

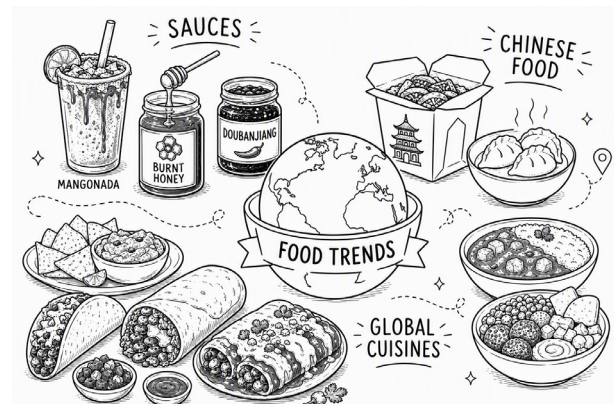
KAGOME

MID-YEAR TRENDS 2026



Mid-year Trends

Today's consumers are embracing a broader and more adventurous definition of flavor, driven by global influences, multicultural experiences, and a growing interest in authenticity. As younger generations shape the future of foodservice, ingredients and dishes once considered niche are becoming part of mainstream menu innovation. This report explores emerging flavors, ingredients, and concepts that are gaining momentum across restaurant menus and consumer culture. From traditional Chinese fermented chili bean paste to Japanese fermentation-based beverages, these trends reflect a growing appreciation for culinary traditions from around the world. We will examine how global flavors are influencing comfort food, beverages, sauces, and menu development. The report highlights ingredients at various stages of adoption, from early-stage discoveries that are just beginning to appear on menus to concepts that have already gained significant consumer traction. Readers will learn how consumer demographics, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, are accelerating demand for bold, complex, and internationally inspired flavors. We also explore the role of "food as flavor" where iconic dishes and beverages inspire new applications across categories. Trends such as mangonada demonstrate how consumers are increasingly seeking layered flavor experiences that balance sweet, sour, salty, spicy, and savory notes. Emerging ingredients like doubanjiang showcase the continued demand for authentic global pantry staples that deliver depth and complexity. Fermentation is another key theme, with products such as koji milk illustrating how traditional techniques are creating opportunities for innovation in modern beverages. The report also highlights flavor-forward ingredients like burnt honey that transform familiar foods through unique preparation methods. Throughout these pages, we identify menu applications and opportunities for foodservice operators looking to stay ahead of evolving consumer preferences. By understanding where these trends are in their adoption cycle, culinary teams can better prioritize innovation efforts and identify promising areas for future growth. Ultimately, this report provides inspiration and actionable insights for developing distinctive menu offerings that resonate with consumers seeking both comfort and discovery in their dining experiences.



Comfort Food Has a Global Twist

Younger generations are exposed to global flavors earlier in life through multicultural households, social media, travel content, and their Millennial parents. This exposure is reshaping what they consider nostalgic and comforting.

School lunches, snacks, and meals eaten away from home are looking more globally inspired. They may include rice with seasoned seaweed, kimchi fried rice, Spam musubi, hummus with carrot sticks, pizza with hot honey, walking tacos, kebab pizza, or

birria ramen. These globally inspired flavors are becoming the new comfort foods, creating a generation whose nostalgia is shaped by a broader, more diverse culinary landscape.



Old-School Dishes Make a Comeback

Traditional old-school dishes are trending as new menu items. Trending savory dishes include moo shu beef (up 3,546%), shrimp chow mein (up 1,154%), seafood tom yum (up 3,023%), chicken pad Thai (up 15,559%), almondine (up 1,201%), and Brunswick stew (up 1,201%).

BY THE NUMBERS

Mexican cuisine is highly popular overall in the U.S., with 83% of consumers loving or liking it.

Chinese Cuisine has surpassed Italian as the most loved global cuisine by Gen Z. Mexican and Italian take the #2 and #3 spot.

47%
of consumers want to try Cantonese Cuisine

39%
of consumers have had Chinese fusion in the past year

Trending Flavors and Ingredients to Watch

Doubanjiang

Is a traditional Chinese fermented chili bean paste that is considered the “soul” of Sichuan cuisine. It is made primarily from fermented broad (fava) beans, chili peppers, and salt, creating a rich combination of umami, savory depth, saltiness, and moderate heat.

According to Datassential's menu adoption cycle doubanjiang is in the inception stage. Translated to food service, trends in this stage are commonly found at fine dining establishments and independent global restaurants. Younger consumers, especially Millennials and Gen Z, are much more likely to enjoy doubanjiang than older generations. This suggests that its bold, spicy flavor appeals to people who are more familiar with global and international foods.



Traditional Mapo Tofu



Spicy and Savory Aioli

Traditional ways of using doubanjiang in Chinese cooking include Sichuan cuisine's famous mapo tofu, twice-cooked pork, mala hot pot, or Sichuan stir-fries. For menu innovation, think of doubanjiang as the Chinese equivalent of how chefs use gochujang, harissa, or miso—a small amount can transform sauces, soups, marinades, and dips with layered savory complexity. **For foodservice culinary teams this trend might consider this ingredient folded into a spicy aioli for dipping or a sandwich spread, an umami heat burger sauce, added depth to a wing glaze, or mixed into a dressing for a protein bowl.**

Mangonada (food as flavor)

A mangonada (also called a chamoyada or chamango) is a popular Mexican frozen drink/dessert made from blended mango, lime juice, chamoy sauce, and chile-lime seasoning (such as Tajín). It is known for its unique combination of sweet, tangy, salty, and spicy flavors.

According to Datassential's menu adoption cycle, Mangonada is in the adoption stage which means it's a trend that has taken root. At this point, it becomes easier to find, more affordable, and easier to prepare, while still featuring authentic or premium ingredients.

In foodservice, adoption-stage trends are often found in gastropubs, chef-driven casual restaurants, food trucks, and independent restaurants. In retail, they are commonly found at farmers' markets, specialty grocery stores, and gourmet food shops.



MANGONADA has experienced skyrocketing growth, up 180% on menus over the past four years, with a predicted increase of another 82% over the next four years. *-Datassential*



Burnt Honey

Honey that's been caramelized for depth of flavor. It can be used in everything from cocktails to dessert to comfort foods such as a drizzle over pizza, much like hot honey.

Burnt Honey is up 160% on menus over the past four years.
-Datassential

Koji Milk

Koji milk is a plant-based milk made with koji, a traditional Japanese fermented grain culture. Koji is produced by inoculating rice (or other grains) with the beneficial mold *Aspergillus oryzae*, the same fermentation culture used to make miso, soy sauce, sake, and amazake. Koji milk can be used as in place of cow's milk as a mix into coffee, matcha and other drinks.



Is Koji milk different than any other plant milk? Koji's fermentation process breaks down starches into natural sugars, creating a subtle sweetness. The process creates amino acids that contribute mild umami flavor and added complexity. This can create a creamier texture without needing gums or added sweeteners.

The flavor profile is typically lightly sweet, mildly nutty, creamy and smooth, that is slightly savory as compared to standard oat milk.

Manufacturers promote koji milk for its clean-label appeal, natural fermentation, Barista performance (foaming and steaming), potential nutritional benefits from fermentation and naturally occurring vitamins found in koji-based products.

Koji milk fits into the broader trend of Japanese fermentation ingredients moving beyond traditional applications. Similar to the rise of shio koji, miso, and amazake, koji milk appeals to consumers looking for: functional fermented foods, gut-health-focused products, Asian-inspired ingredients and premium plant-based alternatives.

A related product you may also see is amazake, often described as a naturally sweet fermented rice drink or "rice milk" made from rice koji.

Koji is up 201% on beverage menus over the past four years. -Datassential



Koji Milk is still an emerging product in the U.S. market, you won't easily find it on your local supermarket shelf, making it more of an innovation-stage ingredient than a mainstream dairy alternative. Most restaurant and cafes serving Koji milk are located in Southern California at third-wave coffee shops such as Moongoat, Flow Good Coffee, match focused cafes, natural organic retails such as Erewhon.



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