

## TOP 10 TRENDS FOR 2016

### Vegetable Forward

*The vegetable-centric movement has taken hold, with opportunity growing in leaps and bounds*

By Katie Ayoub

Prominent Positioning of produce has been gaining steam for some time, but it's just now revealing itself as an industry-wide opportunity rather than a niche specialization. Veg-centric means that vegetables see attention to sourcing, aggressive cooking techniques and bold flavoring treatments—tactics usually reserved for proteins.

Veg-centric is becoming a modern philosophy—a culinary approach to ingredients that were once menued as afterthoughts, at best. Not the same as vegetarian, veg-centric dishes are all about culinary technique, amplifying flavor with high-heat cooking methods like charring, oven-roasting and wood-grilling, and often featuring protein accents, like well-placed chunks of crispy pork or dollops of soft cheese.

The trend was born in forward-thinking concepts like Gjelina in Venice, Calif., Vedge in Philadelphia and Dirt Candy in New York, where husbandry with produce is as meticulous as it is with protein. Nose-to-tail becomes root-to-stem, and throwaways like carrot tops and parsley stems become part of the flavor-layering build. These early pioneers menu the edgier side of the trend, crystallizing the idea that vegetables can demand center stage in flavor development.



Chef Omar Flores' Coliflor a la Plancha at Casa Rubia in Dallas is composed of cauliflower confit, red onion marmalade, capers, Spanish olive tapenade, pimentón crumb and rosemary brown butter atop a base of charred cauliflower.

*“Today’s veg-centric dishes are all about technique, texture and layers of flavor. The combination of these three elements make the dishes the consumer would not have time or skills to prepare at home. To enhance veg-centric dishes on the menu, operators should work closely with produce companies and providers.”*

- Kathy Casey

At Gjelina, protein takes the complementary role, punctuating dishes like the Charred Romesco with linguica sausage, sofrito and chile, an early menu offering at this seven-year-old restaurant. Vedge shirks the label of a vegan eatery, saying instead that it is a restaurant that happens to serve vegetables, perhaps illustrating a new bravado in vegetable cookery—a refusal to be relegated to a niche consumer base. Dishes include Portabella Carpaccio with caper purée, shaved kale, pistachio and Nigella grissini. At Dirt Candy, items like pulled, pickled and jerked carrots with peanut mole sauce on carrot waffles reflect Chef/Owner Amanda Cohen’s motto of “Anyone can cook a hamburger; leave the vegetables to the professionals.” These restaurants guard the fringe of the trend, pushing creativity and innovation, changing expectations of what produce can look and taste like with a little love and culinary technique.

Some are also shifting produce-to-protein ratios. Newcomers like Al’s Place in San Francisco move meat to the side, literally. Named restaurant of the year by Bon Appétit in 2015, Al’s Place rotates its sides menu frequently and includes protein-centric additions like pork belly, duck and smoked brisket.

Propelling the trend into the mainstream are fast-casual concepts like Veggie Grill and Lyfe Kitchen, and even fast-food joints like Clover Food Lab, with six restaurants and four food trucks in the Boston area.

With so many drivers—health and wellness, clean eating, seasonality—the veg-centric trend has broken through. Helping it along the way is its menu flexibility, slotting seamlessly into bar snacks, shareables, sandwiches, sides and center-of-the-plate dishes. Underpinning all of this opportunity is flavor. Chefs are coaxing out, developing and amplifying flavor in these new menu superstars.

But how far can it go? Are mainstream consumers ready for produce-heavy adventure? “You have to illustrate to the guest the value of what they’re getting,” says Jamie Carawan, senior director of food and beverage innovation and menu strategy for Front Burner Restaurants. “We’re currently looking at different vegetable entrées. Brussels sprouts are in our wheelhouse now—they weren’t a few years ago,” he says.

*“Keep an eye on the current and upcoming rockstars, such as cauliflower, colored potatoes and carrots, golden beets and seaweed, which will start to have more play on menus.” - Suzy Badaracco*

Carawan’s menu ideation around Brussels sprouts includes shredding into slaws, roasting them and frying them. “They might be far out for our guest, but they’ve heard of them. And they might give us credit for being edgy.” That’s the key to success with veg-centric—innovation tempered with familiarity. Carrots, beets, cauliflower and green beans are at home here, as are more exotic vegetables like kohlrabi and celery root.

“There’s so much going on in this category at the retail level—in the snacking aisle, at the smoothie bar,” says Mindy Armstrong, director of insights and innovation for Food IQ. With that heightened exposure, both familiarity and customer expectation are elevated.

---

## **Cocktails Gone Veg**

by Kathy Casey

Vegetables are being used in the bar as well. The garden-to-glass movement is expanding from herbs and cucumbers to fresh-pressed vegetable juices, making their way into cocktails. Carrots, celery, snap peas, beets and bell peppers are topping the list of cocktail inclusions. With the “green-is-good” movement, celery, pea pods, avocado and kale are also starting to show up in progressive cocktails.

Fresh vegetable purées are now starring in cocktail favorites, too, like in a purée of cucumber, jalapeño, green onion and pineapple added to a margarita for a sweet and savory profile. And arugula is the new basil for craft cocktails.

Beets, long used in juicing, are a tasty and colorful addition to cocktails, house sodas and lemonades. Add fresh beet juice to make a signature “pink” lemonade. Or combine with orange juice into bubbles for a fresh take on a mimosa.

## WELLNESS AT WORK



Crowd-pleasing flavor profiles boost produce’s appeal. Buffalo Cauliflower with crumbled blue cheese at Thistle Hill Tavern in Brooklyn, N.Y., taps into the craveability of beloved wings.

Even if the vegetable dish is bathed in bagna cauda or sprinkled with crispy pancetta, it carries a moniker of health and wellness. “There’s been a rise of craveable wellness in both consumer eating habits and chef innovation, with a focus on the vegetable as the star,” says Rob Corliss, chef/founder of All Things Epicurean. “Veg-centric is not a vegetarian movement. It is a major opportunity.”

Produce, rightfully so, guarantees some level of nutrient density, and its health halo glows brightly. In addition to high-impact touches of protein-centric ingredients like bacon, cheese, chorizo and char siu, high-heat cooking, other flavorful toppings and sauces help make these dishes craveable.

At Wassail in New York, the Roasted Veggies are served with bulgur, yogurt and za’atar. At Café Gratitude in San Diego, roasted sweet potatoes are served with a coconut-mint chutney and tamarind sauce. The Green Giant at Unforked in Overland Park, Kan., stars char-grilled fresh broccolini spears with a creamy miso-sesame dip. And at Lemonade, with more than 20 units in California, diners can get miso-glazed baby turnips and carrots.

*“All the magic is in the produce—it doesn’t take skilled labor to make them shine. They can be prepared in a number of ways, are exciting for Millennials, and work well with all flavor systems.” - Charlie Baggs*

These veg-centric dishes put flavor first. In the modern environment of feel-good cuisine—where consumers want food that is nutrient-rich and flavorful but that they also feel good about—this trend hits a home run.

“Consumers believe dishes with a lot of produce are healthier regardless of the indulgence of the dish,” says Maeve Webster, president of Menu Matters, an independent food consultancy. “For operators, particularly chains now forced to identify calories on the menu, produce allows for an increase in portion sizes without significantly impacting calorie counts. These dishes invite you in, encouraging unapologetic consumption.”

# 5 Ways to Highlight Produce

by Rob Corliss

## 1. Center-plate stars

Focus first on seasonality then showcase with culinary techniques—roasting, pan-searing, grilling, pickling.

Grilled-vegetable tacos

Steamed spaghetti squash vermicelli with vegetable “Bolognese”

Quiche-like breakfast muffins of grated zucchini, egg and cheese

## 2. Sensational sides

Sides can no longer be an afterthought; they should resonate the same high quality and execution of the main dish.

Stir-fried cauliflower “rice”

Grilled Mexican street corn porridge

Pan-seared umami turnips (with tamari, sesame seeds and white miso paste)

## 3. Tasteful toppers

Add intrigue and layers of flavor via vegetable applications.

Caramelized Thai chile Brussels sprouts on a burger

Global-inspired giardiniera stylings on hot dogs

Kimchi relish inside grilled cheese sandwiches

## 4. New-age appetizers

Veg-centric small bites are a great way to showcase your concept’s key flavor profiles.

Whole steamed edamame with signature seasonings

Tempura asparagus with tahini yogurt dip

Grilled Japanese eggplant topped with smoked vegetable salsa and ricotta

## 5. Flavoring agents

Purée or chop; add to sauces, dips, hummus, soups, stews, dressings or stuffings.

Roasted beet hummus topped with crumbled sweet potato chips

Carrot juice as a base in salad dressings

Produce-oriented glaze on crispy chicken wings

### FLAVOR INTERPLAY



In Boston, Ames Street Deli's Carrot Sandwich with Jack cheese showcases the versatility of carrots, in roasted, puréed and pickled formats.

Veg-centric comes with a healthy ego, proudly claiming its modern position on a level playing field with protein when it comes to flavor and texture. "A growing number of chefs are treating produce as equal-opportunity ingredients when ideating new menu items, ushering in a new age of produce cookery in restaurants," says Gerry Ludwig, consulting chef with Gordon Food Service and frequent Flavor & The Menu contributor. In his street-level trend-tracking research last year, he pinpointed flavor-forward techniques like: poaching vegetables in meat stocks; schnitzels made from celery root, eggplant and rutabaga; whole-roasted beets and cauliflower heads on dedicated rotisseries. "These are just a few examples of the new direction that chefs are taking as they endeavor to innovate the center of the plate and elevate produce beyond the realm of the side dish," he says.

*"Root-to-stem is the new nose-to-tail cuisine. And similar to the artisan, butcher-inspired movement, chefs are crafting vegetables in fresh and innovative ways to showcase produce."* - Gail Cunningham

Interplay between produce and protein is one of the more compelling parts of this trend. At MB Post in Manhattan Beach, Calif., Chef/Owner David LeFevre serves a rotating "Eat Your Vegetables" small-plates section of 10 dishes. The Blistering Blue Lake Green Beans, a recent offering, are tossed with Thai basil, chile sauce and crispy pork. "The goal is to create vegetable dishes that stand on their own as complete dishes, not sides," he says. "In the green beans, the crispy pork adds flavor and richness to the dish. We took a staple veggie and added great Southeast Asian flavors that make the dish a little more fun." Another side dish at MB Post is the Grilled Radicchio and Salad with speck-wrapped asparagus, burrata and tarragon.

John Fraser at Dovetail in New York also turns to soft cheese for protein play in his grilled figs with stracciatella and pistachios. River Roast in Chicago menus Turnips au Gratin with ricotta and Gruyère. The Kale Cuban at The Herb Box in Scottsdale, Ariz., offers caramelized plantain, garlicky kale, pickled red onion, manchego and a roasted garlic vegan mayonnaise.

When protein doesn't come into the mix, veg-centric dishes rely on cooking technique and layering of flavor. At San Francisco's The Progress, a dish of roasted maitake mushrooms with nori, kosho and Buddha's hand holds its own as an entrée. At Distil, a bourbon bar in Milwaukee, the Moroccan Roasted Cauliflower stars Parmesan, preserved lemon and harissa. Gracias Madre in West Hollywood, Calif., serves repollitos fritos—fried Brussels sprouts with cilantro-almond pesto and lemon.

“Consumers want something more interesting, with the same innovation and flavor-forward care in preparation as the rest of menu,” says Maeve Webster. Indeed, the veg-centric focus is more than a trend. It's a movement, reflecting modern consumers' sensibility, gaining momentum with every success.

---

## **Equal-Opportunity Ingredients**

by Gerry Ludwig

A growing number of chefs are treating produce as equal-opportunity ingredients when ideating new menu items, ushering in a new age of produce cookery in restaurants. In the past year of street-level research, we have encountered dishes featuring the following treatments:

Vegetables poached in meat stocks, including cauliflower, Belgian endive, carrots and fennel bulb.

Vegetable tartares made from roasted beets, rainbow carrots and other root vegetables, with such garnishes as egg yolk, fish roe or shredded smoked fish.

Schnitzels made from celery root, eggplant, winter squash and rutabaga.

Beets and cauliflower heads roasted on dedicated rotisseries.

Dishes based on wood-grilled fruit, including watermelon, winter citrus and summer stone fruit.

## **The Brand Power of Produce**

by Chris Casson

With the culinary scene continuing to evolve and the consumer seeking out the next “urban dining” experience, operators are using produce to distinguish themselves from their competitors.

Produce not only provides a solution to the increasing cost of fresh proteins, it is also on trend with Millennials and Gen Z, who account for almost half of our population. These trendsetters in the culinary community are more focused on health and wellness, and flavor-forward produce answers that call.

Many menus have shifted from the traditional “seasonal vegetable” to a powerhouse produce item that is center stage, such as taking a modern-day spin on beef bourguignon to create beet bourguignon.

Seasonally, there are thousands of fresh items available, which enable the artist/chef to source unique items, be creative and stay a step ahead of their competition.

Produce can also provide a story for the operator: Where was it grown? What information can be shared with the consumer, providing a connection to the field? Retail outlets have done a great job of saluting the farmer, shifting some of today's celebrity status from the chef to the grower. This shift has been a big influencer in foodservice, and can really drive the consumer's decision on where to eat.