

### 3 - It's All About Authenticity

The quest for authenticity guides the culinary consciousness of American consumers

By Katie Ayoub

Authenticity is a big word that embraces so many values. Although it can easily be a question of what's "real," it should be viewed through a more nuanced prism—one that informs dining-out decisions and should shape brand and menu development. Authenticity speaks to origin, integrity, tradition and intent. "Authenticity should mean being true to what you're doing," says Datassential's Maeve Webster. "At the concept level, the menu-design level, the experience level and the ingredient level—it should mean a level of respect for the cuisine, heritage or origin of the dish."

But let's be clear—authenticity does not preclude culinary creativity. What makes foodservice today so exciting is the intersection of such creativity and bold new flavor combinations with the element of authenticity. "Mash-ups are increasingly how patrons become familiar with less-common cuisines, ingredients and formats," says Webster. "And while the finished product may not be authentic as a whole to any one culinary practice, the individual elements should be authentic. If you're going to call something kimchi, make sure it's not just glorified coleslaw."

Consumers define authenticity in easily translatable values. According to Datassential, more than half tie it to food that is handcrafted, fresh, natural and farm-to-table. When you parse it out like that, you realize that authenticity has been around for quite a while. Indeed, farm-to-table isn't newsworthy. But now we're seeing authenticity take on a formidable shape, rolling into one big snowball of a trend.

"As operators, we are always looking for points of connection with our consumers—opportunities to strengthen belief within our core users and convert new users," says chef Rob Corliss. "Authentic food is both perception and reality in foodservice. This will continue to build, especially as the younger generation carries the torch for informed dining. We need to make authentic food part of our brand and culinary strategy."

Authenticity is the conduit for that connection so deeply sought after by today's consumers. "I think the best thing that may come out of authenticity is a greater trust between patrons and restaurants," says Webster. "Restaurants that strive for authenticity will enjoy greater loyalty among patrons and a better relationship overall with their customers."



"Simple, whole ingredients" is the mantra at Modmarket, a growing fast-casual, currently with 8 units in Colorado. The company promotes authenticity through rusticity, Old World techniques, from-scratch offerings and sourcing transparency.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF MOD MARKET.

And what's the prelude to connection? Discovery. "The act of discovery is driving guests to dip deeper into authenticity of food, flavor and origin," notes The Culinary Edge's Eric Stangarone. "For guests, especially Millennials, the race is on to be the first to discover something and post it through social media. Whether it's a region, a place or an idea, guests no longer just want to know the 'what,' but also the 'why' of a dish." But he cautions that authenticity should be relayed as part of a conversation, not as a monologue. "Bring them along on the journey, but don't talk down to them," he says. "Not every guest is a foodie."

## A NARRATOR FOR FLAVOR

Authenticity is inextricably tied to narrative. The scene is set in culinary traditions, and authentic flavor adds both character and plot.

Datassential's consumer research tells us that more than 70 percent believe that the story behind authentic food is important. But be an honest narrator and tell a good story, or else authenticity becomes an obvious marketing ploy rather than a compelling story. "Think old is new—cultivate interesting takes on old culinary favorites that provide your operation with a story and a reference for guests," suggests Corliss. "It's okay to push the boundary with a little creative culinary leeway." That's where the license to mash-up is granted—authentic intent and integrity of ingredients meet creative, appealing, modern renditions.

But the heart of the story, the theme, is based in tradition. Tap into that, share that, and you've got yourself a bestseller. At Big Jones in Chicago, chef/co-owner Paul Fehribach tells a forward-thinking story rooted in Southern traditions. He stresses authentic experience over replication. His Sweet-Tea Brined Pork Loin features house-butchered and brined pork loin served with baked bean purée and sweet potato hash. His Fried Green Tomatoes star local green tomatoes breaded in heirloom cornmeal and served with pickled shrimp, aioli and deviled egg purée. "Integrity of ingredient is the most important part when defining authenticity," says Fehribach. "You need to respect the historic context, but give it your own flavor. Warmth linked to the recipe is what people are looking for—they want genuine hospitality."

Fehribach's commitment to authenticity conveys his passion to his craft, notes chef Gerry Ludwig. "These menu cues send a clear and potent message of authenticity. With some research, the same sort of origin references could be made regarding virtually any regional or global cuisine."



Authenticity and culinary creativity can go hand-in-hand in dishes like this warm herbed potato salad with feta. The real opportunity is to make a "connection" to consumers through your menu offerings.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LACTALIS.

Who tells the story? Menu language only goes so far. Servers are today's village criers, ringing the bell and sharing good tidings—and, hopefully, delivering authentic cues in a subtle manner. "You don't need to get credit for everything," says Cliff Pleau, senior director of culinary and beverage at Seasons 52. "That pride of ingredient integrity comes through the food and through the servers. Get them excited about the story and they'll deliver it with animation and believability." For Seasons 52, with 40-plus units nationwide, authenticity is a key driver of menu development. "It impacts the products we position in our pantry," he says. "For example, we use an organic, reduced-sodium soy that's gluten free. That's three initiatives in one bottle. The customer doesn't specifically know about the soy sauce, but it's woven into the story we tell here."

Matt Christianson from Urban Farmer in Portland, Ore., agrees that servers are key ambassadors for authenticity. "They convey the story to the diners, and more and more, the servers care about where the food comes from, and how it's made. So we empower our servers to tell the story," he says. "We give them kitchen experience—even with something as mundane as picking through fava beans. We immerse them in the culture. That immersion is important with authenticity." Dishes include a Farm Vegetable Frittata made with seasonal vegetables, foraged mushrooms and aged Tillamook cheddar, and a Vanilla Yogurt Panna Cotta made with berries, hand-rolled granola and pistachio biscotti.

But authenticity doesn't need to tell a fancy tale. Indeed, look to Rick Bayless and his success with Mexican cuisine. His Cochinita Pibil Torta at Xoco in Chicago has authenticity all wrapped up. "It's not the fancification of food," says Corliss. "But rather the beauty of fresh, quality ingredients with the application of sound cooking techniques. A burger or taco can be simple and affordably priced yet strike a memorable chord via its exceptional ingredients and/or preparation techniques."

## AUTHENTIC OPPORTUNITIES

Tapping into authenticity is no small task, and it's one that needs to be handled differently then, say, tapping into the flavor trends of coconut or Filipino. Authenticity is tender, vulnerable, and its roots run deep. "This is the ideal opportunity for operators to step up and provide leadership with the food they source, prepare and serve," advises Corliss. "This is not about capitalizing on a trend, but rather doing the right thing via our food practices."



Cape Cod's Pain D'Avignon focuses on traditional techniques for its authentic bread and pastries.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF BRIAN SAMUELS.

How do you key into the trend without diluting its meaning? Transparency. Sources. Craftsmanship. “Pick a menu item that you are really proud of and highlight some of the sourcing practices or unique prep methods that involve getting it to the table,” says Melissa Abbott of The Hartman Group. “But avoid using the word ‘authentic’ at all costs. If you are truly authentic, consumers will know it from your product. It’s akin to calling yourself ‘cool.’ Label yourself as such and you are not cool at all.”

And be judicious about your use of authenticity, Pleau advises. “We formulate culinary concepts with the products built in. We’re working on a walnut vinaigrette to go with roasted Bosc pears in a spinach salad. We’re sourcing a pretty expensive but wonderful walnut oil. We bake that into the cost, knowing it will add to our differentiation.” Authenticity, then, demands clarity and honesty with a clear connection to source, tradition and practice.