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Restaurants rethink menus to woo baby boomers

Martha C. White, NBC News contributor

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Alex Brandon / AP

Diners enjoy lunch in the main dining room at Commander's Palace in the Garden District of New Orleans in 2009. The restaurant industry has realized that baby boomers -- not the younger generation -- is the primary customer.

After years of chasing the young and the hip, restaurants are realizing that young people aren't the ones keeping the industry afloat — their parents are. This is prompting companies to tweak everything from their sandwiches to their seats in a bid to woo baby boomers.

Pre-recession, young adults were the restaurant regulars. According to market research firm the NPD Group, adults under the age of 48 visited a restaurant, on average, 240 times in 2008.

Today, young adults struggle to move out of the house, let alone eat out nearly five times a week. "It's the economy. They've learned to do without; they're cooking at home," said Bonnie Riggs, restaurant industry analyst for the NPD Group.

Conversely, those 55 and older spent more time last year in a booth, on a bar stool or waiting at the drive-thru. Those between the ages of 55 to 64 visited restaurants on average 220 times last year, the highest of any age bracket.

"They're more accustomed to eating out and eating away from home than previous retirees," said Brian Todd, president of The Food Institute. "Certainly, convenience is another aspect of it. I think more retirees have part-time jobs," he said.

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Newly empty-nester boomers might be downsizing their homes and deciding that a home-cooked meal isn't the priority it was before, Riggs said.

Boomers not only are visiting restaurants more often; they're spending more, too. According to the National Restaurant Association, 55- to 64-year-olds spent an average \$1,243 eating out in 2001, roughly \$300 more than adults under the age of 25.

After years of throwing their marketing dollars at millennials, Riggs said restaurants from fast food up the price spectrum are now seeking to attract boomers.

In many cases, this means making even fast-food establishments look and feel more comfortable. Chains from Dunkin' Donuts to Wendy's are copying the homier atmosphere adopted by popular brands like Panera Bread, adding living-room style furniture, TVs and lighting that's friendlier to bifocal-wearing eyes.

Hudson Riehle, the National Restaurant Association's senior vice president of research, said more restaurants were using technology to subtly help out those aging eyes by adding digital menus and signage. "There can be a greater emphasis on how the actual menu is displayed relating to font size," he said.

In addition to overhauling their dining areas, restaurants are giving their menus boomer-friendly makeovers. They've turned to ethnic ingredients and spices to deliver novelty, along with a jolt to their taste buds.

"As people get older, their taste buds kind of erode," said Kim Holman, director of marketing for Wixon Inc., a flavorings and seasonings company. "So this idea of heat has an impact." Chipotle and other chili peppers are making more appearances on menus, often in condiments or sauces, Holman said, and other bold Latin American and pan-Asian flavors are creeping onto mainstream American menus.

Riggs said boomers, who crave choice more than anything else, are responsible for the profusion of choices and mix-and-match combo meals where diners can choose a soup or salad and half a sandwich.

And restaurants are adding more low-sodium, gluten-free and other health-conscious offerings in deference to boomers' worries about age-related health issues. YouGov BrandIndex market research found that the top fast-food restaurant among adults 50 years old and up was Subway, a chain that puts a health focus on its marketing and menu items.

But restaurant companies also have to strike a delicate balance, Holman said, because boomers expect to be able to treat themselves when they want something sweet or fattening. "The number one reason people go out to eat is to indulge themselves or to celebrate something," she said.

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