balance cost, changing requirements, and operational logistics. As EPR fees are added to budgets in more states, packaging choices now have real financial implications.

The end-of-life challenge remains a reality. Infrastructure for composting and recycling is lagging behind advances in materials, and patchwork regulations are forcing the industry to design for a moving target.

WHAT'S FEEDING IT:

- EPR is expanding beyond Oregon and Colorado, with more states expected to implement programs
- Recycling and composting infrastructure remains underdeveloped
- The shift from material-agnostic thinking: Every packaging type has benefits; the key is matching the right material to the right application
- California's foam ban demonstrates the impact of how regulations can eliminate entire packaging formats

CHALLENGES:

- EPR eco-modulation fees remain negligible, not enough to drive behavioral change
- Foreign imports undercut domestic recycled materials in price
- Aligning with diverse global regulations
- No single solution fits all

"At Sabert, we're investing in circular solutions—like recyclable and compostable materials—and enhancing lifecycle assessments to guide innovation.

Creating packaging that's optimized for recycling or composting, coupled with clearer labeling and consumer education, can help drive meaningful environmental outcomes."

Ricardo De Genova
SVP, Innovation
Sabert

OUR TAKE

The opportunity lies in designing packaging that's both **compliant and compelling** to add value across the supply chain. While sustainable materials continue to advance, the systems needed to process them aren't keeping pace.

Consumers expect transparency and measurable impact, without greenwashing. Collaboration across the supply chain will be essential, from material science to collection systems to end-of-life processing.

Foodservice operators are going all-in on LTOs. They are setting their sights on creative, craveable, limited-time offers (LTOs) to capture the consumer wallet. Value isn't just about price. It's also about delivering something memorable, whether that's a pop-culture themed meal or a supermarket offering that feels indulgent but fits the budget.

The playbook is clear: create urgency, deliver value, and give consumers an experience to remember.

THE VALUE WARS

WHAT'S FEEDING IT:

- Consumers are making calculated choices about where to spend their dollars
- QSRs are bringing back aggressive value deals to recapture market share
- The gap between QSR and casual dining price points continues to shrink - only a dollar or two more now separates the experience

OUR TAKE

LTOs are the new MVPs when it comes to dominating the foodservice competition. Success requires packaging partners who move quickly for short-run, branded campaigns without sacrificing quality.

Whether it's custom catering boxes or campaigns that amplify the limited-time messaging, packaging must adapt to changing menus to help operators deliver value and novelty.

"LTOs will continue to be a significant opportunity for brands to tempt consumers to spend money on meals away from home. We're seeing a surge in branding and personalized experiences, like tapping into nostalgia by letting fans enjoy a meal while watching their favorite shows.

Operators will need to deliver value in ways that matter most to their customers. What counts as 'value' is shifting; it will depend on who your customer is and what they care about most."

Alexus Medina
Director, Product Management
Sabert

PROMOTE YOUR LTOS

SCAN TO LEARN MORE ABOUT CUSTOM PRINTING OPPORTUNITIES

IS PAPER NOW KING?

Amid the value battle, materials are playing a starring role, particularly the growing importance of paper. Operators are switching to paper food packaging partly because it faces lower EPR fees, making it more economically advantageous. Paper is also a popular choice because consumers inherently understand that paper is recyclable, while assuming plastic automatically means "bad."

Paper food packaging is also a perfect canvas for custom branding opportunities, allowing brands to offer an experience and create a memorable impression with every meal. However, performance still matters. **Delivering paper food packaging solutions that function like plastic while being sustainable is the new standard.**

"Paper is quickly becoming the go-to material for food packaging. As EPR laws and sustainability goals push brands to rethink their packaging, paper stands out—not just because it's easier to recycle, but because everyone already understands its value. It's capturing both the minds and wallets of customers, making it the clear choice for the future."

Chris Howell
Director, Product Management
Sabert

WHAT'S FEEDING IT:

- Paper has lower EPR fees
- Consumer perception remains clear: plastic is "bad," paper is "good"
- Industry push to source paper responsibly

PAPER PACKAGING 101

Paper-based food packaging encompasses a wide array of paper varieties, including:

- Uncoated
- Corrugated
- Coated
- Bleached
- Paperboard

Each paper type serves specific needs in foodservice. For instance, corrugated structures offer extra strength through multiple layers of paper. This layering creates robust insulation and durability than single-sheet alternatives.

Modern paper packaging overcomes traditional moisture limitations through specialized coatings and linings. These treatments allow paper containers to handle everything from hot French fries to frozen meals, with storage times ranging from thirty minutes to several days. Many options now work in both microwaves and ovens, expanding their versatility.

"As paper packaging rises in popularity, we're witnessing an increased interest in what kind of paper is being used and where it comes from.

Companies are making bigger commitments to prevent deforestation, strengthen the chain of custody, and ensure their packaging isn't costing the planet its forests or biodiversity.

Sustainably sourced fiber will be a significant factor in the packaging decision-making process."

Richa Desai,
Chief Sustainability & Strategy Officer
Sabert

OUR TAKE

Paper as a substrate will continue to reign. Paper-based food packaging that is both high-performing and sustainable is only going to gain more ground. The real slam dunk is paper that's responsibly sourced, grease-resistant, and just as effective as traditional solutions.

We'll see more innovation in creating paper packaging with oil and grease resistance that rivals plastic without relying on plastic coatings.

The right paper solution can be a brand win and a compliance win.

PROTEIN POWER, HEALTH HABITS, MENU MOVERS

Consumers are driving demand for protein-forward menu items, from power bowls to new twists on plant-based options. Even beverage trends are shifting to incorporating protein. Core menu items, like burgers and chicken, will remain strong, but customers crave options and customization.

Health-conscious concepts keep growing, and menu innovation is moving fast to keep up with changing tastes and nutritional priorities. Meanwhile, food safety has moved from a background concern to a front-page priority.

"Food packaging plays a critical role in building consumer trust as part of the dining experience.

People want meals that are good for their bodies, and packaging that is designed to preserve freshness, support portion control, and reduce environmental impact can give diners the peace of mind they are looking for."

Paul McCann
CEO
Sabert

WHAT'S FEEDING IT:

- Growing consumer focus on health and protein
- Social media is fueling demand for high-protein foods
- The rising number of GLP-1 users is prioritizing high-protein options for their dietary needs
- Food safety incidents have elevated demand for farm-to-fork traceability

OUR TAKE

Foodservice operators have to rethink their approach as diners put **more emphasis on protein, food safety, and healthy messaging.**

Packaging will need to fit new menu formats and communicate health benefits clearly and directly. At the same time, consumers are more cautious than ever about what they eat and where, making food safety a top priority.

All of this means operators will need partners who are nimble enough to keep up with quick menu changes and can support them as these trends continue to shape the industry.

Who will win the battle for the consumer dollar? The foodservice landscape in 2026 will be defined by fierce competition across segments, especially if the market remains flat.

QSRs, casual dining, grocery retailers, and convenience stores are all fighting for the same consumer dollar, and each is sharpening its value proposition.

MARKET SHARE MADNESS

THE PLAYERS

QSRs

Their scale and speed make them trendsetters. Drive-thru dominance continues, but they're optimizing every touchpoint of the guest experience, including packaging.

CASUAL DINING/FAST CASUAL

Fighting back with appetizer samplers, national partnerships, and the promise of a sit-down experience that's "only a dollar or two more" than their QSR competitor. The value-to-experience ratio is their secret sauce.

GROCERY RETAILERS

Expanding prepared foods and meals-on-the-go. To capture convenience seekers, they're positioning themselves as an alternative to cooking at home and dining out, with lower price points and grab-and-go ease.

C-STORES

Convenience stores are upping their food game, partnering with third-party delivery platforms, and capitalizing on the return-to-office trend. Whether it's a breakfast meal deal or fresh prepared foods, c-stores are taking market share by delivering QSR quality at QSR prices with unbeatable convenience.

OUR TAKE

In a market with economic uncertainty, growth comes from capturing share. Winners will be those who understand their customer segments inside and out, tailoring their service model – whether that's drive-thru speed, retail grab n' go, or delivery durability.

Dishing out value at every touchpoint is non-negotiable, including packaging that reinforces brand identity and elevates the customer dining experience.

"Everyone is looking for every opportunity to win the wallet. QSRs are grabbing share by bringing back value meals, fast casual restaurants are leaning into their unique value propositions, and c-stores are capitalizing on the convenience factor. Food packaging can be huge differentiator.

Operators are leveraging custom, branded packaging to drive brand awareness, while others are seeking options that align with their customers' increasing demand for safe, sustainable solutions."

Tomia Smith
Vice President, Sales, National Accounts
Sabert

ICE AGE

Consumers are spending more time in the frozen foods section seeking out prepared foods. They are hunting for fully prepped, chef-inspired meals that bridge restaurant-level flavor with weekday convenience.

Longer shelf lives, new food processing methods, better packaging, and the growing interest in foods from around the world are all helping fuel this growth.

The freezer-to-table trend represents a fundamental shift in food packaging design. Packaging must now deliver extreme temperature performance, eliminate the need for transfer dishes, and meet increasingly stringent sustainability mandates—all while keeping costs competitive for value-conscious consumers.

In 2026, the most innovative packaging isn't just about what contains food—it's about creating a complete ecosystem where performance, value, and circularity work together.

OUR TAKE

The surging popularity of prepared foods, paired with increasingly stringent sustainability regulations for food packaging, is redefining what “performance packaging” means. Food packaging must enable operators to deliver safe food that goes straight from the freezer to the oven, microwave, or table, and its performance is non-negotiable.

At the same time, **brands need packaging solutions today that meet tomorrow’s requirements.** Now, processors seek a wide array of turnkey packaging options or fully customizable solutions that make it easy to use their existing machinery and technology while upgrading their packaging for the modern consumer.

WHAT’S FEEDING IT:

- Consumers are busier than ever, and shoppers want dinners in minutes, not hours, but don’t want to sacrifice taste or nutrition
- The quality of frozen foods keeps rising, with healthier, more global, and more plant-based options
- Consumers are feeling the pressure of higher costs and seeking ways to feed their families affordably. Frozen meals, designed for longer storage periods and easy preparation, fit the bill.
- The rise of grocerants and stronger supermarket fresh-prepared food lines is competing head-to-head with takeout and delivery
- Legislation, like state-mandated post-consumer recycled content in plastics, means packaging must now check the boxes on functionality without driving up cost

"The freezer-to-table trend validates our long-standing commitment to engineering packaging that works harder for our customers and their consumers. For example, a durable material like CPET can go straight from the freezer to a microwave or conventional oven, creating a seamless cooking experience and cutting down on cleanup time and waste.

Our investments in PCR and design-for-recycling innovations position our customers as sustainability leaders by adopting eco-friendly materials that won't impact performance. The prepared foods boom isn't slowing down. Neither should packaging innovation.

Freezer-to-table performance demonstrates that when we design with both the consumer and the planet in mind, we don't have to choose between functionality and sustainability; we can engineer solutions that deliver both."

Alexus Medina
Director, Product Management
Sabert

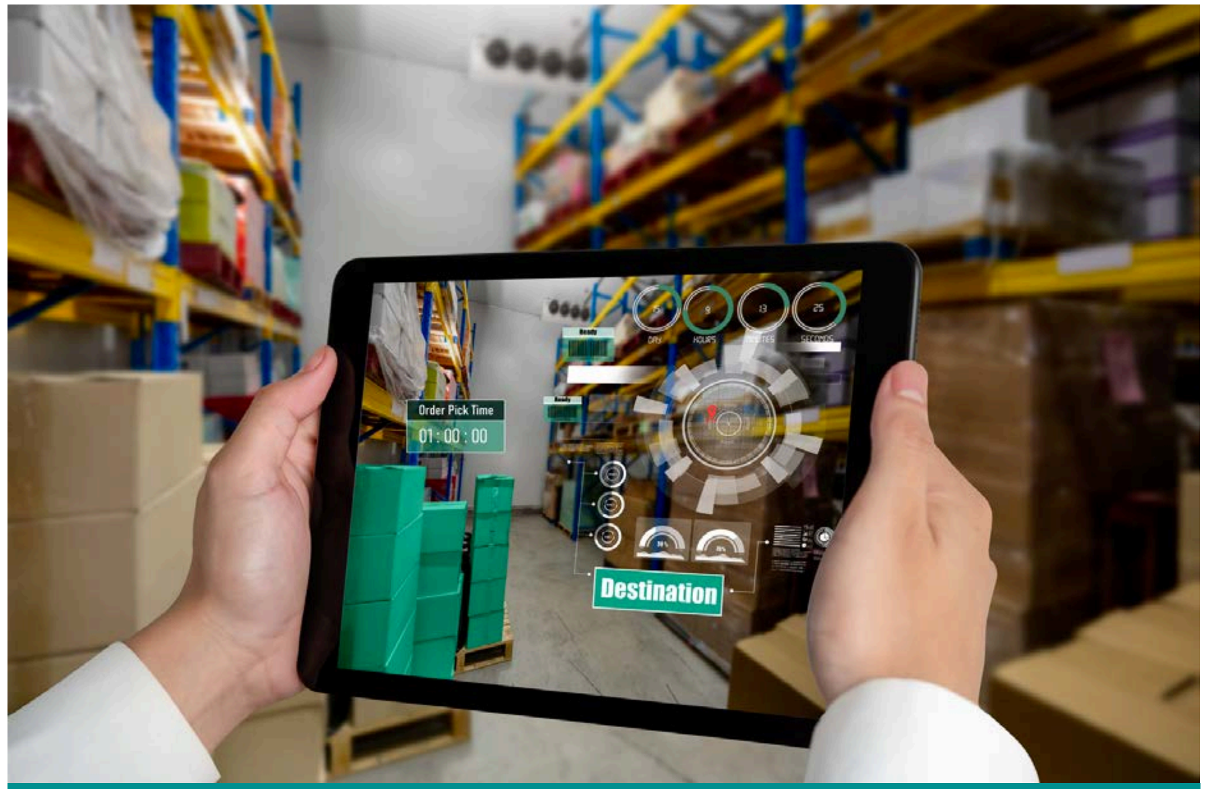
FREEZE OUT THE COMPETITION

SCAN TO LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR PROCESSOR CAPABILITIES

TECH, MEET TABLE

The **intersection of packaging and digital integration** is ripe for innovation. As artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT) evolve, packaging is expected to play an even larger role in inventory management, waste reduction, and customer engagement.

Think of embedded sensors for food safety and freshness, QR codes for traceability, and AI-powered inventory tools that help operators run leaner and smarter.



OUR TAKE

Packaging is not just a container anymore; it's a platform. Bridging physical packaging and digital technology now presents a real, tangible opportunity for operators to optimize operations, reduce waste, and enhance the customer experience.

As packaging evolves alongside digital transformation, we're exploring how it can actively participate in the foodservice ecosystem, offering a connected platform for efficiency and engagement.

WHAT'S FEEDING IT:

- AI and IoT are becoming accessible for foodservice applications
- Operators need inventory management, automatic reordering, and supply chain visibility
- Opportunity to embed intelligence: ordering patterns, freshness indicators, personalized solutions

"We are just scratching the surface when it comes to leveraging technology to help brand owners and operators become efficient in the way they provide service to customers. We could use data like zip codes to drive more personalized, customized packaging designs.

We can help packaging itself tell a story – Where did it come from? When was it packed? How should it be disposed of? The blending of smart packaging and connected tech will move from being a novelty to offering new ways to build loyalty and streamline operations."

Ricardo De Genova
SVP, Innovation
Sabert

HOME SWEET HOME

The foodservice industry has historically relied on a mix of global and local sourcing, with global sourcing often favored for its cost advantages. Yet the tariff turbulence of 2025 accelerated a trend that will define 2026: prioritizing domestic supply chains.

Pricing swings, shipping delays, and unpredictable geopolitical events have made the risks of overseas sourcing apparent. Now, the ability to produce and source domestically is becoming a necessity and a selling point.

Consistency and reliability have moved to the top of the priority list, especially for restaurants and foodservice providers who need a long-term strategy to ensure stability and resilience. For many in foodservice, that means getting closer to home.

WHAT'S FEEDING IT:

- Tariff spikes create pricing volatility and supply chain disruptions
- Customers want partners who can deliver consistency

"While global capabilities matter, our domestic production strength allows us to serve customers with speed, reliability, and the agility to pivot when markets shift. In a world where sudden tariffs and shifting policies can throw supply chains off balance overnight, proximity and partnership matter more than ever."

Paul McCann
CEO
Sabert

"Operators keep asking, "How does this save me money?" When supply chain management is under pressure and margins are getting squeezed, the answer has to be new ways of working that cut costs, and domestic production can be one of those areas of opportunity."

Kelly Best
Vice President, Foodservices Sales
Sabert

OUR TAKE

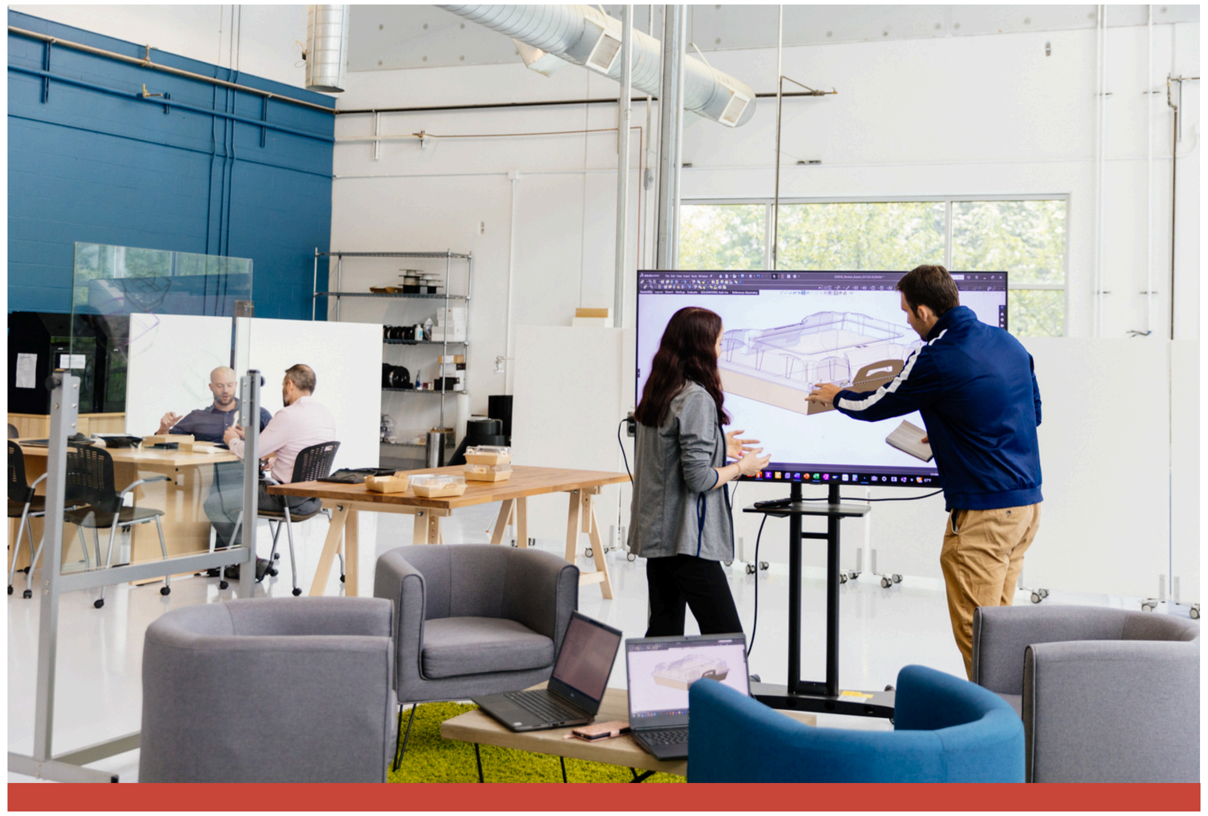
While global sourcing will always play a role in the industry, it's clear that being able to **deliver locally and pivot quickly** when needed is now a major competitive advantage. Foodservice operators are under pressure to deliver consistency, whether it's a chain with hundreds of locations or a single neighborhood café.

Domestic suppliers can often guarantee fresher products, tighter quality control, and a sense of reliability that can't always be matched from halfway around the world.

Behind every innovation is expertise. As the foodservice packaging industry grows more complex, balancing material science, sustainability mandates, EPR compliance, and digital integration, the need for technical talent has never been greater.

In 2026, the race is on to attract and retain technical experts in design, engineering, material science, and manufacturing. The industry needs creative minds who can bridge the gap between compliance, cost, and consumer delight to turn regulatory complexity into opportunity.

THE TALENT EQUATION



OUR TAKE

Innovation doesn't happen by accident—it requires investment in people. Designing and executing innovative packaging solutions requires expertise across material science, design, manufacturing scale-up, and regulatory compliance.

Finding professionals who can navigate this complexity is critical to remaining competitive.

"There is a strong need for technical talent in our industry as the demand for innovative, sustainable packaging solutions intensifies and increasingly gets even more complex. Innovation will hinge on people who can bring deep expertise and creative problem-solving to the table.

In today's world, building and retaining technical talent is a strategic imperative. At Sabert, we are lucky to have a culture built on innovation where we empower our talent to dream big, start small, and move fast. The future of food packaging will all come down to those who share our passion for how food is packaged, protected and preserved. "

Paul McCann
CEO
Sabert

WHAT'S FEEDING IT:

- Demand for speed and innovation
- Industry complexity increasing
- Technical talent shortage as demand for sophisticated solutions accelerates

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

At Sabert, our global footprint gives us a front-row seat to the shifting landscape of food packaging. We sat down with our Sabert Europe and Asia teams to understand the trends that are shaping both innovation and day-to-day operations in their markets.

By working closely with customers and partners across the globe, we're able to tap into regional insights that drive smarter, more adaptable solutions for the future of food packaging.

EUROPE

United Kingdom

In the UK, the foodservice market remains resilient, with QSR and delivery segments outperforming broader hospitality despite inflation and cost pressures. Major chains are opening new locations and prioritizing packaging that is focused on sustainability and operational efficiency. The **"grab n' go" culture** is deeply rooted, and the demand for convenience and delivery continues to shape both menu offerings and packaging choices.

DACH Region (Germany, Austria, Switzerland)

Price sensitivity dominates, but industrial catering and institutional channels remain stable. Regulatory pressure is pushing operators to explore sustainable packaging, with many institutions moving toward more eco-friendly options as compliance deadlines approach.

Benelux & Nordics

These regions are leaders in compostable and fiber-based packaging, supported by strong government mandates and advanced recycling infrastructure. Operators are quick to pilot new materials and circular models, setting a **benchmark for sustainable packaging innovation in Europe.**

Spain & Southern Europe

Tourism and QSR have experienced a robust post-pandemic rebound, driving strong demand for packaging, particularly in hot food, bakery, and convenience channels. Hybrid formats—part supermarket, part foodservice—are increasingly popular, with coffee shops and bakery outlets thriving in both urban and resort settings.

France

The French foodservice sector faces **economic and political headwinds**, with out-of-home dining stagnant or declining. Despite government efforts to encourage a return to the workplace, the number of employees working from home remains high, which continues to limit the recovery of out-of-home meals.

Foodservice packaging is split into industrial, central kitchen, and end-user segments, each with distinct priorities—food safety, cost sensitivity, and traceability, respectively.

While large organizations invest in sustainable solutions to meet regulatory demands, most smaller operators rely on mixed-material, cost-effective options. Gaps hamper circularity progress in collection and recycling infrastructure, and reusable packaging remains largely experimental.

EUROPE

"In terms of sustainable packaging, the French regulatory environment is the toughest in Europe, but Europe's sustainability trajectory, albeit uneven, is progressive overall. In the UK and Nordics, the voluntary adoption of sustainable packaging is strong, and a lot of that is driven by retailer ESG goals and public demands. In Spain and Italy, the adoption of sustainable packaging is somewhat slower, but it's headed in the right direction. Eastern and Central Europe are price-led but increasingly influenced by EU-level directives, such as EPR."

Alex Noake
Senior Vice President and Managing Director,
Sabert Europe

ASIA-PACIFIC

With the rapid development of the foodservice industry, packaging material is playing an increasingly important role in food safety, sustainability, and brand communication.

We interviewed **Eric Shu, Senior Vice President and Managing Director of Sabert Asia**, to discuss the key trends shaping the foodservice packaging industry in 2026 and how Sabert is adapting to serve the China and Asia-Pacific markets.

> *"In 2026, companies must shift from scale-driven competition to quality-focused competition, leveraging chain expansion, digitalization, and business model innovation to seize structural opportunities. Success will go to brands that balance growth speed with operational resilience and continuously create value for consumers."*
>
> *Eric Shu*
> *Senior Vice President and Managing Director,*
> *Sabert Asia*

ASIA-PACIFIC

Sustainability is Gradually Becoming the Industry Standard

Regulatory action is accelerating across key markets

Hong Kong's Single-Use Plastic Policy

Hong Kong's comprehensive single-use plastic ban prohibits the distribution of expanded polystyrene (EPS) food containers and disposable plastic straws/stirrers. The policy mandates full compliance across the foodservice sector, with phased extensions to include plastic cups and food containers by 2025.

Shanghai's Revised Regulations

The Shanghai Municipal People's Congress enacted stringent measures restricting all non-degradable single-use plastic products in food delivery and retail packaging, while actively promoting certified compostable and recyclable alternatives.

Australia's National Plastics Ban

·Australia has implemented a nationally coordinated approach with all states and territories banning straws, cutlery, and expanded polystyrene containers. The legislation includes mandatory participation in packaging recovery schemes and requires a minimum 20% PCR content for plastic packaging by 2025.

ASIA-PACIFIC

Key Consumer Behaviors

Price Sensitivity

Economic fluctuations led to a sharp increase in consumer price sensitivity, a decline in foot traffic for high-end catering, and a shift in value-for-money as a core decision-making factor. Value-based promotions are now a major driver.

Popularity of Prepared Meals

The prepared meal category saw explosive growth, but incidents such as the Xibei Prepared Meal Controversy in September of 2025 drew intense consumer attention to the transparency and safety of prepared meals. As a result, trust and clear labeling have become critical factors in consumer choices, pushing companies to enhance supply chain visibility and build stronger brand credibility.

Health and Wellness

With rising awareness of dietary needs and health impacts, customers are more likely to choose products that align with their wellness goals, such as organic, low-sugar, allergen-free, or light meal options.

ASIA-PACIFIC

Functional Performance Increasingly Critical

The continued surge in online delivery orders in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly China, is expected to accelerate further, placing even **greater emphasis on heat retention as a key functional packaging requirement.**

Given that Asian cuisine predominantly consists of hot dishes that need to maintain optimal temperature for taste and quality, packaging and product design must continuously adapt to meet these evolving demands.

Additional critical features include oil resistance, leak-proof design, and compatibility with microwaves and freezers, all of which play a vital role in ensuring food safety, product integrity, and an enhanced consumer experience.

Packaging as Brand Communication

As consumers become more conscious of food sourcing and processing, packaging not only conveys product information and builds trust but also **fosters an emotional connection by reflecting a brand's values and commitment.**

The use of sustainable and convenient materials, along with clear labels such as "ready-to-heat" or "pre-chilled," enhances transparency, supports user experience, and strengthens consumer confidence, ultimately delivering a sense of care and reliability with every delivery.

ASIA-PACIFIC

Supermarkets and Convenience Dining Poised for Change

In 2026, China's supermarket and Convenience (CVS) sectors are expected to undergo the most significant transformation, with a growing emphasis on in-store dining experiences.

Deli Counters Getting an Upgrade

Deli Counters are being upgraded to dining hubs, retailers like FamilyMart, Yonghui, and Hema will integrate bakeries, Chinese food counters, and coffee stalls into an "in-store shop" model, requiring packaging that serves both retail display and takeaway functions.

Rise of Private Label

Private-label prepared meal brands, often offering a price advantage over traditional options, are capturing increasing market share, driving the need for customized and differentiated packaging solutions.

Digital Membership Ecosystems

Digital membership ecosystems are integrating offline shopping, online ordering, and points redemption through mobile apps. Packaging serves as a key touchpoint to drive engagement, such as through QR codes for promotions and discounts.

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Reinventing food packaging to
nourish and protect our world.

For packaging options, or more information, visit sabert.com or call 1(800) 722-3781.