

► Exhibitor Brief

# TREND EXPLORER 2026

An Exclusive Show Experience



axion<sup>TM</sup>  
foodservice



► **Introduction**

# Trend Explorer Is Back for More in 2026

After last year's success, Connections powered by CSSI and Acxion™ Foodservice is partnering with Dot Foods Innovations to focus on 2026's exciting foodservice trends, giving participating manufacturers a chance to put their products in the spotlight by showing a trend in action with samples only served during the preview.

## **When is Trend Explorer?**

- Wednesday, April 22, 2026
- 4 p.m.-6:30 p.m. CST
- Houston, TX - George R. Brown Convention Center: Halls A3-B3
- Participating exhibitors only.

The goal? To create a high-impact, multi-course tasting experience that captivates and inspires operators with every delicious bite. Manufacturers have so much to gain for participating, and it's **absolutely free**. This deck has all the details. Ready?

## ► Introduction

# Who should be included in this process?



Here is who we recommend to get involved:

- Your culinary team, if applicable
- Those involved in running your exhibit
- Anyone else you might need to execute your vision

## ► Introduction

# What are the benefits of participating?

- Inclusion in the digital app that guides the operator through **Trend Explorer**
- A high-impact chance to show operators how your product is trend-relevant and flexible on any menu
- Cross-sampling opportunities, which can get your product in more places across the show, with increased branding and menu signage
- It's a fun and interactive reason for operators to visit your booth- and a great conversation starter
- **All of this and more, at no extra cost to you**





## Who is Connections powered by CSSI?

We Bring Integration to a Complex Foodservice Landscape.

Together, with Acxion™ Foodservice, we are the largest, most experienced sales and marketing agency in the foodservice industry with unmatched access and connectivity.

- Strategy & Research
- Foodservice Branding
- Operator Engagement
- Content
- Digital & Media
- Culinary
- Analytics

► About



## Who is Axxion™ Foodservice?

Through a suite of complementary sales, marketing, and technology solutions, we drive business growth, every day.

- Operator Sales
  - Field Sales
  - K-12 & Colleges & Universities
  - Regional Chains
  - Non-Commercial
- Distributor Sales
- Market Support
- Back of House Services

# Your Connections power



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► About



# Your Dot Foods Team



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► Process

STEP 1:

## Pick a trend.

Explore the trends illustrated in the following slides, then select one that your product can really bring to life as a sample at the show.

**Claim your trend by Friday,  
February 6, 2026.**



PLAYFUL  
PLATES



FUNCTIONALLY  
DIVERSE



PROTEIN  
RENAISSANCE



NOT YOUR  
MOTHER'S SNACKS



LOADED  
& LAYERED



GLOBAL  
COMFORT

## ► 2026 Trends

# Playful Plates

Playful, nostalgic, and rule-breaking food fun

### WHAT IT IS

- A shift from serious eating to **joyful indulgence**
- Embraces **nostalgia, surprise, and creativity**—food that makes you smile
- **Bold colors, wild textures, and unexpected combinations**

### WHY IT MATTERS

- Consumers crave lighthearted, **feel-good** experiences
- **Breaks the “rules”** to spark curiosity and conversation
- Often ideal for **social sharing**
- 86% of consumers are interested in a **whimsical restaurant environment**, 37% are interested in **chaos cakes**, 25% are interested in **Spaghetti Uh-Ohs**.

### ON THE MENU

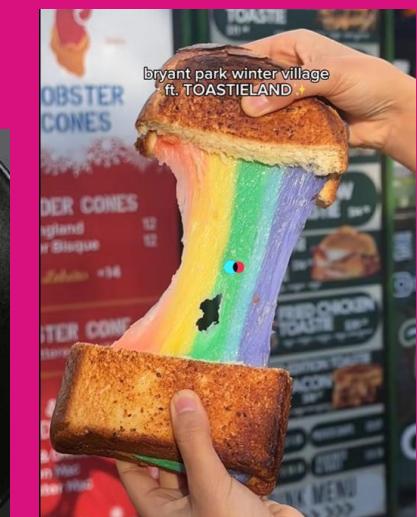
- Chaos Cakes, creative desserts, and imaginative beverages
- Playful takes on comfort food and **cross-cultural fusions**



Unlucky Ducky: Tequila, Rum, Vodka, Schnapps, Triple Sec, Sweet and Sour, Pineapple juice, Starry



Butternut Squash Dumplings: Velvety butternut squash, rich miso butter sauce, fresh chives.



Toastieland, NYC Artisanal Grilled Cheese

## ► 2026 Trends

# Functionally Diverse

From maxxing to mixing

### WHAT IT IS

- Shift from “maxxing” nutrients to **mixing ingredients** for balance
- Embraces **variety over rigidity**—a holistic, inclusive view of wellness
- Focuses on **diverse plants**—fruits, grains, legumes, vegetables, nuts, and seeds—as well as **lean proteins** and **fermented foods**.

### WHY IT MATTERS

- Variety supports **gut health** and **overall wellness**
- Encourages **discovery across cultures**, colors, and flavors

### ON THE MENU

- Global plant-forward blends like **grain & legume bowls**, mixed-vegetable stir fries, and fermented flavor add-ons
- Gut-friendly variety through **diverse nuts, seeds, pulses**, and vibrant veggie-centric mashups



Green blend (contains **kale**, banana, **pineapple**, and **coconut milk**) topped with **blueberry flax granola**, banana, strawberry, sliced almonds, chia seeds, and honey



Gin, orange juice, and eucalyptus syrup essence topped with **kombucha** and sparkling edible “**opal dust**”

**sweetgreen**

Garlic parmesan cauliflower, caramelized balsamic onions, roasted sweet potatoes, garlic breadcrumbs, wild rice, organic shredded kale, roasted romesco sauce, creamy basil dressing

## ► 2026 Trends

# Protein Renaissance

Flavorful protein satisfaction

### WHAT IT IS

- Consumers are **adding protein** in abundance to their diets
- Consumers are often **returning** to the flavor, texture, and comfort of **real meat and seafood**
- Protein **add-ons** and meat in **unexpected offerings** is popping up on menus

### WHY IT MATTERS

- 72% of consumers say animal meat is **more satisfying** than plant-based
- 67% say there are dishes where plant-based just can't compare
- A meat-centric comeback pairs **indulgence with global flavor inspiration**

### ON THE MENU

- Trending dishes: chicken Singapore noodles, birria tacos, sauced meatballs, smashburgers, chicken taco salad, burnt ends, protein add-ons



Short Rib Grilled Cheese and Tomato Bisque



5-Piece Steak Nuggets



Wagyu Meatballs



Lobster Esquites

► 2026 Trends

# Not Your Mother's Snacks

Snacking goes from filler to lifestyle

## WHAT IT IS

- Upscale snacking and little luxuries
- Builds on “little treat culture” with an upscale, premium spin
- Perfect for noteworthy happy hours and girls’ nights
- Often lower prices for smaller portions

## WHY IT MATTERS

- “Having a snack” ranks as a top self-care ritual
- Snacks reflect mood, creativity, and identity
- Opens space for innovation in flavor and format for snacking
- 26% consumers snack more often today than a year ago

## ON THE MENU

- Grazing Boards, mini crudité cones, whipped feta flights
- Micro classics, two-bite sliders, tiramisu jars
- Mezzes, global bites, kimchi crisps, labneh with chili crunch



Aperitivo Italian Box—Focaccia, Marinated Olives, Giardiniera, Nduja Crostini, Panzenella, Spiced Nuts, Polpette, Crispy Fingerling Potatoes--Lulla, NYC



Tiny Negroni, No. 246, Decator, GA



Strawberry Chocolate Ganache Mini Pies, Yoder's, Sarasota, FL



Mini burger, mini fries, and a mini beer for \$8—Clinton Hall, NYC

► 2026 Trends

# Loaded & Layered

Indulgent, craveable, and proud of it

## WHAT IT IS

- The rise of loaded indulgence: **cream in sodas and energy drinks, loaded and layered** comfort foods
- Embraces **over the top, flavor, and nostalgia** — no napkin-shaming here
- **Visual, social, and sensory** — food meant to be experienced, not perfected

## WHY IT MATTERS

- Counterbalances “clean eating” culture with **unapologetic pleasure**
- Appeals to younger consumers who value **authenticity and fun** over polish
- **Encourages shareability** — the more over the top, the better

## ON THE MENU

- Pit-to-plate favorites — brisket ends, rib tips, charred corn elotes
- Hangover heroes — gravy biscuits, Nashville hot hash, maple-bacon slab



Whatafresher: Blackberry Refresher, Blueberry Bursties, Sweet Cold Whip



**Elote Breakfast Burrito:**  
Chorizo, scrambled eggs, potatoes, red bell pepper, Cheddar and Monterey Jack, black beans and avocado. Wrapped in a grilled flour tortilla, covered in Vera Cruz hollandaise and topped with house-roasted corn salsa, Cotija cheese, house-pickled red onions, chipotle aioli, Tajin® and cilantro



**Rough Night Burger:** burger patty, two southern fried chicken tenders, herb-roasted turkey, grilled ham steak, crispy bacon, American cheese & garlic aioli layered on a biscuit, smothered in house sausage gravy, topped with green onions, and served potatoes. Berry Fresh Café, Palm Beach Gardens, FL

## ► 2026 Trends

# Global Comfort

Familiar feels, global flavors

### WHAT IT IS

- Comfort food goes international, blending **nostalgia with discovery**
- Dishes rooted in **warmth, indulgence, and tradition** — from around the world
- Combines **emotional satisfaction with cultural curiosity**

### WHY IT MATTERS

- Consumers are craving **comfort with a twist** — familiar formats, new flavor stories
- 63% are interested in Basque cheesecake, 59% in butter chicken, and 49% in ras malai
- Great opportunity to add global flavors to familiar favorites

### ON THE MENU

- **Sweet Comforts:** Basque cheesecake, ras malai, mochi cake
- **Savory Staples:** Butter chicken, salted egg yolk pasta, birria mac & cheese
- **Fusion Favorites:** Global spins on soups, sandwiches, and snackables



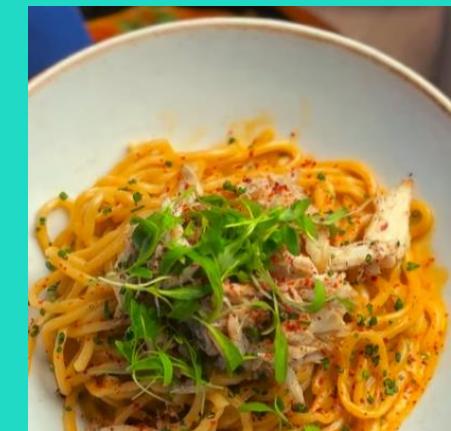
**Matcha Crepe Cake**, Double Chin, Boston, MA



**Dirty Chai Martini**, Laughing Buddha, Ontario



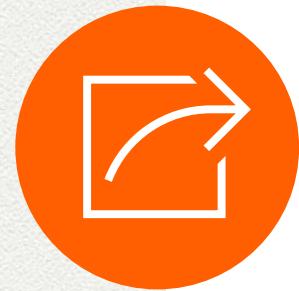
**Birria Mac & Cheese**, Brewski's Bar & Grill, Bronx, NY



**Salted Egg Pasta:** tossed in a rich salted egg yolk cream sauce, buttery lump crab, and finished chili heat. Brewski's Bar & Grill, Bronx, NY

STEP 2:

## Want to share your product with other manufacturer exhibitors?



Let your fellow booth preview exhibitors use your product as part of their sample concepts. It's optional but participating gives your brand greater visibility and more call-outs on menu signage at the show. Keep in mind:

- Supplying your products to others should be at no cost to them.
- Reciprocally, using products from other exhibitors will be supplied to you at no cost.

This can be a fun way to see how your product meets other trends. **Sign up to offer your product no later than Friday, February 6, 2026.**

**STEP 3:**

## Get free culinary support.



Need help brainstorming an idea for your trend? Or are you curious about how to make your concept stand out at the show?

Book a consultation call with the culinary team at Connections powered by CSSI; the chefs are happy to help work out logistics, provide inspiration, or be the "*yes, and...*" you're looking for.

**Appointments are available from **Monday, February 23-Monday, March 2, 2026.****

► Process

STEP 4:

## Submit your recipe concept



Once you have a delicious sample recipe concept that fits your trend perfectly, we want to know about it. Submit your recipe.

**Deadline for submission is  
Friday, March 13, 2026.**

► Process

STEP 5:

## Submit your recipe image\*



Once you've perfected the recipe, we'd love it if you could share a photo with us. Recipe photos to be used in promotional material.

**Deadline for submission is  
Friday, March 27, 2026.**

► Key Dates

# Mark your calendars!

Join the Connections Powered by CSSI team as we discuss the program on **Tuesday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2026, from 2-3 PM CST or Friday, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2026, from 11-12 PM CST**

STEP	ACTION	DEADLINE
1	Trend Sign-up	2/6/26
2	Submit your product as an option for product crossover	2/6/26
Product crossover list will be distributed		<b>2/9/26</b>
3	Window for consultations to review concept with Connections powered by CSSI team	Monday 2/23: 10 am - 3 pm CST Tuesday 2/24: 9 am - 5 pm CST Thursday 2/26: 11 am - 2 pm CST Friday 2/27: 10 am - 1 pm CST Monday 3/2: 10 am - 5pm CST
4	Submit your recipe concept <b>and</b> final date to request crossover sampling product from manufacturer.	3/13/26
5	<b>OPTIONAL:</b> Submit your recipe concept image	3/27/26
Trend Explorer Event <i>Your signage will be provided at the conference.</i>		<b>4/22/26</b>

► Your Next Steps

## Please Fill These Out on [dottrendexplorer.com](http://dottrendexplorer.com)



Please sign up for one trend to use as inspiration for your concept.

[Trend Sign Up Form](#)



If you plan to allow other manufacturers to use your product(s) in their concept for the show, please use the link below to sign up.

[Product Crossover Form](#)



Schedule your one-on-one consultation with Connections Powered by CSSI.

[Schedule Consultation](#)



Please submit your recipe concept based on the trend you signed up for.

[Concept Submission](#)



Please submit a photo of your recipe concept (optional).

[Photo Submission](#)

► **Key Dates**

# Questions about Trend Explorer?

**Join us during our Office Hours.**

Dot & Connections Powered by CSSI will be hosting two virtual office hours sessions to help assist with any questions leading up to the event.

- Exhibitor Resources:  
<https://innovations.dotfoods.com/exhibitor-resources/>
- Attendee Registration - Wednesday, January 14
- Premium Booth Selection - Wednesday, January 28
- Premium Plus Booth Selection - You will be notified by January 21 with your assigned space

**OPTION 1:**  
Trend  
Office Hours

Thursday, January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2026  
10:30-11:30 AM CST

**OPTION 2:**  
Recipe  
Office Hours

Friday, March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2026  
10:30-11:30 AM CST