

The foodservice industry continues to change dramatically in all segments, from commercial to non-commercial alike. Changing consumer palates and eating behaviors have a lot to do with this. Research has shown the majority of us want better quality, fresher food and more comfortable, interesting dining environments, whether we're in a fine dining restaurant or a hospital. Some of the industry's top foodservice consultants share their take on the outside influences impacting these changes in a variety of segments.



FAST CASUAL & QSR

Juan Martinez, principal, Profitability, Miami

A frequent contributor to www.fesmag.com, Martinez has built his consulting career on fundamental engineering principles to improve labor and other efficiencies in the nation's top chain restaurants.

The fast-casual sector has exploded in recent years, thanks in part to a post-recession emphasis on value. But perhaps what — or rather, who — have impacted “the Chipotle effect” most is the growing group of maturing Millennial diners, with their sophisticated food tastes and a penchant for both customization and convenience.

With chains like the build-your-own Blaze and MOD Pizza, and cult-followed Rustic Taco and Shake Shack expanding rapidly around the country, many traditional

quick-serves need to adapt just to keep up. “Fast-casual is trying to get faster by emulating QSR, but QSR is trying to drive quality up, emulating fast casual,” Martinez says. “Concepts seem to be merging into the middle, no longer making it easy to define one category or the other.”

Martinez points to the growth of QSR-plus, a term used frequently by research firms like Technomic to describe changes at established chains like In-N-Out Burger, Culver's, and even Arby's that have zeroed in on menu enhancements



and introduced new, modern design prototypes to elevate the QSR model.

These segment-wide changes continue to impact kitchen design and equipment selection. “Everything is about quality and transparency now — transparency in terms of the ingredients but also in seeing the food made for you,” says Martinez. “Millennials especially will trust a brand, but they need to verify that the food is fresh first. The once-closed-off back-of-the-house has opened up and become more of the middle of the house.”

Think: dry storage and a little prep in back, an open counter, serving line and some cooking equipment in the middle, and a modernized — sometimes reduced — dining area with limited table service at the front. “It’s all about ‘right-sizing’ now to drive sales and profit,” Martinez says.

When it comes to equipment, chains look for versatile items that can drive prep efficiency, production time reductions and quality improvements, according to Martinez. “Years ago fast casual was more expensive and slower though

the quality of ingredients were higher,” he says. “But now they’ve morphed into becoming much more efficient and more focused on speed, and that has introduced better equipment.” Panini grills, rapid-cook ovens, induction cooking and higher-end holding equipment for some pre-cooked items are becoming more popular in this space.

Even the nature of the workforce has changed. “An open kitchen puts everyone on stage and interacting with the customer so you need higher caliber employees to be able to communicate in a professional and friendly way,” Martinez says. In the past, the presence of a drive-thru set QSRs apart from fast casuals. Now, some fast-casual concepts, such as Panera, offer that service.

“Before, you could look at a fast casual and QSR and easily tell the difference,” Martinez says. “Now it’s not that easy anymore as both fast-casual concepts and QSRs strive to improve the areas where they were weak.”