

Back to the dinner table: 11 restaurant trends



By [Michael Said](#)

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Each year I return home from the National Restaurant Association Show in Chicago and wonder which of the latest trends I had just witnessed will take South Africa by storm. There's been the Low-Carb/No-Carb Trend, the Zero Trans Fats, the Organic Trend, The Mini Dessert Portion Trend, the Health Trend and the 'that looks like another trend' trend.



For some reason none of them really seemed to find a place in South African mainstream and when I was offered the opportunity to research restaurant trends for 2011, I was once again more than a little sceptical about how relevant it is to our market. So here are 11 international predictions for 2011 and how I feel they will be received in South Africa.

Restaurant operators can't be certain about much for 2011, as recent improvements in guest traffic, same-store sales and hiring are far from guaranteed to continue. About the only thing they can expect as they hope for traction in the economy's wobbly recovery is that the industry will continue to look different than it does today.

In forecasting what changes may lie ahead, Chicago-based market research firm Technomic Inc. identified 11 restaurant industry trends for next year.

1. Action in adult beverages

Restaurant owners internationally are predicting that as optimism grows in 2011, consumers will want to celebrate with some higher-end alcoholic drinks. As such, retro cocktails and high-end spirits may get more play at fine-dining and independent establishments, craft beers could gain in popularity against their mass-market counterparts, and fast-casual concepts could turn to alcohol as a way to differentiate themselves.

TEST THIS ONE - *This may be slightly tempered by the AARTO demerit system that is due for implementation and may see a responsible shift towards a greater selection of Non Alcoholic cocktails and alternatives for designated drivers.*

2. Beyond bricks and mortar

Food trucks are poised to move beyond New York and Los Angeles and Chicago and possibly all the way down south (and I am not referring to Louisiana). This will require a complete mind shift at both operator and customer level and will require the cooperation of the various city councils.

INVEST IN THIS ONE - *In South Africa, a "food truck" is still a caravan without wheels on the side of the road. Who will be brave enough to invest and roll out this concept in South Africa with great success. A restaurant without a RENT account sounds pretty good to me.*

3. Farmers as celebrities

The era of the celebrity chef may soon give way to that of the star farmer. American trend watchers are expecting this to start taking off with farmers featured in commercials and television interviews.

REST THIS ONE - *This one I wouldn't bet the house on! I am not even certain that the SA public are aware that the food chain extends beyond the supermarket shelves. We are yet to explore home grown Celebrity Chefs, I am not certain Farmer Brown is going to develop a huge Facebook and Twitter following in a hurry.*

4. Social media and technology: evolutionary spurt

Look for more restaurants to gain a competitive edge with new technologies and applications, including kiosks for ordering and displaying nutritional information, iPads containing wine lists, and hand-held devices for tableside payments. Widespread adoption of location-based social media has a lot of room for scale.

REST THIS ONE - *Hmmm, with the knives and forks, Tabasco and pepper grinders disappearing out the door in customer handbags and pockets, why am I unsure we will be handing out iPads and PDA at the tables anytime soon? Possible increase usage of behind counter displays with changing information is probably as far as this one will go in SA for a while still.*

INVEST IN THIS ONE - *Widespread use of Social Media Marketing, Location Based Advertising & Online Reputation Management are all sure to grow in SA over the next few years. Do it properly or don't do it at all. This is not a new way to SPAM everyone, like all other marketing it requires strategy, planning and implementation.*

5. Korean and beyond

Internationally there is a very strong trend toward "The Korean Influence" but one must realise that this is fuelled through immigration and social adoption.

TEST THIS ONE - *Once again I wouldn't place too much stock in this one BUT there may be some homegrown fusion that is just waiting to burst onto the scene. Global Wrapps have been brave enough to introduce the TORTIZZA a thin crispy Mexican version of a pizza, Debonairs is always pushing the boundaries and there are others dipping their toes at the moment.*

6. Tired of being poor

Consumers who are able to treat themselves again in 2011 will do so - meaning that restaurants with a few indulgent menu items or experiences could see an uptick in orders of high-margin and high-price-point dishes. This could spell opportunity not only for casual-dining chains to entice diners with more premium dishes.

INVEST IN THIS ONE - *The interest rate drop will certainly put a little extra money in the hands of your customers at just the right moment (providing your target market is not pensioners living on interest payments!). Not all your customers will be out to blow the budget, just ensure you can accommodate those who wish to!*

7. How low can you go?

On the other hand, customers will continue to demand everyday value when dining out. As part of any balanced-menu strategy, restaurants should have permanent value fixtures available, not just limited-time offers.

INVEST IN THIS ONE - *EVERYBODY understands VALUE, ensure you are geared up and ready for those still feeling the pinch who would like to at least stop eating EVERY meal at home!*

8. Carefully calibrated brand action

Expect to see a number of chains introducing new branding and new looks. Many chains have begun on that front already, Mugg & Bean, Dulce Café and Bugatti's to name but a few. Customers re-entering the market will not settle for the same old same old as they look for new and exciting places to celebrate the new found financial freedom.

TEST THIS ONE - *You may not be feeling flush just yet and feel that paying off that mountain of debt is more important than a revamp BUT don't get caught with your paints down (yes that was deliberate). As the market slowly recovers, those that have been able to invest in their businesses will be the first to benefit as many scramble to play catch-up.*

9. Back to our roots

Consumers will continue to turn to comfort foods when dining out, creating demand for traditional Southern African foods, retro Italian favourites like meatballs, or gourmet updates to nostalgic favourites like doughnuts and popsicles. There also could be more opportunities for family-style service and family-size portions.

REST/TEST THIS ONE - *I am not certain that the South African public slowly recovering from some pretty lean times really want to go out and eat what they have been eating for the past two years AT HOME, even if you can cook it better! They are going to start filling the restaurants again in search of the foods and flavours they have missed for the past few years. Welcome them back with old favourites, new experiences and plenty of "love". Remind them there is a reason they chose your restaurant. Wildfire Restaurant in Chicago has a great slogan "As good as you remember".*

10. New competition from C-stores

Some time ago I wrote an article which said "Watch out, Woolworths wants your customers". There eat at home for R100 campaigns and Valentine Solution offers are aimed at taking customers out of the restaurants and into the aisle. Pick 'n Pay are investing heavily in high quality meals and products and restaurants need to be aware of this

WATCH OUT FOR THIS ONE! - *But warmth & hospitality they cannot get at home! You had better start understanding and acting upon this differential.*

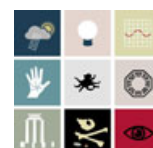
11. Healthful versus indulgent: The little angel says one thing, the little devil another

The balance that restaurants usually strike between healthful and not-so-healthful food items could get complicated in 2011 when many menu-labelling requirements take effect. The Consumer Protection Act (if we ever get to see it) will certainly influence this and how restaurants describe their dishes to their customers.

TEST HIS ONE - *Sure a few healthy alternatives on the menu are always a good thing, but eating out is about indulgence. Cover your basis... healthy starters and decadent desserts is the way to go!*

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ABOUT MICHAEL SAID

Twenty two years in the hospitality industry, working from the ground up, has left Michael Said no wiser to understanding the workings of waiters, customers or franchisees BUT he insists he will keep on trying. In January 2006, he founded www.brandStrategy.co.za, which develops brand strategies and integrated marketing plans, including internal and external marketing policies and the overseeing of all ATL and BTL campaigns. Email Mike at brandStrategy@gmail.com, find him on Facebook and follow him on Twitter at @mike_said_what.

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