

Future Forecast for Food

Supermarket guru Phil Lempert shares the food trends he sees shaping the way consumers purchase food — and ultimately impacting agriculture.

by **KINDRA GORDON**, field editor

The food world is changing at unprecedented speed, according to Phil Lempert, who has monitored the food industry — and consumer behavior — for three decades. In fact, so much change is occurring, Lempert, who bills himself as the “Supermarket Guru,” anticipates 2018 in the retail sector to be akin to the Wild West.

Annually, Lempert shares a list of top trends for the New Year. For 2018, he predicts that the trend that will have the biggest impact on the food industry is tactile — the sense of touch.

“People want to touch things,” he explains. “It’s all about being involved, feeling and hearing.”

To that point, he notes that the traditional metal-keyed typewriter is making a comeback, because people are seeking that tactile experience.

In food, Lempert anticipates tactile will mean more multi-sensory options —

in products, packaging and in-store. He points to varying food colors, textures, even sounds, as part of the multi-sensory experience. Specifically, Lempert says poke bowl restaurants — typically serving bowls of rice with a variety of seafood and vegetable toppings — are growing quickly and offer a variety of colors and textures in their food options. This model is challenging fast-food and quick-service restaurant formats.

Additionally, Lempert believes 3-D printing will come of age and offer more tactile food experiences, while also being a less wasteful food production method.

Changes in farming

Just as the way food is packaged and marketed is changing, so too is agriculture production going to change — dramatically, says Lempert.

With 65% of the population living in urban areas, Lempert says the direct farm-to-consumer connection trend will only increase as communities strive to get closer to nature. He points to apps

helping make that happen. One example: the FreshFoodNY app, which is a virtual farmers’ market allowing New Yorkers to purchase local food directly from farmers and fishermen.

Another change Lempert is predicting — younger farmers entering the field. He reports the USDA’s latest Census of Agriculture reports that the number of farmers under 35 is increasing, and this is only the second time that has happened since 1900. Interestingly, among these “new” farmers, 69% have college degrees, which is nearly 30% higher than the 40% incidence in the general population. Of this, Lempert says, “Younger, smarter farmers will bring us into a new era of agriculture.”

Two other trends that are likely to impact agriculture, says Lempert, include the growing popularity of plant-based diets and the growing investment in vertical indoor farming. Lempert reports that in 2020 a multi-use building will open in Sweden with a mix of 16 stories of farms and offices. It is said this vertical

farm building will save 1,100 tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions and 13 million gallons of water.

He shares that Bill Gates is also investing in a new “smart city” model that would incorporate vertical farming along with other cutting-edge technology.

Food and health

As health risks among Americans continue to skyrocket, particularly obesity, Lempert says renewed efforts are being made to better match an individual’s food choices to health. He explains that neuro-nutrition is being researched to further study how different foods affect our brains, while biohacking is another emerging trend designed to use science to create individualized nutrition and products matched to a person’s nutritional and health needs. Specifically, Lempert explains that DNA testing is being explored to match genetics to prescriptive nutrition. (Learn more at <https://habit.com/>).

Lempert says these trends dovetail with

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A glimpse at supermarkets

What will supermarkets of the future look like? Supermarket guru Phil Lempert's vision is this: "It's time we rethink the four-walled structure, much the way Apple has done for its new headquarters. The grocery industry should wake up each morning thinking about how we can make the shopping experience better."

As examples, Lempert points to incorporating more solar into stores for energy efficiency; he shares that waste-free supermarkets are being developed globally; and in Japan, supermarkets have put greenhouses on top of, or adjacent to, supermarkets. To this, Lempert envisions the possibility of future greenhouses inside a store, allowing shoppers to pick produce off the vine.

With the rising interest of consumers in health and wellness, Lempert also anticipates more supermarkets may add in-store dietitians to help shoppers with nutrition choices and other services. He cites examples where some stores are already offering group exercise and yoga classes, and expects that trend to continue. Lempert notes that it is a powerful means for retailers to build relationships with their customers.

Given the increasing history of terrorism and violence, Lempert says another area future supermarkets must address is security. He anticipates retailers will add more visible security in-store and in parking areas. However, because of the security concerns by consumers, Lempert says he doesn't feel in-home deliveries will ever be successful.

Meanwhile, he does see online grocery services and ordering continuing to grow and evolve. According to Lempert, the "click-and-collect" method appears to marry online and in-store shopping. He reports research showing 61% of consumers who do use this ordering method also come into the store to make additional purchases. Bottomline, says Lempert, "Shoppers do want to have a relationship with their supermarket. They don't want the experience to be faceless."

another consumer buzzword: mindfulness. He defines this term as meaning: "the quality or state of being conscious or aware."

"Mindfulness reflects a new consumer attitude, mostly led by millennials, to truly understand everything possible about a particular food or beverage and then support the company, whether it be

a brand or a retailer, by aligning with its values and supporting it with purchases," he explains.

As examples, Lempert points to retailers like CVS offering in-store options like "snacks that give back" to a charity or environmental fund. Likewise, the hospitality business is promoting specialized vacations built not only on

the foods it serves, but also on detailing how its facilities and practices align with the holistic values of a consumer — i.e., vegetarian, paleo, etc. Lempert indicates that initiatives to address food waste are the next social issue resonating with consumers.

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Technology's impact

Going forward, Lempert emphasizes that technology will continue to shape the future of food. He points to digital assistants like Alexa, Google Home and others ushering in a new, automated way to easily reorder from Amazon or other retailers.

His data reveal that in just two years, there will be 55 million smart devices in our homes, making that the biggest supermarket chain on the planet. However, Lempert believes the auto-purchases will primarily be for paper products and nonperishable items — leaving supermarkets to specialize in fresh foods,

artisan foods and prepared foods.

Technology will also continue to impact food transparency. Lempert reiterates, "Today, people want a connection with the foods they eat; they want to know where foods come from." He suggests technology will likely have an increasing role in helping consumers learn about food and

make healthier food choices.

Finally, Lempert says he is most excited about the new "thought leaders" coming into the food industry. He reports that during the past two years, 17 CEOs of large food companies have been replaced with fresh-thinking executives. He points to retailers like Hy-Vee who are hiring graduates from Stanford and Harvard.

He concludes: "It's a new food world. The new retail model must be built around the consumer, with the foundation that someone else thought through the way people want to acquire foods, and create an environment that empowers consumers and makes their lives easier, healthier and more enjoyable."

Phil Lempert shared 10 food trends for 2018 via a webinar, listen to the entire presentation online at <http://bit.ly/2n5Wzti>.



Author's note: The popularity of food has grown to such an extreme that a massive agri-food theme park is now open in Bologna, Italy. Called Eataly World, the attraction includes more than three dozen restaurants, a food market and 20 acres of farms and factories that enable visitors to see how pasta and Parmigiano-Reggiano is made, or how olive oil is pressed. Learn more at <https://www.eatalyworld.it/en/>.

Editor's note: Kindra Gordon is a freelance writer and cattewoman from Whitewood, S.D.

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