

Menu Concept Testing

DATASENTIAL





Menu development can be hit or miss, but it doesn't have to be.

This whitepaper spotlights best practices for testing your new menu ideas and giving you the right results to identify the winners.

INFORMED IDEATION

The creative process starts here.

Menu innovation starts with trend discovery and idea generation. Because food knowledge alone doesn't ensure menu success, collective expertise from operations, culinary, marketing, and insights helps generate concepts that are operationally feasible to produce. What key insights contribute to informed ideation?



Fastest-growing menu items

Ghost Pepper.....	+2,347%
Radler.....	+1,531%
Sriracha Mayo.....	+1,198%
Chia.....	+813%
Calabrian Chili Pepper.....	+541%
Salted Caramel.....	+483%
Hard Cider.....	+478%
Gluten Free.....	+450%
Kale.....	+417%
Poutine.....	+392%
Quinoa.....	+353%
Ginger Beer.....	+338%
Almond Milk.....	+316%
Bahn Mi.....	+304%
Chicken & Waffles.....	+286%
Candied Bacon.....	+286%
Sumac.....	+257%
Greek Yogurt.....	+254%
Maitake.....	+217%

Key inputs for informed ideation:

1.

Determine consumer brand perception to understand consumer menu expectations and align brand with innovation.
2.

Identify existing menu gaps or weaknesses by analyzing competitor menu offerings and identifying winning dishes.
3.

Assess relevant food and flavor trends (see left) including retail and foodservice trends, regional dishes, and seasonal foods.
4.

Determine exactly what foods consumers know and like as well as consumption drivers and barriers.
5.

Use experience-based learning via field immersions, trend tours, facilitated ideation workshops, or rapid insight screening.
6.

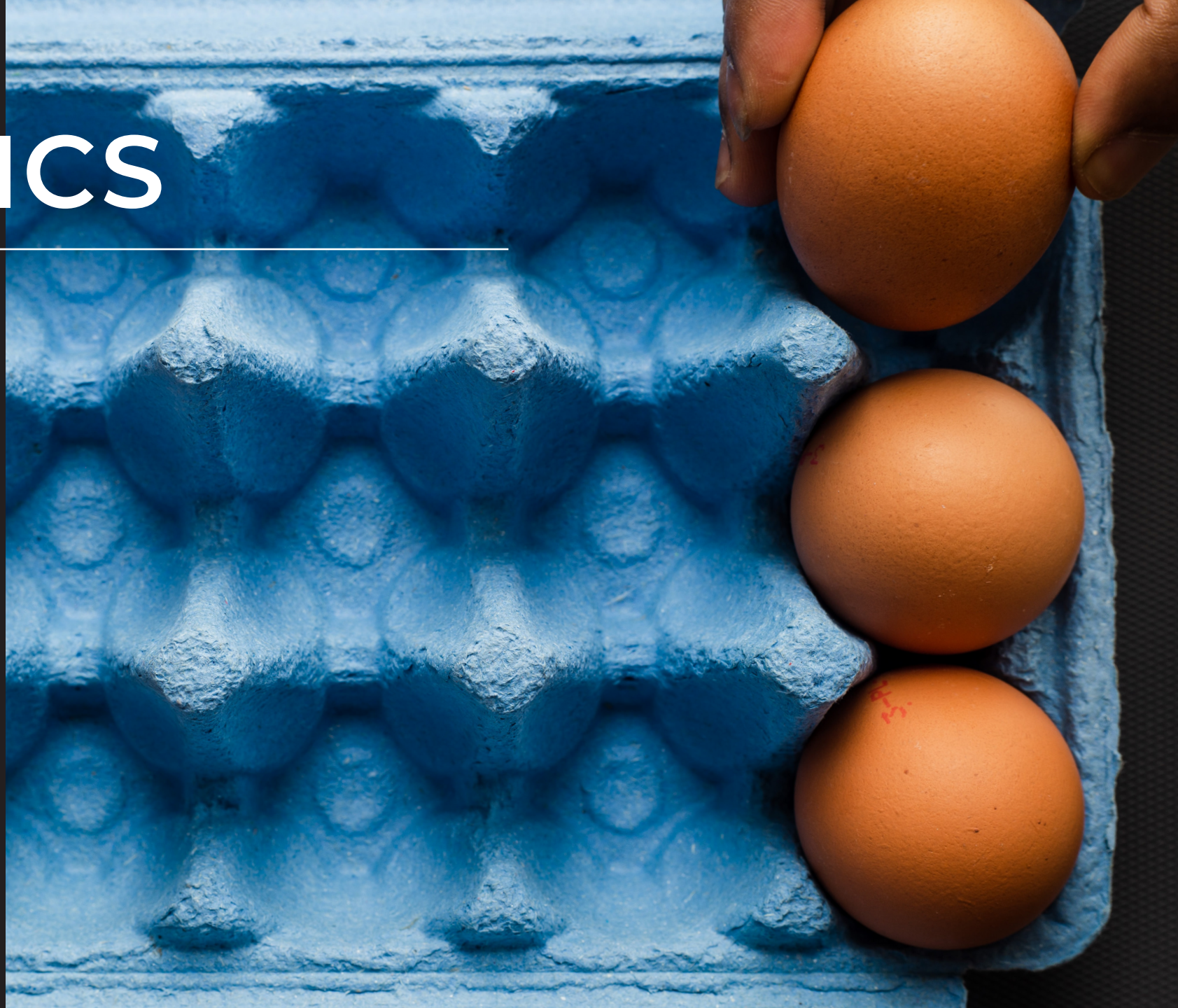
Identify operational feasibility by assessing supply chain roadblocks, equipment constraints, or production limitations.

THE BASICS

Making sense of consumer concept testing.

Collaborative ideation generally leads to a large cache of high-quality concepts. But before you start investing time, money, and labor in bench top recipe development, you'll first want to vet your ideas by testing items with consumers.

Immediately following ideation you'll move your menu ideas into consumer concept testing.



The Concept Testing Process

Concept testing puts your ideas in front of consumers who rate your concepts—usually via an online survey—based on how dishes would appear on a menu using standard inputs: menu item name, menu description, price, restaurant chain, and optimally, a photo.

The best menu concepts undergo a simple, streamlined testing process, (below). This is the easiest way to funnel ideas down to best bets while avoiding redundancies and complications that arise during ad hoc testing.



9 metrics for predicting success:

Unbranded Purchase Intent - measures consumer interest in your dish

Branded Purchase Intent - measures consumer interest in your dish when offered at a specific chain

Uniqueness - measures whether your dish is new and different

Draw - measures your dish’s craveability and suggests LTO success

Frequency - measures your dish’s potential for habitual consumption

Value - indicates your dish’s value proposition given the menu price

Brand Fit - measures the dish’s suitability for your brand

Daypart Fit - identifies which meal occasions are most fitting for the dish

Concept Likes & Dislikes - reveals consumer sentiment on your dish’s best and worst features

CONSUMER TESTING

The right test at the right time.

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Express Screen

Consumer testing starts with idea screening. These are high-level screens designed to winnow a lot of ideas into a shortlist of those with the highest potential. Think of Express screens as your way of identifying and prioritizing dishes that are the most viable.

Express screens also test multiple variations of the same concept, such as flavor sorts. You may have a new steak dish with five possible sauces. Express screens help you determine which sauce consumers will most likely buy.

Because Express screens provide a high-level read on your dish's appeal, focus on purchase intent, uniqueness, and draw to rank each dish among your list of contenders.

Purchase intent, uniqueness, and draw are the most important vetting metrics to measure in Express screens.

Full Test

Full concept testing is a detailed assessment of fully-formed and refined menu ideas using more key metrics with a larger consumer group. A larger sample size allows you to more accurately and specifically understand appeal, but also to evaluate the concept by demographic subgroups - age, race, gender, region – particularly important for targeted menuing and marketing initiatives.

While purchase intent, uniqueness, and draw continue to be foundational metrics in step 2 testing, full concept tests also include frequency, value, brand fit, or daypart fit. Valuable qualitative consumer opinions on item

likes and dislikes, motivating attributes, and barriers to ordering are also collected during detailed concept tests.

The full concept test reveals areas for refinement based on consumer preferences so that you can confidently go into recipe development with proven, data-verified menu items. Dishes that score well in the full test are ones that perform best in the real world.

WRITING GREAT CONCEPTS

Guidelines for menu descriptions.

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7 rules of thumb for good menu copy:

Good menu copy:

SMOKED CHICKEN TOSTADAS

Pulled smoked chicken, pepper jack cheese, and grilled onions on two crispy corn tortillas, topped with avocado, romaine, black bean salsa, pico de gallo, and Mexican crema.

- describes item completely
- doesn't make emotional claims
- easy to understand

Copy that needs work:

CECI BEAN CAVATELLI

Haus merguez, caramelized shallot, fried ceci bean, caciocavallo, jus.

- difficult to understand
- unfamiliar ethnic ingredients
- requires strong image

1. **Mimic how real world menu items are written.** Unique ingredients should be listed in the description. Ethnic or unusual flavors are better received in familiar applications.
2. **Describe clearly what's in the item itself,** making sure to include all important flavors and ingredients.
3. **Don't let wording detract from the concept** with overly playful or whimsical names.
4. **Limit the use of superfluous adjectives** and focus on item transparency.
5. **Limit use of "your choice of" descriptions.** Items with a build-your-own component often receive an inflated bump in interest.
6. **Avoid references to side dishes or other bundled meal items.** You want consumers to respond to the concept itself rather than any accompaniments.
7. **For items that are hard to describe, a photo really helps** consumers understand it. A high-quality photo works best, if available. But opt for no photo over a poor-quality one.

NORMS & BENCHMARKS

Interpreting the results.

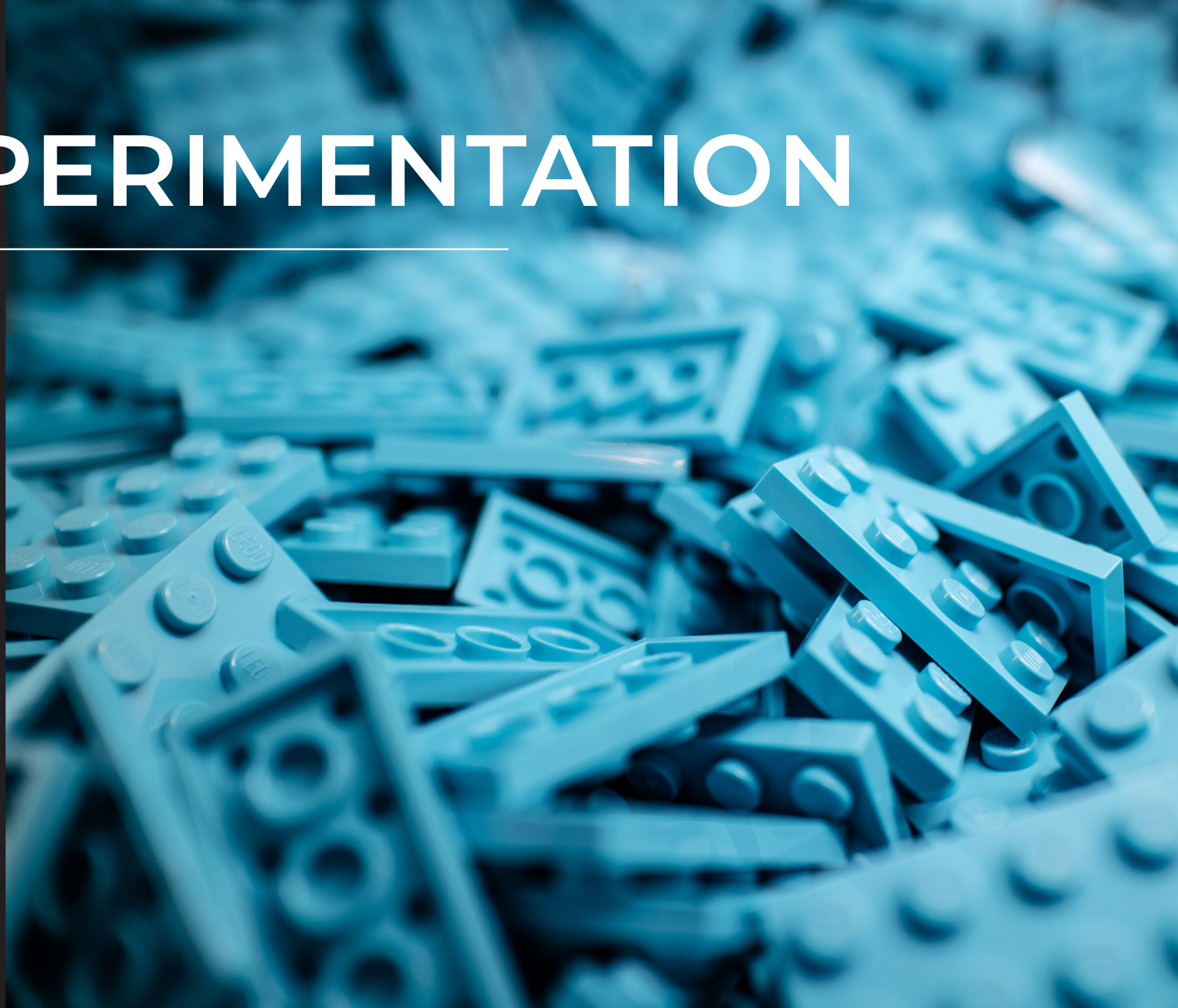
Raw scores alone don't determine success. Once you've tested your dishes, how do you interpret the results? Meaningful concept testing requires benchmarking raw percentages against ideal standards to generate normative score percentiles (norms), which are the TRUE performance gauge.



SAFE EXPERIMENTATION

The hallmark of great menu items.

The SCORES database features over 7 million consumer ratings for more than 14,000 new menu items at top chains since 2014. Our analysis of the data tells a consistent story – the best performing items tend to be those that excel in both purchase intent (PI) and uniqueness.



Tips for safe experimentation:

Menu items that combine strong purchase intent and high uniqueness often follow the mantra of SAFE EXPERIMENTATION – they have an aspect that's new and different (experimentation), but are also rooted in something familiar to consumers (safe).

1. Reimagine a classic dish, like a unique spin on a burger, pizza, or other consumer favorites.
2. Keep unique and lesser known ingredients only in the dish's description; including them in the name of the dish could make the item seem risky and scare consumers away.
3. Don't overdo it with too many unknown ingredients in a single dish, or you may find yourself drifting into the zone of "experimental experimentation" (highly unique, but appealing only to a small audience).



Create with confidence.

Culinary and insights are the art and science of food. With so much riding on your menu, maximize new item success with this proven recipe for innovation.

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