

ong considered the most important meal of the day, breakfast is also a meal that's enjoyed at all times, whether it's on the go, sitting down in an eatery, at home or at work.

During the COVID-19 pandemic and its ensuing lockdowns, essential workers and first responders drove demand for ready-to-eat breakfast selections, and vending machines and micro markets became go-to destinations for workers. Meanwhile, workers sheltering at home and freed from their commutes transitioned from onthe-go breakfast items to more substantial fare, embracing what Whole Foods has called the "epic breakfast every day" trend.

> Another defining trend of 2020: indulgence. Aligned with that trend, this year's list of most-ordered breakfast foods, according to Statista, showed huge growth for sweet items like acai bowls (up 353% year over year) and frozen mocha beverages (+336%); following were chorizo burritos (up 304%), potato pancakes (+264%) and strawberry banana smoothies (+216%).

A recent study conducted by the Harris Poll and commissioned by General Mills Foodservice found that consumers are eating more breakfast foods than normal during the pandemic and not just in the morning hours. Nearly a quarter reported eating more breakfast foods during the COVID-19 pandemic than they normally would (24%) with items such as eggs (72%), cereal and pancakes (both 51%) and bakery items such as donuts (36%), cinnamon rolls (34%) and muffins (33%) among the top favorite items. Further, nearly four in five Americans (79%) have eaten breakfast foods outside of the traditional breakfast meal in the past year.

The nationwide poll, conducted between Feb. 11 and 16, surveyed more than 2,000 adults, ages 18 and over, to learn how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their eating habits at home, work or dining in public.

"The recent poll shows that people are eating more breakfast foods during the pandemic and enjoying them for lunch, dinner and even dessert," said Mark Harmon, who analyzes consumer insights for General Mills Foodservice. "We also learned that consumers are eager to return to restaurants to enjoy their favorite breakfast and brunch foods."

For operators of micro markets and vending in workplace venues, these trends signal that the breakfast boom will continue as more people return to work.

Results from General Mills' poll suggested that consumers who are eating more breakfast foods during the pandemic over the past year are doing so because they feel they have more freedom in what and when they eat. Poll participants said they have more time in their schedules (52%), they've been craving their favorite breakfast foods (37%), they want to eat something fun that brings them joy (33%) or breakfast favorites remind them of childhood (24%).

"Consumers' love of breakfast is strong, giving chefs and foodservice operations the chance to reimagine breakfast," said Harmon, who added that breakfast often has an impulsive nature that can be activated with new and different menu items. "For instance, consumers may not have breakfast for dinner in their regular rotation of eating, but they may be tempted to splurge on it for a memorable experience," he observed.

The General Mills study offers other helpful findings. Consumers have a deep affection for breakfast, for instance, with three in five Americans (62%) saying it is their favorite

meal of the day and over half (56%) saying they love breakfast food more now than they did a year ago. And three-quarters of survey respondents (79%) have eaten breakfast foods for meals other than breakfast in the past year with more than half (59%) saying they have eaten breakfast foods for dinner. Additionally, half have enjoyed breakfast foods for lunch and one-fifth have eaten breakfast items for dessert. Lastly, more than half (66%) said they love creative twists on breakfast menu items.



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CLASSIC AND ARTISAN

Employees back at work should expect more offerings at their micro markets and vending machines, and breakfast options are no exception. Accordingly, more of the industry's food suppliers are offering appealing breakfast selections.

Founded in 1955, E.A. Sween Co. manufactures a wide range of breakfast sandwiches for the Deli Express and Market Sandwich lines. Sandwiches ship frozen and have a 14-day refrigerated shelf life once thawed. Market Sandwich items are packaged in a paper bag with a clear window for product visibility. Items in both lines can be purchased from a refrigeration unit and heated in the package in the microwave, making them perfect for markets or vending.

"Eating on the go has changed throughout the pandemic," said EA



Several types of breakfast sandwiches are offered by EA Sween's Deli Express

EA Swe



As things have evolved over the past year and a half we have started to shift back to normal where consumers are on the go and looking for fast prepackaged food they feel safe eating."

Abby Ostlund, EA Sween

Sween marketing manager Abby Ostlund. "At the onset during lockdowns, we saw a shift away from eating on the go as people were stuck at home and not commuting to and from an office. As things have evolved over the past year and a half we have started to shift back to normal where consumers are on the go and looking for fast prepackaged food they feel safe eating."

As more operators seek sales data to help them decide which products to include in their plan-o-grams, Eden Prairie, MN-based EA Sween can provide Nielsen information regarding top-selling varieties, best-product mixes and fastest-growing varieties, among other rank categories.

"We use Nielsen data across the board to understand overall category performance, competitive performance, trends, growth areas, new opportunities and best-selling items," Ostlund said. "We also conduct our consumer research and utilize research from several outside sources to better understand consumer behaviors, buying behavior, industry trends and category trends."

Because many food suppliers are unable to deliver products on time and the shortage of fresh foods in various markets, EA Sween's sales have taken off over the past year.

KETO SANDWICH

Keto is now America's favorite diet. See for yourself by searching for the "most popular diet trends" on Google and you'll likely find that Americans are more interested in keto than any other diet. The ketogenic diet, high in fat and low in carbs, however, can be challenging to follow. With restrictions on what one is permitted to eat and what they cannot eat, keto meal and snack options may be limited.

But now there's a convenient keto option in vending and micro markets from Cheesewich, a family-owned company based in Hodgkins, IL. The original breadless sandwich snack, vacuumed packed, consists of two slices of cheese with salami. Available cheeses include colby jack, pepper jack, cheddar and provolone. Cheesewich products are enjoying brisk sales, according to the company's marketing manager, Sarah Nesci, who reported a 30% sales increase year over year.

The five-year-old company's new Breakfast Taco, which began shipping

Cheesewich's keto-friendly Breakfast Taco is made with turkey bacon, colby jack cheese, an egg patty and flour tortilla.

Cheesewi





in in September, is made with turkey bacon, colby jack cheese, an egg patty and flour tortilla. This keto breakfast sandwich needs only 25 seconds in a microwave to heat. Also available is the Uncured Turkey Baconwich, made by wrapping all-natural uncured turkey bacon around mozzarella cheese. These two products possess low-moisture content and use hearty string cheeses.

PLANT FORWARD

More and more convenience customers are interested in healthy, plantbased alternatives to start the day, according to data from Label Insight, a NielsonIQ company. To see which breakfast foods increased in popularity during the pandemic, the CPG data source analyzed online searches. In the breakfast meal and sandwich categories, search volume augmented for product features like "healthy," "veggie," "ketogenic," "low carb" and "gluten-free." In the cereal category, such characteristics as "organic," "paleo," "sugar free" and "high fiber" rose. Searches for frozen breakfast sandwiches and meals soared 311% in 2020.

Positioning with the plant-based and vegan movements, Peet's Coffee together with Beyond Meat and Just Egg launched the Everything plant-based sandwich, which began selling at Peet's stores this past spring. Last year, Starbucks Corp. made its first move into vegan meat with its vegetarian Impossible Breakfast Sandwich. And one year ago, convenience store chain Wawa rolled out its Beyond

Meat breakfast sandwiches nationwide. Wawa's Sizzli Breakfast Sandwich features Beyond breakfast sausage – made with ingredients like peas and brown rice, without GMOs, soy and gluten – and egg and cheese on a bagel. Eaters can also customize orders with Beyond breakfast sausage like breakfast bowls, burritos or bagel sandwiches.

In the vending and micro market channel, plant-based breakfast sandwiches are wanting. "There is a huge lack of plant-based breakfast options," said Alpha Foods chief executive Cole Orobetz. "So, we are continuously reimagining convenient, plant-based options for everyone to enjoy during every meal of the day."

Alpha Foods offers a grab-and-go lineup that includes two sandwich varieties and three burritos that are made with meatless sausage, plant egg and dairy-free cheese, along with meatless chorizo and spices for the burritos. Both the sandwiches and burritos weigh 5.5 oz. They ship frozen.

CRUNCHY ESSENTIALS

Granola is usually considered a healthy breakfast item, and its shelf-stable quality makes it a vending staple. The toasted mixture of rolled oats, nuts and a sweetener like sugar or honey, can also include other grains, puffed rice, dried fruit, seeds, spices and nut butters.

New for vending and micro markets in the category is Jessica's granola in chocolate chip, vanilla maple, butterscotch chip and pecan almond flavors. The product is handmade in small batches. It's non-GMO verified, gluten-free certified and kosher. It's available in convenient 2-oz. snack bags for on-the-go consumption.

Jessica Natural Foods is based in Birmingham, MI, and was founded by Jessica Mindell in 2009. "Our sales show that customers are definitely eating more granola," Mindell said. "With people working from home, they are



finding more time to eat breakfast since. From a grocery perspective, we are expanding into more stores."

AUTHENTIC COMFORT IN A VENDING PACKAGE

When it comes to breakfast comfort food, waffles have maintained wide-spread popularity for a longtime for two important reasons: nostalgia and simplicity of preparation. But how do you bring a waffle experience to an unmanned packaged food environment like vending and micro markets? Enter Mountain Waffle Co.

Single-serve Mountain Waffles for vending and markets are offered in several flavors and packed in large (3.17 oz.) and medium (2.12 oz.) sizes.

Mountain Waffle Co.



Jessica's granola bags are available in convenient 2-oz. snack bags for on-thego vending patrons.

Joseica Natural Foods

Mountain Waffle began serving Liege Belgian waffles in Steamboat Springs, CO, and soon expanded to ski resorts in 11 other states. Skiers liked them so much, they unrelentingly asked the company to make them available after the winter season. So now they're available in foodservice (frozen dough), freezer packs, bulk packs and private label, as well as in single-serve packs for vending and convenience channels.

Made from authentic Liege Belgian waffle dough with all-natural ingredients, single-serve Mountain Waffles are offered in several flavors and packed in large (3.17 oz.) and medium (2.12 oz.) sizes. Waffles can be eaten right out of the wrapper at room temperature or quickly warmed up—with or without toppings. They have an 18-month shelf-life for frozen storage and stay fresh up to 10 weeks at ambient temperature. Flavors include butter, maple syrup, dark chocolate chip and cocoa covered.

