



A change for the better?

17

Revamping your menu to make things healthier can pay dividends with a more nutrition-focused public, but how should you manage the transition? **Tristan Parker** asks the experts for their views

Nowadays, we are inundated with information about health and nutrition on a daily basis. For anyone running a cafe, it can be hard to stay on top of things – be it official guidelines or just food trends – but an ongoing shift in awareness and dietary preferences and requirements means that customers are weighing up their options more than ever before. Healthy

eating and drinking have well and truly moved into the mainstream, and it isn't just at home that people are seeking out better options.

“Wellness and well-being are really booming at the moment,” confirms Rivkah Maya, a registered nutritional therapist and health coach. “People want more choices, whether that’s vegan, >



gluten-free, dairy-free – consumers are becoming more health-conscious and cafes need to up their game to meet that.”

In terms of common cafe products, the main ‘red flags’ tend to be items with refined carbohydrate content and high sugar, says Maya, such as white bread, cakes, pastries and foods with lots of white flour in, which often contain extra sugar and more processed fats. In particular, the much-discussed ‘free sugars’ have become perhaps the headline item to avoid or minimise. The accepted definition is any sugar that has been added to food and drink, plus those sugars found naturally in honey, syrups and fruit juices, including smoothies.

Government guidelines state that free sugars shouldn’t make up more than 5% of daily calorie intake for adults, with 30g of these sugars being the recommended maximum per day. Figures from the latest *National Diet and Nutrition Survey* published by Public Health England show that intake of these free sugars was at least double the recommended maximum during 2008-2017, despite levels falling from previous years. One of the biggest issues is that it’s not always obvious where these red flags occur. Even if you think your menu avoids unhealthy choices, hidden sugars and fats can still appear in many items. “A lot of food and drinks served in cafes can be filled with hidden sugars,” says Maya. “Take hot drinks – anything with syrups or sweetened milks or cream – those things that make them taste amazing! I don’t think people realise how much sugar and processed stuff has been put in to make them taste like that.”

Perhaps more confusingly – both for customers and cafe owners buying-in stock – seeking out ‘low-fat’ and ‘low-sugar’ options can actually be counterproductive. “I get my clients to avoid things that are labelled ‘low-fat’,” says Maya, “as these foods often have more hidden sugars or processed carbohydrates to make up the flavour and fill out the product. It’s confusing for the consumer, and I think it is misleading.”

Another common trap that both customers and cafe operators can fall into is assuming that some foods are healthier than they actually are. An artisan Italian pastry with fresh fruits and



“PEOPLE WANT MORE CHOICES, WHETHER THAT’S VEGAN, GLUTEN-FREE, DAIRY-FREE – CONSUMERS ARE BECOMING MORE HEALTH-CONSCIOUS AND CAFES NEED TO UP THEIR GAME”

seeds on top, for example, or a baguette filled with premium-quality, organic Manchego, handmade in front of you.

“People can get lured-in by the freshness of something, but you don’t always know what else is in that item,” says Maya. “And eating some good, organic cheese doesn’t outweigh the impact on the body of eating a huge white baguette, which is basically just pure sugar.”

With that in mind, cafes really can stand out from the crowd by offering truly healthy options.

These don’t have to be complicated or fancy, either: providing simple, nutritious choices on a menu will resonate with customers and show that you’re keen to provide them with better products, whatever their dietary choices.

There’s plenty of research on how diets are changing, but one recent example is the annual *Waitrose Food and Drink Report 2018-2019*, which surveyed 2,000 people across the UK – not just Waitrose customers. The report found that almost 13% of the population is now vegetarian or vegan, with a further 21% identifying as ‘flexitarian’.

Healthier purchasing is also rapidly becoming an increasing concern for many people. *The European Shopper Insights Survey*, published by market research agency IRI in October 2018, found that 42% of shoppers were willing to pay more for organic food, while research firm Mintel found that sales of plant-based alternatives to dairy milk grew by 9.4% in the UK during 2016-17, totalling £221 million. Tastes really are changing, it seems, and cafes need to cater for this shift.

Overall, the key message is to do something, rather than nothing, and start making changes sooner, rather than later. “I don’t see this as a trend or something that will slow down,” says Maya, “because it’s about people’s health. If businesses don’t respond to that, they’re going to lose out.” >



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THE BARISTA NATALIA SMYTH, BODEN PARK COFFEE COMPANY, BELFAST

When it comes to making coffee healthier, the first thing I would say is that if your coffee has more than three words when you order it, you're doing it wrong! If you're drinking a black Americano or even a cappuccino or latte, it's still a relatively healthy option compared to a triple caramel mocha with an extra shot and cream, which will obviously have much more sugar and fat in. It's good to talk to your customers and make them aware of different options that you serve, like dairy-free milk alternatives and caffeine-free coffees.

If customers like a sweeter coffee but also want something healthier, there are sugar-free syrups and sweeteners, but I would encourage people to try their coffee without sugar first, particularly in specialty coffee shops and especially if they're ordering anything with steamed milk. This is because the lactose in cow's milk contains sugars that break down when the milk is being steamed, and this naturally makes the drink sweeter. Most people don't know this and it's just habit for them to put two or three sugars in the coffee instead of trying it without first.

An alternative to sugar is using a little cinnamon or cocoa powder, which can also help spice up the flavour of the coffee. I also recommend that cafe owners and baristas look into the origin of the coffees they serve, because there are so many notes and differences that make some varieties sweeter, which could be useful for some customers. Coffees from Africa, for example, are generally much fruitier than, say, Costa Rican coffees. So, customers should always ask the barista in their local cafe for their advice if they're looking for something specific.

If people do still want sugar, suggest using brown sugar instead of white, and if you are using syrup, choose a good quality variety, because that means you don't need to add lots of it to give the desired flavour. Another way of making a healthier coffee is to

swap cow's milk for a non-dairy option. Some non-dairy milks are also a little sweeter than cow's milk, which will appeal to some customers. Soya used to be the only alternative available, but now there's oat, almond, coconut – I'm sure anyone will be able to find a dairy-free alternative they enjoy. As a barista, I prefer using oat 'milk' over soya, as the consistency is quite similar to dairy milk, but it's lighter on your stomach than cow's milk. I've definitely seen an increase in customers asking for dairy-free alternatives in recent years, also from people who don't have an intolerance or dairy-free diet, but just want to be healthier.



When it comes to reducing caffeine, I recommend sticking to one good cup of coffee a day. There's a saying in the barista community – 'death before decaf' – and for a long time decaffeinated coffee was often really bad, but nowadays there's much more of a market for it and there are good-quality decaf specialty coffee options to choose from, as well as half-decaf blends. There are generally four ways of decaffeinating coffee and it's good for cafe owners and baristas to ask their roaster which method is used for their decaf, because this alters the flavour of what you're serving. At Boden Park we have a roastery on-site as well as the cafe, and we make sure there's always at least one decaf coffee on offer.

It's really important for cafe operators to educate their baristas and make sure they know what choices there are for making things healthier. Also, make sure you're talking to customers and sharing knowledge about what's available. If people don't know what options are on offer, they won't be able to ask for them, and remember that people like choices! If customers want a healthier coffee, they should be able to talk to the barista – they need to be the experts! >

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“IT'S GOOD TO TALK TO YOUR CUSTOMERS AND MAKE THEM AWARE OF DIFFERENT OPTIONS THAT YOU SERVE, LIKE DAIRY-FREE MILK ALTERNATIVES AND CAFFEINE-FREE COFFEES”

THE BAKER MICHAELA PONTIKI, FOUNDER AND OWNER, ARAPINA, LONDON

Arapina is a healthy lifestyle bakery specialising in vegan, free-from and low-in, organic products, based on Mediterranean cuisine. Our focus is on healthier cakes and guilt-free treats, as we like to call them.

As someone who is gluten-intolerant and vegan, when I first came to London I found my choices for eating out very restricted, so I started looking for healthier eating options, which is how Arapina started.

Cakes and treats don't need to be full of preservatives, chemicals and sugar. I hated that feeling of eating a cupcake or muffin when I was out, followed by the mental guilt and physical toll that these things had on me. I am a great believer that cakes and treats shouldn't be put together with guilt – they can be made healthier to fit your lifestyle. You can have amazing cakes that are low in sugar, sweetened with natural sugar or made lighter with rice flour.

Only 20% of our menu uses animal products. We do use meat in a few things, but 80% of our recipes are vegan. Some of our most popular items are our vegan

cakes, vegan and gluten-free brownies, sugar-free cookies and chocolate, and vegan mushroom rolls.

Over the last six years we've developed over 300 recipes catering for people with coeliac disease, diabetes, vegans and other dietary requirements. It all started from one recipe, the Arapina chocolate cake. The cake was dairy-free, because it was baked with olive oil, but it soon turned

vegan: no eggs, no dairy. Since then, things have grown by demand!

We've supplied to lots of cafes around London over the years. The main things they're interested in are our vegan items: croissants, brioche, doughnuts and our vegan, gluten-free brownies. And our healthy cakes, of course: the blueberry and lemon 'Letitia' is free from dairy, gluten and wheat, and sells very well, and the vanilla and apple 'Deborah' – which is dairy-free and very light – is popular with coffee shops, too.

There was a time when coffee shops could get away with bad-quality, unhealthy cakes or snacks bought

from distributors, but people are now very food-educated, so it's important for cafes to stock healthier foods, especially since millennials – who are very health-aware – are one of the biggest consumer bases now. Cafes really need to refocus on who their target audience will be.

When I started Arapina in 2013, providing gluten-free and dairy-free options made me the odd one out, but now everyone wants to stock these things. It's a bad business decision if you're not offering healthy options on your menu, and you'll soon find your business struggling and losing ground on the market.

I would say to cafe owners that if you're ordering your food from distributors, search around for reputable suppliers offering better options, as there are lots out there. If you're making things in house, research how you can give your recipes a healthy twist, such as using better quality oil, like coconut oil, or adding some nuts and seeds to foods. There are lots of ways you can make things healthier. >

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THE COFFEE SHOP OWNER LISANDRA OSCAR-SMITH, CO-FOUNDER, THE LITTLE ONE, LONDON



When we opened, we wanted to do something different. We decided to make all of our products in-house and keep things simple and healthy with a small menu.

The main things we make are muffins – like the ones we used to eat in Brazil, where both myself and my husband are from – plus crêpes and pão de queijo (a Brazilian cheese bread).

Some of our muffins are dairy-free, and some are dairy and gluten-free. All of our crêpes are dairy-free and the pão de queijo is naturally gluten-free and very light.

When you keep things simple you can make sure you're doing it well. Many cafes come and go because they try to do a 400-item menu. That's too complex for everyone, both customers and staff. We found the best products for our target audience and stuck with them.

These days, so many people are going vegan or gluten-free, so we wanted to bring that side to our menu. Healthy food was something I always did in my house when I was younger, because my mother is a nutritionist. We make all of the crêpe mix ourselves and we have a vegan crêpe made

with spinach and fresh garlic. There's about a bagful of spinach in it, so it's very nutritious, and being dairy-free means there are fewer calories, because there's no butter or milk.

People seem to love it! We only bake 24 muffins at the start of each day and once

we're beginning to sell-out we start baking more. People know that if they wait 20 minutes, they'll be eating something straight from the oven, rather than from a big central kitchen. We also don't have much food waste, either, because we only bake what we need. Our dairy-free carrot muffin is one of our best-sellers. I put two carrots in each muffin. They're good for kids, too, because it's a sweet treat that gives them some vegetables. We also make a dairy-free, gluten-free and sugar-free banana muffin, and we have regulars who come in just for those.

It can be hard to find something really fresh, and that was one of the things I wanted to do when I opened my business – I needed to eat something that I knew hadn't been sitting out all day. People are looking for better ingredients these days. We have clients who travel all the way

across London just to eat our food, because they know it's fresh and healthy. I think that shows how much people appreciate good-quality food.

Cafe owners do need to sell healthier, fresher products. My advice to anyone wanting to make their menu healthier is to keep things to a minimum and don't try and do too much. Find a good supplier if you're buying in, but if you can make your own products, that's even better. Read about your food – what can you substitute for healthier ingredients?

Study your clientele and learn what they want, as the area you're in makes such a difference. Our shop is in quite a touristy area, and there are so many cafes around us doing the same kinds of things, so offering something different and healthier has definitely brought us more business. We've made sure to stick to our plan – keep things simple and keep the quality high. It's helped us last for ten years! ○

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“OFFERING SOMETHING DIFFERENT AND HEALTHIER HAS DEFINITELY BROUGHT US MORE BUSINESS”



RETHINKING YOUR MENU: AN ACTION PLAN

Nutritionist and health coach **Rivkah Maya** reveals some simple steps to give your menu a greater appeal to the growing numbers of health-conscious customers



ONE

Stock a good selection of dairy-free milks and not just soya. There are so many alternatives available to choose from now.



TWO

Offer a variety of breads, like good-quality brown bread, rye, sourdough and gluten-free, which are healthier options that more people are choosing...



THREE

...but also make sure you offer non-bread options. A lot of cafes rely on sandwiches or toast, so adapt that and have other choices.



FOUR

Use salads and vegetables as side portions with dishes. People want healthier items, but they don't want to buy lots of separate things to make a meal.



FIVE

Offer a decent choice of non-caffeinated hot drinks. More and more people are realising that they don't want to be having caffeine all the time.



SIX

Consider making things like energy balls or sweet options that aren't just cakes. Or experiment making cakes that have natural sugars or fresh fruit.



SEVEN

Where it's financially viable, use organic, as it's definitely healthier – even if you choose to swap out just a few items on your menu.



EIGHT

Shout about the healthy stuff and be proud of it. If something doesn't have refined sugar in, let people know on the label or somewhere else.