



SUNNY SIDE UP

Summer Foodservice Trends
2026 Edition



SABERT FOOD PACKAGING

AN ENDLESS SUMMER OF OPPORTUNITY



Summer is once again the hottest season on the foodservice calendar, and 2026 is shaping up to be one of the most opportunity-packed yet.

Summer drives roughly 25% of annual restaurant sales (National Restaurant Association), and traffic ticks up 3–4% over the rest of the year.

The 2026 consumer is different: more value-conscious, more flavor-curious, more GLP-1-aware, and far more attuned to sustainability than ever before. They're snacking instead of dining, sharing instead of eating full meals, and posting on social before tasting.

This report breaks down key trends shaping summer 2026 menus, beverage programs, and catering pipelines.

Whether you're catering a backyard graduation, slinging dirty sodas from a drive-thru window, or prepping K-12 cafeterias for fall, these are the currents to ride.

LTOs ARE THE HOTTEST TICKET OF THE SEASON

Value-seeking consumers may be watching their wallets, but they're still showing up for novelty. Datassential's 2026 data shows **41% of consumers associate summer with special flavors, dishes, beverages, and LTOs from restaurants** and **46% are actively looking to buy them.**

Pair that with Circana's finding that 91% of consumers are more inclined to visit establishments that offer new items, and **limited-time offers become one of the biggest opportunities of the season.**

The 2026 LTO that wins is one that creates a moment beyond the menu. Globally inspired flavors, social-ready presentation, and a clear sense of urgency that converts curiosity into traffic.





MAXIMIZE EVERY SUMMER HOLIDAY MOMENT

Summer holidays are built-in marketing hooks, but the 2026 picture is more nuanced. Datassential reports that **63% of Memorial Day celebrants and 63% of Independence Day celebrants prepare food at home**, while Father's Day stands out as the summer holiday consumers are most likely to dine out for.

The generational lens matters too: Gen Z (16%) is statistically more likely than other generations to associate Juneteenth with LTOs, and both **Gen Z (12%) and Millennials (11%) over-index on buying prepared food from a grocery store for the Fourth of July**.

What does this mean? Meet consumers at the cookout and at the counter. Build family meal kits, pickup-friendly platters, and themed bundles for the dates that matter. Don't sleep on the smaller moments either, such as National Drive-Thru Day (July 24) and National Ice Cream Day (third Sunday in July). These days are easy excuses to drop a one-week LTO that gets people through the door.



MEMORIAL DAY

May 25, 2026



JUNETEENTH

June 19, 2026



FOURTH OF JULY

July 4, 2026



NATIONAL DRIVE-THRU DAY

July 24, 2026

THE SMALL PLATE SUMMMER



The shared plate is continuing to heat up. More than a third of restaurant consumers are downsizing their orders, and Circana's data shows that 13 of 16 appetizer categories are on a growth trajectory, with fried and Asian-style apps leading the charge. Over the next two years, **appetizers are expected to keep gaining share** as guests move away from heavy entrées toward grazing-style meals.

For operators, this means designing for more than just the main course and offering share-friendly foods like **wings, dumplings, totchos, crispy cauliflower, and bao-style bites**.

Our **award-winning Twist & Crispy® line** is a great fit for app-forward orders. A dual-locking lid switches between vented mode for crispiness and sealed mode for sauces, so shareables arrive table-ready, whether they leave via drive-thru, third-party delivery, or family-style pickup.

SNACKING STAYS HOT

Snacking isn't slowing down, and it's eating into the traditional meal. Circana reports **nearly half of consumers eat three or more snacks per day**, and Datassential found 78% of operators serving snacks say they're profitable, with 77% reporting strong sell-through. Additionally, IFMA reports that **48% of consumers prefer lighter meals or snacks instead of full meals in the summer.**

Half-portions, **fruit cups, parfaits, popcorn chicken, and grab n' go salty snacks** all benefit from right-sized packaging that looks great in hand while accommodating the demand for smaller portions.

Our Snack Boxes and Soups & More Cups are perfectly sized for almost any snack, including small meals, mini sandwiches, chips and salsa, veggies and ranch, even sushi.



Clear Three-Compartment Snack Box



Paper Soups & More Cups



SUSTAINABILITY GOES FRONT-OF-HOUSE AT LIVE EVENTS

Sustainability has shifted from a back-of-house initiative to a consumer-facing differentiator, especially at conferences, festivals, and sporting events. 81% of event organizers now run composting programs (up from 52% in 2019), diverting 28% of waste from landfills. Even more telling: 38% of attendees actively volunteer for on-site sustainability tasks, such as waste sorting, and 82% of organizers say it strengthens community ties.

For foodservice operators activating at large events, sustainable packaging is now a venue requirement and an audience expectation. Compostable bowls and recyclable containers help operators meet vendor specs while aligning with guest values.

In celebration of the summer's biggest international soccer tournament, food will be at the center of the field and at home. In fact, nearly half of soccer fan viewers say they are very likely to order more takeout or delivery than usual during the tournament.* Here are a few sustainable food packaging solutions that will show up strong for fans all summer long.



Kraft Fluted Clamshell



Pulp Hinged Container



EcoSnap™



r-PRO™ Bowls & Containers

DIRTY SODA MAKES A SPLASH

Move over, matcha, dirty soda is the breakout beverage of 2026.

Datassential reports that 36% of consumers now recognize the category, and it's flagged as "on fire" in Datassential One. Menu penetration sits at just 2% but is growing at a staggering 42% per year, while traditional soda growth has flatlined.

Priced at \$5–\$6, dirty sodas land in the "affordable luxury" sweet spot, meaning it's a high enough margin to matter, and cost-effective enough to drive repeat visits.

The format is simple and infinitely remixable: a soda base (cola, lemon-lime, root beer, Dr. Pepper) layered with flavored syrups, cream, coconut milk, and fruit purees. With non-alcoholic beverage demand rising year over year, dirty soda is poised to become a permanent menu fixture. The operational lift is minimal; the social media payoff is significant. Cold cups with Kraft drink carriers keep these creations safe, secure, and Instagrammable from window to wheel.

270%

Social media conversations about dirty soda have grown more than 270% year-over-year, with menu penetration growing at 42%*



Kraft Drink Carrier



CATERING CASHES IN ON THE OUTDOOR EVENT BOOM

Longer days and warmer weather make summer prime time for outdoor events and the catering pipeline that comes with them. Backyard graduations, corporate field days, pool parties, weddings, and pop-up market activations all need convenient, high-quality food that travels well.

For operators willing to invest in the format, catering is one of the highest-margin add-ons available.

Presentation is where catering is won or lost. Vibrant, seasonal menus paired with eye-catching packaging differentiate a caterer in a crowded market. Our wide array of catering packaging solutions can turn a routine drop-off into the kind that drives referrals and repeat business. With sustainability now a baseline consumer expectation, sustainable catering packaging can double as a marketing asset.



Outdoor Catering Solutions for Popular Summer Menu Favorites



Clear Round Catering Bowls

Show off bright and colorful salad creations with durable, clear PET round catering bowls. Bonus: PET is widely recyclable, making these a great sustainable option.



Clear UltraStack® Square Platters with Clear Dome Lid

Stackable, secure, and strong, these specially designed platters offer an easy way to transport everything from sandwiches to veggie trays to their final destination.



Catering Pop Top Bowls

Cater to different tastes at the same time with our two-compartment Catering Pop Top Bowls. Hinged lid option can be rotated 90 degrees to allow one or both halves to be accessed. Made from 100% clear PET making this line fully recyclable.



Kraft Pop-Up Catering Tray with Paperboard Inserts

Build-your-own tacos are an automatic crowd pleaser. With our Kraft Pop-Up Catering Tray with Paperboard Inserts, ingredients stay safe, secure, and looking spec-taco-ular!

BACK-TO-SCHOOL PREP STARTS IN SUMMER

Summer is the runway for the school year and the foodservice teams that win in September start planning in June. K-12 foodservice continues to grow in strategic importance, with **nearly nine-tenths of students eating at school at least once a week**. On the C&U side, operators are seeing a 68% increase in meals served, with **nearly two-thirds of students reporting they eat on campus weekly***. Both segments demand portable, kid-friendly or grab n' go formats that hold up between class periods, practices, and bus rides.

Smart operators use the summer window to forecast menus, refine offerings, and lock in packaging supply before fall demand spikes. The summer is short but the planning window is even shorter.

A+ Food
Packaging
Solutions



Kraft Lunch Box



On-the-Go Round Bowls



Paper Square Bowls

SABERT UNIVERSITY



With Sabert's sustainable and innovative food packaging solutions, you can always be prepared to serve an endless summer of satisfied customers.

Learn more at: www.sabert.com

