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Produce Moves To Head Of The Class

IF YOU WANT TO TASTE THE FUTURE OF PRODUCE, THEN DINE AT A COLLEGE CAMPUS. **By John Lehdorff**

If you pay attention to what's cooking on America's college campuses, you can catch a glimpse of the future of fresh produce. The same cafeterias that horrified earlier collegiate generations with meat-loaf and plops of instant mashed potatoes, gravy, frozen green beans and canned fruit cocktail are now leading sites for culinary development.

To a produce grower or supplier, the modern university dining hall can look like the Promised Land. The salad bars can compete with those at Whole Foods Market and Wegmans. Stir fries are cooked to order for students. Beautiful composed salads, vegetable-topped pizzas and side dishes (such as sautéed broccolini) are on the menu

along with "stealth health" burgers, a 50/50 blend of lean beef and roasted fresh mushrooms. Friendly folks hand out samples of fresh-fruit desserts, and restaurant-like seating areas where information is posted about the farmers who grow the fruit are prevalent.

Meet the Millennials, the demographic driver behind the phenomenon. Born between 1980 and the mid-2000s, they are 80-million strong, fill every university classroom, and are one-third of the current U.S. population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

The Port Washington, NY-based NPD Group, a market research firm, defines the generation's importance in its May 2015 *Five Consumer Trends Shaping the Future of the Food and Foodservice Industries*. The report



PHOTOS COURTESY OF YALE UNIVERSITY



notes that, “Millennials are driving changes in this country’s eating behaviors with their approach to food choice and preparation. They like fresh, less processed food.”

Millennials grew up going out to dinner and trying new cuisines, says Amy Myrdal Miller, president of Carmichael CA.-based Farmer’s Daughter Consulting, a nutrition communication and marketing firm.

“This generation of students is super-demanding as consumers. They have knowledgeable and highly demanding ‘helicopter’ parents. Schools have to offer more dietary options to keep students eating on campus,” she says.

To uncover the roadblocks and opportunities available to the produce industry in campus foodservice, PRODUCE BUSINESS talked with college foodservice directors and produce professionals across the country.

Beyond The Freshman 15

Institutions of higher learning are eager fans of American-grown fresh produce, but there are challenging particulars to this market. It’s a given that the grapes and greens are tasty, good-for-you and convenient. These consumers and institutions may also want their food grown locally and socially responsible in terms of sustainability, animal welfare, worker fairness and food waste reduction.

The fare must also satisfy a mélange of special diets ranging from vegan and halal to food allergies related to peanuts, tree nuts, eggs, soy, gluten and dairy.

On top of those variables, this generation is burdened with heavy tuition debt and typically short on expendable income. If the fare is not affordable, it doesn’t matter how local, organic and healthful it is.

“For many years, college dining was all institutional food and mystery meat. Now we are centers of culinary innovation,” says Rafi Taherian, executive director of Yale Dining at New Haven CT-based Yale University. In his eight years at Yale, Taherian and his team have overseen a transformation in the way produce is served at the Ivy League institution.

“The first place we looked was at the

salad bar. It was not the solution but rather the problem, because it was filled with poor-looking produce and processed dressings,” he says.

“We increased composed salads from various cuisines that are all great sources of vegetable recipes. The make-your-own salad bar includes better ingredients such as roasted — not raw, mushrooms.”

Taherian brought in noted chef and Mediterranean cuisine expert Joyce Goldstein to develop produce-focused recipes that fit the dietary goals. “We needed to pay as much attention to the produce as we did to the proteins,” he says. Yale’s ambitious goal is to double fresh produce consumption on campus by 2020.

While there are clear trends, Millennial college students are no more monolithic than their Baby Boom and Gen X parents. “Some students are foodies. They talk about street food, restaurants and recipes and watch the Food Network. They might eat bone marrow because it’s cool,” says Taherian of Yale Dining. Others have dietary and environmental concerns while a certain percentage of diners are just trying to get something to eat, he says.

Engineering A Menu

“Convenience,” “service” and “variety” top the surveys for the students at Golden, CO’s Colorado School of Mines, says Susan Fukushima, general manager of Mines Dining operated by Sodexo North America. (Sodexo operates food facilities at more than 600 colleges and universities.)

Mines Dining feeds 1,300 engineering students every day at a central dining hall. Other buildings on campus are home to Starbucks, Pizza Hut and Einstein Bros. Bagels.

At the School of Mines, broccoli still rules as the No. 1 vegetable, says Fukushima. Students can have it raw, steamed or stir-fried with peppers, onions and other ingredients. The menu also offers Indian and Asian vegetable dishes and a fairly standard salad bar. One highlight is creamy hummus made from freshly ground garbanzo beans in two flavors: garlic and roasted red pepper.

New Produce Items On College Shopping Lists

Newer produce items being used in campus dining halls in New England include:

- Heirloom spinach
- Organic mesclun
- Mixed medley colored tomatoes
- Black kale
- Nopales (cactus pads)
- “Graffiti” eggplant
- Enoki mushrooms

Source: FreshPoint-Connecticut

The Mines dining hall is getting a makeover this summer and will debut a sushi station and Chipotle Mexican Grill-style burrito station with fresh salsas in the fall, says Fukushima. “Over the years, students’ palates became more sophisticated, and we changed to accommodate that. They are much more conscious about eating healthy and not just eating burgers,” she says.

Patience is sometimes required on the part of college foodservice operators with specific sourcing goals, she says. “It takes our vendors time to get to the point where they have the volume we need.”

Mines’ produce supplier, FreshPoint-Denver, sources locally when possible, but the range of available products is limited because of Colorado’s short growing season, she says.

4,000 Sushi Rolls Daily

At the nation’s largest university foodservice program, UMass Amherst Dining, about 45,000 meals per day are served to more than 18,000 students. “We have 4,000 students who live off of campus, and don’t have to eat with us, but do anyway,” says Ken Toong, executive director of UMass Amherst Dining at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst.

From 2012 to 2014, produce consumption went up 26 percent at the school, which spends approximately \$3 million a year on produce, he says.

Because the pool of college-aged students is flat and not predicted to increase significantly in the next decade or so, universities will be competing for students and their dollars. “One of the things you need to attract and keep good students is great food. The difference between campus foodservice and restaurants is that we see the same customers several times a day, so it has to be exciting,”



PHOTO COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

asserts Toong.

One way to achieve that goal is exploring Mediterranean, South American and Asian cuisines, which naturally use a lot of produce, he says.

“We do dim sum items and make 4,000 sushi rolls a day. Our most popular station is the stir fry — where you pick from 15 vegetables and give it to the chef to cook. You decide the protein and how spicy you want it.”

The winter fruit program at UMass has also been amped-up well beyond “The Three” — bananas, apples and oranges, says Toong.

“Now we offer blueberries, strawberries, lots of mangos, grapes and kiwi all the time. In our experience, the more kinds of fruit you offer the students — the more they will choose them.”

Sourcing: Location, Location

The Hartford, CT-hub of FreshPoint distributes produce to more than 40 colleges and universities in five New England states including the University of Massachusetts. Each school and state may have its own definition of what “local” and “regional” mean, says Rich Adams, vice president for sales at FreshPoint-Hartford. FreshPoint, the largest foodservice distributor of fresh produce in the United States, is part of Houston TX-based Sysco Foods.

“We have a good partnership with the University of Massachusetts, which is very proactive in wanting to support local and regional sourcing,” says Adams.

“The challenge for us is getting more local produce to supply to the university. We have an agreement with the school to source as much as possible within 50 miles of the school, and then as much of the remainder within 250 miles. We have relationships with more than 100 farms in New England, so we encourage schools to consider regionally sourced produce as well as local. It lengthens the local season and increases the available varieties,” says Adams.

Weekly market basket reports are sent to schools listing produce in season (from fiddleheads to pears) and the mileage from farm to school. This also provides operators with tracking information they need to meet local produce purchasing goals.

FreshPoint creates materials on fruits and vegetables for the schools. “We provide information on where, for instance, the yellow squash was grown and a bio of the farmer who grew it so schools can post it in the dining area,” says Adams. Some colleges also launched “Meet the Farmer” programs connecting undergraduates with the families who grew it.

Despite the complexity of fulfilling locally grown needs at universities, Adams says that it is a large and growing market opportunity for growers and suppliers.

“The local food movement has only become more popular in the schools, and students are asking for it. If it was up to some universities, they would buy 100 percent local because their goals include sustainability and economic development,” he says.

However, most colleges will still invest much of their budget on produce grown in California and elsewhere because of the sheer volume of product needed and ongoing budgetary constraints.

“Local” doesn’t have to be synonymous with “fresh,” says Myrdal Miller of Farmer’s Daughter Consulting.

“Sometimes local means capturing a wonderful regional crop like tomatoes at their peak before the students arrive, so it’s available during the winter for a special marinara sauce.”

‘Inveterate Vegetable Haters’

Willamette University’s location near the lush Willamette Valley in Oregon means the small private school can source much of its produce locally and support small farmers during the year.

“The Willamette Valley has a vibrant

Top 10 Vegetables on University Menus 2014

Potatoes	94.2%
Beans	87.7%
Tomatoes.....	85.7%
Broccoli	85.1%
Corn.....	83.8%
Onions	77.3%
Spinach	74.7%
Carrots	74.0%
Peppers	70.8%
Peas.....	70.1%

Source: 2015 Technomic College & University Consumer Trend Report

culture of small-scale growers. One provides us with diverse sweet melons, another has heirloom tomatoes, and there are new varieties of potatoes and lots of berries coming all the time,” says Chris Linn, general manager of foodservices at Salem OR-based Willamette University.

Willamette Dining is operated by Palo Alto, CA-based Bon Appétit Management Company, which has foodservice operations at more than 100 campuses in 33 states.

“Locally grown food and food raised in an ethical manner are bigger deals here than organic. Food waste is also huge. We have more conversations with students about cutting waste than anything else,” says Linn.

At Willamette, the most heavily used produce resource is the salad bar, says Linn. One side of the salad bar is build-your-own, and the other features composed salads made frequently in small batches. These include roasted vegetable salad, Caesar salad, wheat berry salad with apples and an Asian noodle salad with baby bok choy and sweet onions.

“We can quickly draw in seasonal things that catch our eye — like roasted golden beets, sautéed Brussels sprouts and grilled leeks — and add them to the menu,” says Linn.

“With 1,200 diners to feed every day, we are in a balancing act. We still have French fries and chicken strips for some, and you still have your inveterate vegetable haters. What has changed in the past decade is the amount of attention and concern being paid to what kind of produce we are serving, who grew it and where,” he says.

Menu Changes Offer Opportunities

Changing a university menu item isn’t quite as slow as turning an aircraft carrier, but it is a complicated process because of institu-

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tional goals and budgeting. Feedback starts with students who are not shy about offering colorful opinions about university cuisine — especially on social media.

Most university foodservice operators also do annual satisfaction surveys. UMass Dining distributes 4,000 surveys twice a year. “In the last survey, the top item was produce — almost 93 percent said fresh produce was very important to them,” says Toong.

Campus foodservice directors are open to new produce product ideas from suppliers and growers, but many underestimate the wide scope of university foodservices, says Taherian of Yale Dining.

“They think campus dining is just one thing: a cafeteria. We also have retail food sites, on-campus catering, and event concessions for students, staff and visitors.”

Getting college operators and produce suppliers in the same place at the same time is always the challenge, says Myrdal Miller of Farmer’s Daughter Consulting.

“More people on the producer side need to engage with the culinary side. You need an intermediary, someone who speaks the same language as the producers and operators.”

Foodservice management staff needs to get out and interact with the produce industry at events such as the New York Produce Show and its Foodservice Forum, says Taherian.

“I went to the show for the first time last year and found many new items. One is broccoli leaves — the ones that are usually trimmed and tossed. They are absolutely delicious, full of nutrients, and we have them on the menu now. We formed relationships with three growers from going there.”

Another recent menu addition is Kalettes, the cross between kale and Brussels sprouts.

Another option is collaborating with produce marketing groups on menu innovations, says Toong of UMass Dining.

“We have a program using Avocados from Mexico for more than just guacamole. Because it has healthier fat, we want to use it in entrees and especially as a sandwich spread to cut down on mayo.”

Making Produce Sexy

Universities inviting Millennials to expand their produce consciousness craft their pitches carefully, according to the 2015 *College & University Consumer Trend Report* from Chicago-based Technomic. The report notes that “Health-halo claims (such as fresh and natural) resonate strongly with students and are most likely to increase purchases. Also, claims regarding social and environmental

Top 10 Fruits On College Menus 2014

Lemons.....	46.8%
Apples	41.6%
Blueberries.....	40.9%
Oranges	31.8%
Pineapples	30.5%
Limes.....	29.9%
Bananas	28.6%
Cranberries	23.4%
Strawberries	21.4%
Raisins	20.1%

Source: 2015 Technomic College & University Consumer Trend Report

responsibility are just as likely as traditional health descriptors to increase purchases and drive price points.”

Offering samples is essential to marketing a new dish, cuisine or produce product on campus, but the message has to be enticing. “You look at the history of the health and wellness movement and you see that we failed, because we tried to sell health and wellness. Nobody has spent any money making produce sexy,” says Taherian of Yale Dining.

Menu timing is also a critical factor to success, says Myrdal Miller of Farmer’s Daughter Consulting.

“Don’t introduce new produce-forward dishes on chicken tenders day. The students love their chicken tenders, and they won’t pay attention.”

To connect with students about cuisine, schools also have to speak their language, she says. There’s a lot that can be done with social media and the platforms students’ prefer to use. “They run away from our social media channels. It’s also important to have a sense of humor and not be preachy.”

Brevity is vital. Think funny, share-worthy, short-attention-span videos — only six to 15 seconds long — on platforms such as Vine, Instagram and Snapchat.

What’s Hot?

Foodservice directors can point to a wide range of successful produce-focused cuisines from smoothie bars that are open all day to standalone carts serving street tacos made with fresh fish, produce and served with lime and various salsas, plus certain dishes that are winners.

“We started serving a roasted half tomato — with salt, pepper and olive oil and a little Parmesan cheese. The students love them

New Ways To 'Eat Your Vegetables' On College Foodservice Menus

Dishes served at college foodservice outlets during the 2014-2015 school year:

- Jicama, mango and cucumber salad with chile: University of Southern California (Los Angeles)
- Adobo sweet potato tacos (avocado, salsa verde, red cabbage, pickled red onion, cashew-lime crema): Vanderbilt University (Nashville, TN)
- Eggplant curry: Dartmouth College (Hanover, NH)
- Grilled vegetable Reuben sandwich: Georgia Institute of Technology (Atlanta, GA)
- Broccoli rabe sautéed with garlic and olive oil: Manhattan College (New York City)
- Crepes with goat cheese and grilled vegetables: Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore, MD)
- Roasted cherry tomato and balsamic onion flatbread: Stanford University (Stanford, CA)

Source: college.usatoday.com

are on the horizon along with old flavors used in new ways such as pistachios (as a crust for baked chicken) and fresh ginger (in salads).

"The other one is bitter melon; we use it in stir fries for a bittersweet flavor. I think it is a vegetable to watch," he says.

Generation Z

"With closer collaboration between growers and foodservice operators in the future, we can get some things done in terms of produce consumption. Remember: We

are training the next generation of produce consumers and creating the new palates," says Taherian of Yale Dining.

The impact of those palates is huge, because 60 percent of adult Millennials attended — or are now attending — college, versus only 46 percent of Baby Boomers, according to data from Whitehouse.gov.

So it's less a question of "if" and more a question of "when" the trends migrate from academia to mainstream restaurants and supper tables. **pb**

now and there would be a revolt if we didn't have them," says Toong of UMass Dining.

Protein is also the major buzz-word in dining halls, says Myrdal Miller of Farmer's Daughter Consulting.

"At breakfast, students are moving away from cereal and pastries and looking for protein. I'm seeing a lot of eggs paired with produce such as savory egg sandwiches, omelets, egg bakes, frittatas and breakfast burritos. What's important at colleges is that the item be handheld so they can walk across campus with it in one hand and operate a device in the other."

Quest For The Holy Kale

Produce people seeking the next game-changing fruit or vegetable trend can look toward college foodservice for an inkling of what's to come.

"Cauliflower isn't sexy enough to be the next kale. I look at aromatic ingredients like fresh lemongrass and Thai basil. Chillies of all sorts are on the rise," says Myrdal Miller of Farmer's Daughter Consulting.

Toong of UMass Dining says traditional vegetables from South and Central America



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