UK Chefs Reveal a ‘Change In Appetite’ Among UK Diners - New Research

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According to new research, 85% of UK chefs and restaurant operators believe that 'dining expectations are changing faster than ever' - and yet nearly one-third (30%) admit to selling dishes that are unchanged from five years ago.

“*There is a creative and commercial tension at the heart of British kitchens*” says Ollie Lloyd, Head of Innovation, Hot Pickle Innovation Lab. “*Operators know that the diners' wants and expectations have shifted but the safe revenue of proven dishes is holding them back. A case of fortune favouring the brave?*”

Conducted jointly by Hot Pickle Innovation Lab, the food innovation division of award-winning experiential agency Hot Pickle and The Staff Canteen, the UK's leading networking site for chefs, the study polled 123 of the UK’s top chefs and restaurant operators revealing an evolving dining scene driven by a change in customers' attitudes and appetite.

“What we’re hearing through our network is that diners are changing their expectations quickly - whether that’s around health, 'real food', value, provenance or flavour - and the people feeling that first are the ones on the pass, on the floor and running the business” says Mark Morris, Founder of The Staff Canteen.

Local-First

Provenance - once a premium differentiator is now a baseline expectation with ‘local’ (65%) the claim that matters most to UK diners. 54% of the chefs and operators surveyed stated that they already source from local suppliers with 71% saying that they would ‘pay or charge more’ for verified provenance.

“*The research has validated that operators who can tell a compelling, verified supply-chain story have a genuine commercial edge”* comments Mark Morris.

Pickles, ferments and Umami – the new mainstream

53% of UK chefs and restaurant operators are using more ferments and pickles, with miso, koji (40%) and seaweed (37%) also featuring heavily on today’s menus. The research has also revealed that Korean and Japanese cuisines are the biggest sources of new dish inspiration with fish and seafood identified as the fastest-growing protein - featuring on 48% of menus.

Redefining ‘healthy’

When it comes to defining what constitutes ‘healthy’ for today’s diner, 70% of the chefs and restaurant operators surveyed said it is about ‘natural and minimally processed ingredients’ with just over half (51%) citing more vegetables/plant-based options.

“*The era of virtue-signalling via plant-based swaps is giving way to a genuine demand for clean, honest cooking,*” says Ollie Lloyd “*and UK chefs are the people best-placed to articulate what ‘healthy’ really means to British diners*.”

The politics of hospitality

The hospitality sector is notoriously precarious with recent data from NIQ (NielsenIQ) showing that the hospitality sector saw 382 net closures in the final three months of 2025 - equivalent to four per day. Not surprisingly, UK chefs and restaurant operators are looking to the Government for support with an emphatic 94% saying that ‘they are not doing enough’. When asked what the Government could/should be doing to support the industry more than two-thirds (69%) said a ‘VAT rate cut’ followed by business-rate reductions.

Tom Kerridge, who contributed to the study and holds two Michelin stars for his pub The Hand and Flowers said: “The biggest thing that would help hospitality across the board is a reduction in VAT that aligns with the rest of Europe. Even though hospitality operations vary dramatically, the pressures they all face are exactly the same. Together the industry needs to hold hands, become one voice and

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consistently and repetitively keep banging the drum about VAT”

Summary of results

· 85% of chefs and restaurant operators say dining expectations are changing quickly.

· 70% say ‘healthy’ is deemed to be ‘natural’ and ‘minimally processed’.

· 53% are actively using more ferments and pickles

· 65% state that ‘local sourcing’ is the #1 looked-for provenance claim among diners

· 37% claim that customers are ‘trading down’ or being more ‘price conscious’

· 45% are using more chilli and spice in their menus

· 44% are using more smoke

· 48% cite fish and seafood as the fastest-growing proteins on today’s menus

· 44% say gluten-free has surged past vegan as #1 dietary request

· 94% of chefs and restaurant owners state that the UK Government is not doing enough to support the hospitality sector.

Methodology

123 chefs and restaurant operators completed an online survey in February and March 2026.

The roles of those that participated included: Head Chefs, Chef Patrons, Owner-Operators, GMs and Executive Chefs.

The venue types were a mix of independent restaurants, pub dining, hotel restaurants, groups and chains.

The reach of the study was UK nationwide.

The spend per head spanned the full range from under £15 to £150+.

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