THE RETURN OF REAL

2026 TREND REPORT

NOURISH
food marketing

Cover photography by Carbelle Djossa, shot in our in-house studio

FOREWORD BY NOURISH PRESIDENT JO-ANN McARTHUR

THE RETURN OF REAL

The rhythm of our daily life has fundamentally changed. Hybrid work erased the line between home and office for most people. We can get anything we want whenever we want it, wherever we want it, thanks to a multiplicity of shopping apps. Traditional TV broadcast schedules are all but gone, replaced by streaming that is fully on-demand, personalized, and optimized by algorithms. We're eating earlier, fasting longer, staying home more, and spending less time socializing. Meanwhile, the growth of single-person households and solo dining marks a wider cultural move toward individual living, even as the desire for real connection intensifies.

This is the paradox of our time: we're more connected digitally than ever before, yet more isolated as human beings. As Artificial Intelligence promises to solve everything from grocery shopping to meal planning, we're discovering what it cannot provide: authentic human experience, serendipitous discovery, and the messy imperfections that make life meaningful.

THE AI ECONOMY VS. EVERYTHING ELSE

The economy is being bolstered by a remarkable investment boom in Artificial Intelligence, with estimates suggesting that AI capital expenditures may reach 2% of GDP in 2025, up from less than 0.1% in 2022. That means the equivalent of about $1,800 per person in America will be invested this year in AI.[1] However, a recent report from MIT found that only about 5% of corporate investments in AI are paying off.[2]

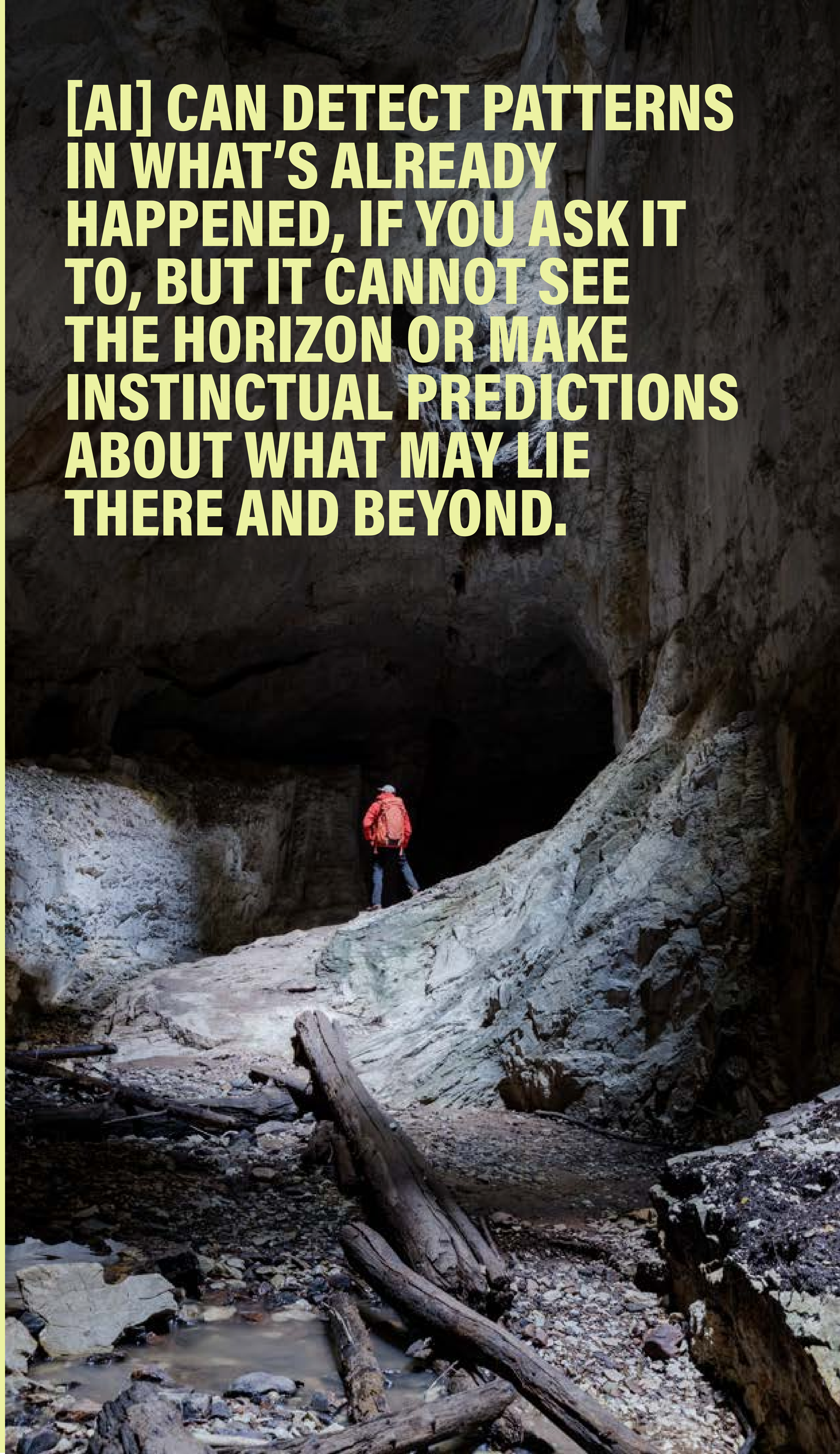
The hundreds of billions of dollars companies are investing in AI make up, according to some analyses, an astonishing 40% share of U.S. GDP growth this year, with AI companies accounting for 80% of the gains in U.S. stocks so far in 2025.[3]

Yet here's what else the MIT research reveals beyond the hard data: AI can speed up your development pipeline, but it can't tell you why everyone still picks chocolate. It doesn't know what it tastes like or the emotional response chocolate triggers, no matter how many new flavour options come to market. It has no intuition and no foresight—AI is wedded to what HAS been done, what IS known. It reminds me of a quote from Haruki Murakami on acquiring knowledge: "If you only read the books that everyone else is reading, you can only think what everyone else is thinking."

THE LIMITS OF ALGORITHMIC PREDICTION

AI is entirely reliant on historical data. A lot of it, to be sure, and that can be very useful; as many have said, you have to look back to move forward. It can detect patterns in what's already happened, if you ask it to, but it cannot see the horizon or make instinctual predictions about what may lie there and beyond. Future-shaping forces, like shifting political climates and policy changes, emerging health research, and economic instability, don't exist in their training set until after they're already making waves. It's advanced technology, but it's not a cyber-psychic come to tell you the future.

Want an example? I recently asked a LLM (Large Language Model) AI to make prognostications for next year's food trends—without consulting any already published predictions for 2026. Let's just say the results were mixed. Everyday drinking vinegars? Seriously? Try again; that's been in decline since pre-COVID.



Here's what that skill gap means for food and consumer trends:

Artificial Intelligence is the assistant (I'd say "intern" but you have to pay to play if you want the best results) of your dreams; it's brilliant for sorting information, summarizing what's known, and quickly providing reams of research. But true foresight means detecting weak signals, interpreting risk, and understanding behaviours long before the data confirms them. That requires human pattern recognition, cultural insights, and the ability to sense what's emerging before it becomes measurable.

Now, on a very small scale, Predictive AI can be effective. For example, if it knows what a consumer has bought recently, it can do a decent job at making recommendations for future purchases. But relying on AI alone for brand and trend strategy is like driving while watching only the rearview mirror.

A HUMAN-CENTRIC REBELLION IS HAPPENING

This brings us to 2026's overarching theme: The Return of Real. Across nearly every trend in this report, we see consumers actively pushing back against artificial perfection, and inauthentic brands and marketing in the foodisphere. They're (mostly) choosing the reality of imperfections over polish, human connection over digital efficiency, authentic experience over algorithmic optimization. In short, they want flawed, messy, wonderful humanity back in their lives.

THE RETURN OF REAL MANIFESTS DIFFERENTLY ACROSS CATEGORIES:

In food, it's the return to "real" ingredients and traditional proteins as consumers reject ultra-processed alternatives that promised improvement but delivered disappointment.

In nutrition, it's the evolution beyond single-nutrient obsession toward understanding food as a complex orchestra of interconnected elements working in harmony.

In beauty, it's the migration from synthetic supplements to whole-food nutrition as people realize their skin reflects internal health, not external applications.

In commerce, it's the rise of AI agents managing transactions while humans crave authentic discovery and serendipitous encounters that algorithms can't provide.

In social connection, it's the recognition that food serves as our most powerful antidote to loneliness, creating moments of genuine human interaction in an increasingly isolating world.

In trust, it's the demand for radical transparency as consumers lose faith in both corporate messaging and regulatory oversight, requiring brands to earn credibility through actions rather than promises.

AT NOURISH, AI IS A CREATIVE COLLABORATOR

If you read our last couple of Trend Reports, you know we've kept a real eye on AI. It has transitioned from an intriguing novelty (with obvious potential) to a game-changing tool in our toolbox. The trick, as it is with any powerful tool, is knowing how to use it the right way—which, as you are no doubt aware, is subject to interpretation.

We use AI as a creative collaboration partner, not a replacement for human insight. AI helps us synthesize vast amounts of information, identify patterns we might otherwise miss, and accelerate our research process. But every trend in this report emerged from human observation, cultural intuition, and the kind of deep immersion in a sector that no algorithm can replicate.

The trends that matter most for businesses often emerge from the spaces between data points, in the contradictions and tensions that humans navigate daily. They require understanding not just what people do, but why they do it, how they feel about it, and what they're seeking that they can't yet articulate.

Welcome to 2026 and The Return to Real. The future belongs to brands (and their marketing partners) that remember what algorithms cannot replicate—the irreplaceable value of authentic human experience and connection.

Cheers,

Jo-Ann

1. Jens Nordvig, AI adoption is accelerating in 2025, July 2025
2. MIT Nanda, The State of AI in Business, 2025
3. Ruchir Sharma, America is now one big bet on AI, Financial Times, October 2025

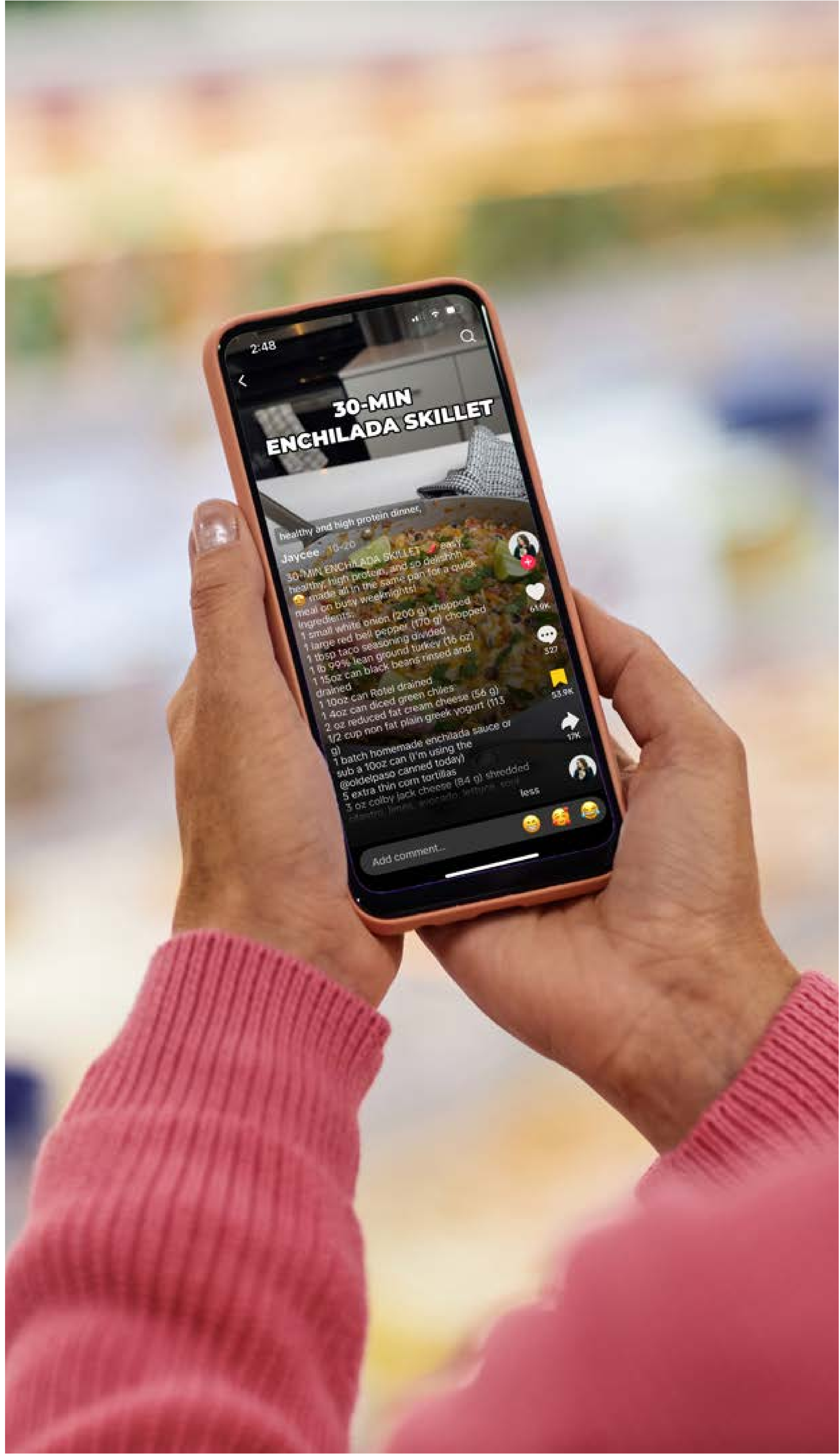
OUR TRENDS FOR 2026

RISE OF THE BOT SHOPPERS: WHEN ALGORITHMS BECOME YOUR #1 CUSTOMERS

We begin, ironically, in one place the rebellion hasn't gained a toehold: online shopping. As we discussed in the introduction, the cadence of life has changed drastically; many people feel busier than ever, and that's when consumers will grasp onto anything that claims to simplify their lives. So, with free time at an all-time premium, we've apparently thrown in the towel when it comes to Search and planning, choosing automated assistance and speedy AI results over slogging through Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs) that aren't optimized on a personal level.

That's why the future of food marketing isn't B2B or B2C, it's A2B and A2C, where AI agents become the primary intermediaries between brands and consumers and businesses. This shift could represent the biggest retail disruption since the introduction of e-commerce, with AI agents predicted to drive 9 trillion US$ in sales by 2030 while also fundamentally changing how food is discovered, rated, and purchased.[1]

Consumers are already discovering new food and beverages through non-traditional channels; 73% reported trying new foods they found on social media, creator content, and AI-powered platforms, signaling the decline of traditional discovery pathways.[2]



Remember, your customer doesn't wake up thinking "What am I going to buy today?" They think "What am I going to DO today?", and they're increasingly offloading purchase decisions to AI agents that may know them better than they know themselves.

SEO (SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION) →

Content strategy: Emphasizes keyword density, metadata, long-form content, internal linking, and crawlability.

Tactic examples: On-page optimization, schema markup, backlinks, speed optimization, keyword-rich content.

GEO (GENERATIVE ENGINE OPTIMIZATION) →

Content strategy: Emphasizes concise, high-quality, unambiguous content with strong contextual signals. Prioritizes direct answers to natural-language questions.

Tactic examples: Providing clear facts, FAQ-style content, structured tables, unique data, good citations, and consistent brand/entity information.

THE GREAT DISINTERMEDIATION

This shift from traditional search to AI-mediated discovery is happening at breakneck speed. Consumer search is evolving from 5-word queries to 35-word conversational strings as people interact with AI agents that understand context, preferences, and complex requirements. Sixty-one per cent of U.S. consumers have tried generative AI tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, or Perplexity, a threefold increase from 2024. For 35% of AI users, it is already part of their shopping journey, especially for comparing prices and finding deals.[3] In Canada, 46% have made purchases based on generative AI recommendations, and 72% would trust an AI personal shopper.[4] That's a lot of trust gained in a short time.

Brands that spent decades optimizing for Google SEO must now master Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) to remain visible in AI-powered search results. If AI models can't access your brand's data through structured APIs, proper metadata, and agent-friendly content, your brand may not appear in recommendations at all.

FROM PERSONAL SHOPPERS TO PROCUREMENT AGENTS

The evolution from AI assistants to autonomous agents represents a fundamental shift in sales dynamics. These agents won't just recommend products; they'll also negotiate prices, complete purchases, and potentially initiate buying wars on behalf of their user. If AI agents evaluate products based on mathematical efficiency rather than emotional connection, traditional brand loyalty and marketing strategies built on emotional differentiation will be threatened.

THE CREATOR ECONOMY COLLISION

The rise of AI agents coincides with the explosion of individual creator platforms in the food space. (For more, see our trend `Entering the Celebrity Platform Brand Era.`) Creators like Logan Paul (Prime drinks) and Jake Paul (various CPG products) are building substantial businesses beyond traditional brand deals by leveraging their personal platforms. These creator brands succeed because they start with built-in audiences and authentic storytelling, advantages that AI agents particularly value when making recommendations.

They also love a detailed brand story. Large Language Models particularly favour linear narratives presented as timelines with dates, detailed team bios with social media links, and clear mission statements. Humans rarely read these pages, but AI agents consume them voraciously to understand brand positioning and values.

Live social shopping is becoming massive, with platforms like TikTok and Instagram evolving into a "QVC-ification of social media," where users can purchase products instantly from creators through live streams. AI integration enhances these personal brands, enabling creators to build large-scale enterprises while maintaining the unique human element that differentiates them from corporate brands. AI can replicate many things, but authentic human connection remains a critical differentiator. (For more, see our trend `Food as the Cure for the Loneliness Epidemic`)

THE SEARCH EVOLUTION

The transformation of search behaviour from keyword-based queries to conversational interactions fundamentally changes how consumers discover food products. Traditional SEO optimization will become less relevant as AI agents aggregate information from multiple sources to provide comprehensive product comparisons and recommendations. Brands must adapt by structuring content for AI understanding rather than human reading patterns. Voice and conversational interfaces are becoming the primary ways of interacting, as consumers prefer

language communication with AI agents over traditional point-and-click navigation. This requires brands to optimize for spoken queries and product descriptions rather than traditional written content.

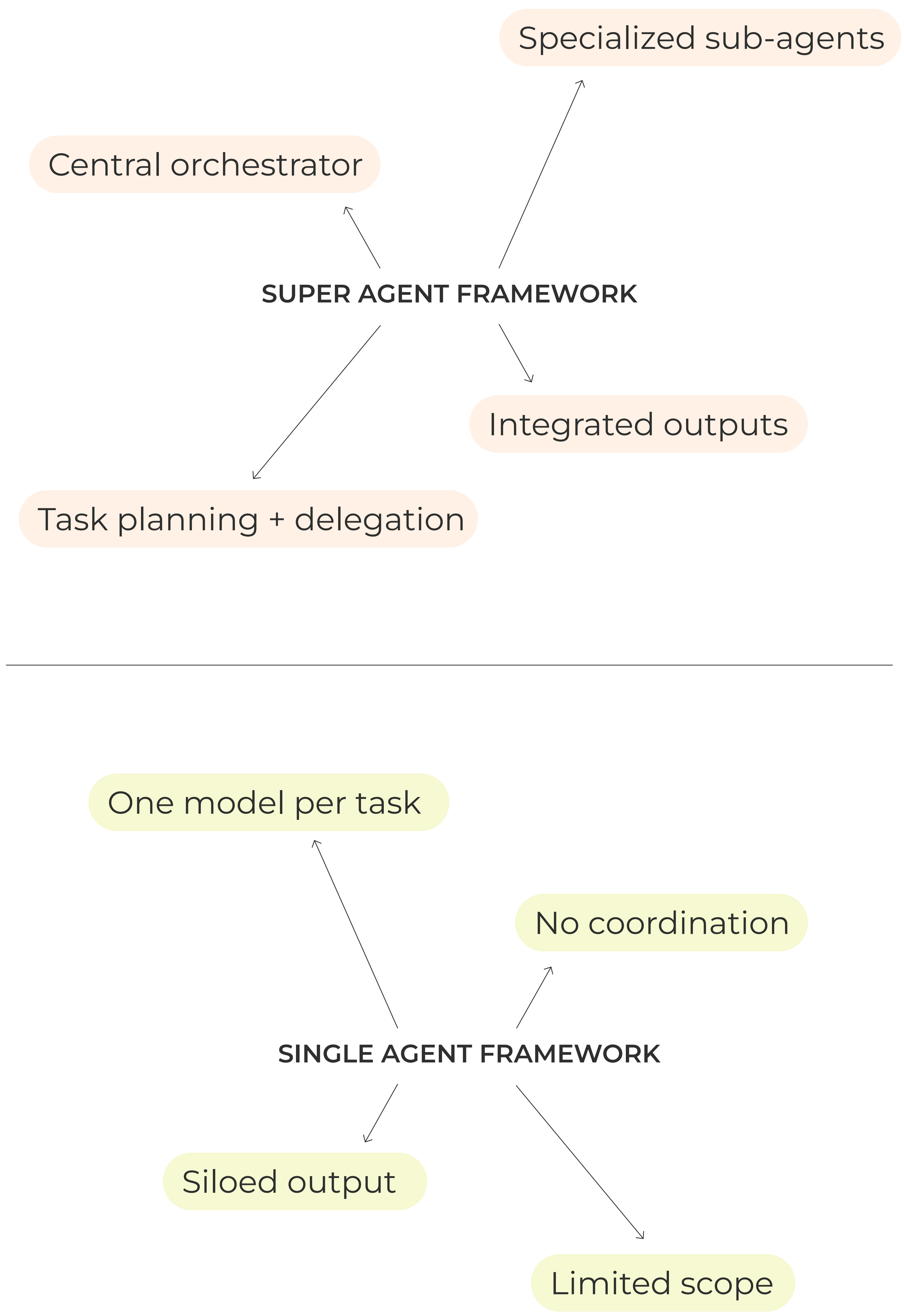
The shift also affects how consumers make unexpected discoveries. Traditional browsing allows for serendipitous encounters with new products, but AI agents may create filter bubbles that limit exposure to different options. Food brands will need strategies to break through AI-mediated discovery patterns and create moments of delightful surprise that build emotional connections. The goal is to become "agent-friendly" while building direct relationships with consumers that transcend AI intermediation.

▶ HAPPENING NOW:

WALMART'S SUPER AGENT, SPARKY

Walmart just unveiled a 'super agent' framework for AI tools that consolidates dozens of standalone AI tools into four integrated systems designed to enhance experiences for customers, employees, suppliers, and developers. Sparky, the Customer Agent, serves as a multimodal shopping concierge, helping customers with product recommendations, review summaries, and increasingly complex tasks like event planning and automated reordering. In its enhanced form, Sparky can organize events—like "unicorn-themed parties"—and use computer vision to suggest recipes based on your refrigerator's contents.

SUPER AGENT VS. SINGLE AGENT



THE RISE OF AI NUTRITION COACHES

Artificial Intelligence is rapidly becoming a trusted advisor for next-generation consumers seeking personalized nutrition guidance. Digital natives who grow up with ChatGPT as part of their daily lives may not understand the concept of “not knowing what to eat” or traditional meal planning.

AI nutrition chatbots offer unprecedented personalization by analyzing data from connected wearable smart devices, like Continuous Glucose Monitors and smart watches and rings, while incorporating dietary preferences, allergies, health conditions, genetic profiles, and lifestyle factors to provide tailored meal recommendations. Unlike generic nutrition advice, these systems create highly individualized plans that consider metabolic rate, food sensitivities, nutrient deficiencies, and, yes, personal taste preferences.

Consumers will be able to use AI nutrition assistants for real-time food analysis, healthy restaurant suggestions, personalized grocery lists, nutritional intake tracking, and even educational resources tailored to individual knowledge levels.

▶ HAPPENING NOW:

JUST SALAD’S SALAD AI

Why struggle with choices when an AI assistant can craft the perfect bowl for you based on your preferences, dietary restrictions, and nutritional goals? This system can even integrate with wearable devices to provide comprehensive dietary recommendations based on activity levels and energy expenditure.

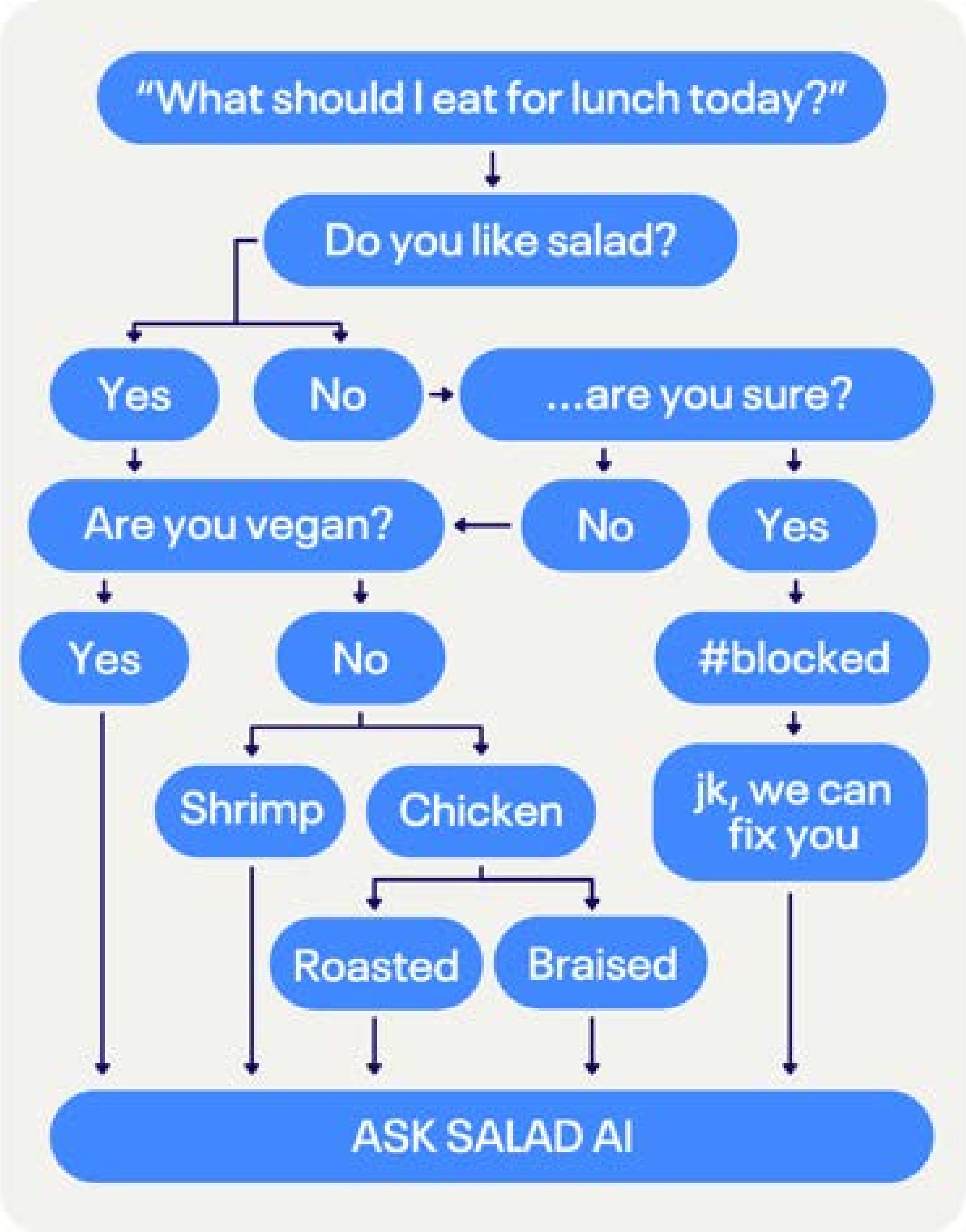


Image Source: Just Salad, “It’s not over ‘til it’s over... or at least until February.” Facebook, 2025

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

FOR FOOD BRANDS:

Optimize for AI agent discovery by investing in Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) to ensure your products appear in AI-powered search results and recommendations.

Develop comprehensive brand narratives specifically for AI consumption, including timeline-based company stories, a spotlight on your team members, and making your values and mission crystal clear. Create dedicated pages that AI agents can easily access and process to understand your brand positioning; ironically, these human elements will attract AI's attention.

Build direct consumer relationships that transcend AI intermediation through loyalty programs, community engagement, IRL events, and exclusive newsletter content.

FOR RETAILERS:

Deploy your own AI shopping agents to maintain direct relationships with customers while competing with third-party platforms. Create proprietary agents that showcase your unique value proposition and product assortment.

Optimize product data and inventory systems for AI agent access, ensuring accurate real-time information about availability, pricing, and product specifications. Make it easy for both your own and third-party agents to access and recommend your products.

FOR FOODSERVICE AND RESTAURANTS:

Create detailed nutritional data feeds that AI agents can access to recommend your menu items to customers based on their individual dietary preferences, allergies, and nutritional goals, positioning your restaurant as a go-to for personalized, health-conscious dining.

For QSRs less focused on health propositions, create loyalty and rewards programs specifically designed for AI-mediated shopping, offering cashback or benefits that AI agents can factor into their recommendations to diners.

FOR AGRI-FOOD:

Keep consistent records on how you grow, what inputs you use, and your sustainability practices. This makes it easier to share information with digital buying and traceability platforms, helping your products show up in searches from automated purchasing tools.

Use online marketplaces; try platforms that automatically connect farmers with buyers like processors, retailers, or exporters based on real-time needs. For example, FarmLead, which bills itself as "North America's Online Grain Marketplace," uses software to match grain sellers with buyers based on grain quality, location, and buyer preferences.

1. Grous, N. and Kim, A., Generative AI: A New Consumer Operating System, ARK Investment Management LLC, 2024
2. Edelman Trust Institute, Brand Trust, From We to Me, 2025
3. Wildfire, The AI Shopping Shift, 2025
4. Accenture, Me, My Brand, and AI: The New World of Consumer Engagement, June 2025

FROM ENDORSERS TO INVESTORS: ENTERING THE CELEBRITY PLATFORM BRAND ERA

The food industry is witnessing a transition in power dynamics that would have been unthinkable just a decade ago. Legacy brands that dominated grocery shelves for generations are losing market share to a new breed of celebrity-backed platform brands—backed, not endorsed, and that's the key difference. This transformation represents more than a simple changing of the guard. It's a fundamental reimagining of how food brands are built, marketed, and scaled in the digital age.

THE DECLINE OF LEGACY DOMINANCE

In 2025, Del Monte Foods, after 139 years of operations, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. While inflation and supply chain costs were cited as contributing factors, the real culprit was something every brand owner should recognize: standing still while consumers moved forward. Consumer preferences had shifted decisively away from canned fruit toward fresh, organic, ready-to-eat options, and Del Monte's slow innovation cycle meant missing trend after trend.

Del Monte's collapse is emblematic of a broader industry crisis. According to Boston Consulting Group data, large CPG companies in the condiments space with more than $1 billion in annual sales lost approximately 3% of market share between 2020 and 2024, while smaller manufacturers with revenue under $1 billion grew their share by 2.2%, and private label brands gained 0.9%. (See the chart on the next page.) This could herald

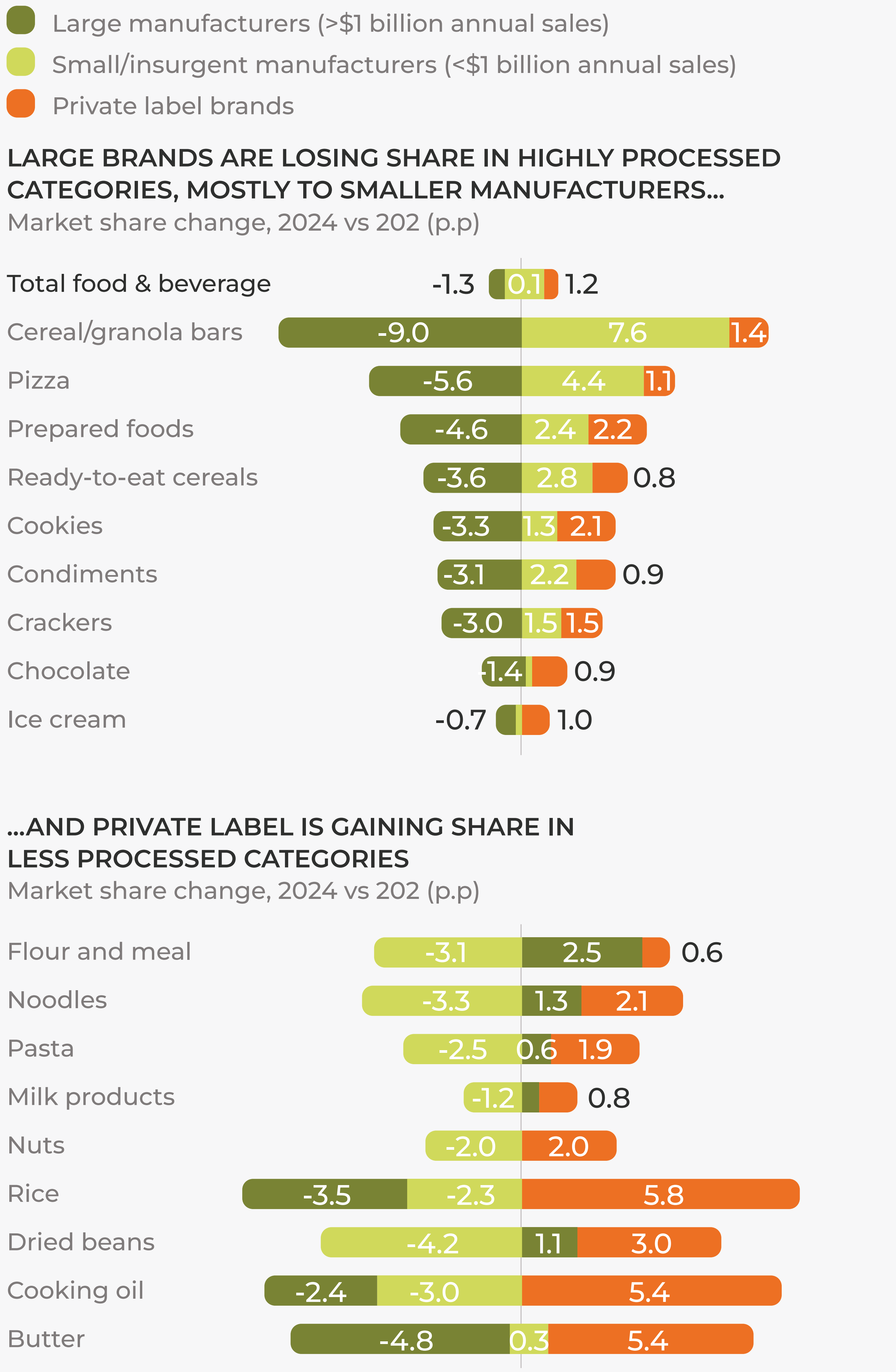
the most significant power shift in the food industry since the rise of supermarket chains in the mid-20th century.

The fundamental issue is cultural relevance. Legacy brands built their empires on mass market appeal and broad distribution, but today's consumers, particularly Gen Z and millennials, value authenticity, transparency, and cultural connection. When 84% of Gen Z actively try social media food trends and 70% identify TikTok as their primary platform for food recommendations, traditional marketing approaches become less effective.[1]

THE CELEBRITY PLATFORM BRAND REVOLUTION

Enter celebrity platform brands, a new category of food companies that understand how to leverage the modern attention economy. "We don't just need shelf space at a big retailer, we need a microphone to tell the story of what it means to be a clean, organic label," explains Sameer Mehta, CEO of Smash Kitchen, the condiment brand backed by rising Hollywood star Glen Powell.

CATEGORY SHARE IS SHIFTING FROM LARGE, ESTABLISHED BRANDS TO SMALLER MANUFACTURERS



Source: Nielson data; Babak Ravandi et al., "Prevalence of processed foods in major US grocery stores," Nature Food, January 13, 2025; BCG analysis.

This insight captures the fundamental difference between legacy and platform brands. Traditional companies spent decades building distribution networks and manufacturing scale; platform brands start with an audience and authentic storytelling, then build backward to product and distribution. This success formula is deceptively simple but incredibly difficult for legacy brands to replicate.

The power of celebrity platform brands lies in their ability to solve the most expensive problem in modern marketing: attention. Traditional CPG companies spend billions annually trying to break through the noise and reach consumers, but celebrity founders start with ready-made audiences who are already emotionally invested in their success. This represents a fundamental reordering of the startup equation; instead of product-market fit, successful platform brands achieve audience-product fit first.

As cited in our 2025 Trend Report, TikTok has become the primary discovery mechanism for food trends, with the platform driving everything from cottage cheese's resurgence as protein ice cream to cucumber salads garnering millions of views. When traditional brands try to participate in these conversations, they often feel inauthentic because they're inserting themselves into organic cultural moments rather than creating them. The lesson here: you cannot fabricate relevance.

THE INSURGENT BRAND PHENOMENON

Celebrity platform brands are part of a broader category that Bain & Company calls "insurgent brands," companies that generate more than $25 million in annual revenue while growing more than ten times their category's average growth rate. These brands represent less than 2% of market share in their categories but captured nearly 39% of incremental category growth in 2024, compared to just 17% in 2023.[3]

The numbers tell the story of a fundamental market disruption. In the food category specifically, insurgent brands accounted for less than 1% of market share but captured more than 27% of the growth despite massive scale disadvantages. This isn't a temporary phenomenon; it represents a structural shift in how CPG operates.[4]

What makes these brands so effective is their ability to identify and serve specific consumer needs that legacy brands either ignore or address inadequately. Legacy brands, optimized for mass market appeal and focused on protecting existing margins, often can't justify the premium positioning or niche targeting that drives insurgent success. Companies like Once Upon A Farm revolutionized baby food with cold-pressed organic options, Goodles reimagined boxed mac and cheese with protein and hidden vegetables, and Chomps transformed meat snacks with grass-fed, sugar-free jerky—all in categories where established players had decades to innovate but didn't.

▶ HAPPENING NOW:

SMASH KITCHEN FROM GLEN POWELL IS A TOP GUN AMONG BRANDS

The archetype of this new model has to be Glen Powell's Smash Kitchen. The products themselves, organic ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise, and barbecue sauce, are not particularly innovative, even compared to their legacy competitors. What sets them apart is Powell's enormous social media platform and his authentic connection to the product. Launched in April 2025 exclusively at Walmart, the brand generated more than $10 million in sales within six months and is on track to exceed $20 million by year-end.[2]

Glen Powell, Smash Kitchen (Photo Credit: Andrew Montgomery)

THE INNOVATION DEFICIT CRISIS

The decline of legacy brands isn't just about marketing; it is a reflection of a deeper innovation crisis within the traditional CPG industry. According to Mintel data, the rate of new product introductions in food and beverage has dropped almost 50% globally since 2007.[5] This innovation deficit creates opportunities for nimble startups that can test ideas quickly, pivot based on consumer feedback, and launch products in months, leveraging direct-to-consumer channels and social media feedback to iterate products in real time.

The committee-based innovation process at large food companies has become a liability in fast-moving markets. Every new product idea must survive multiple stage gates that can stretch for years. This speed differential has become a decisive competitive advantage. While established companies debate and deliberate, startups are testing, learning, and scaling. The most successful insurgent brands combine rapid product development with authentic storytelling and targeted distribution, creating a formula that legacy brands find difficult to counter.

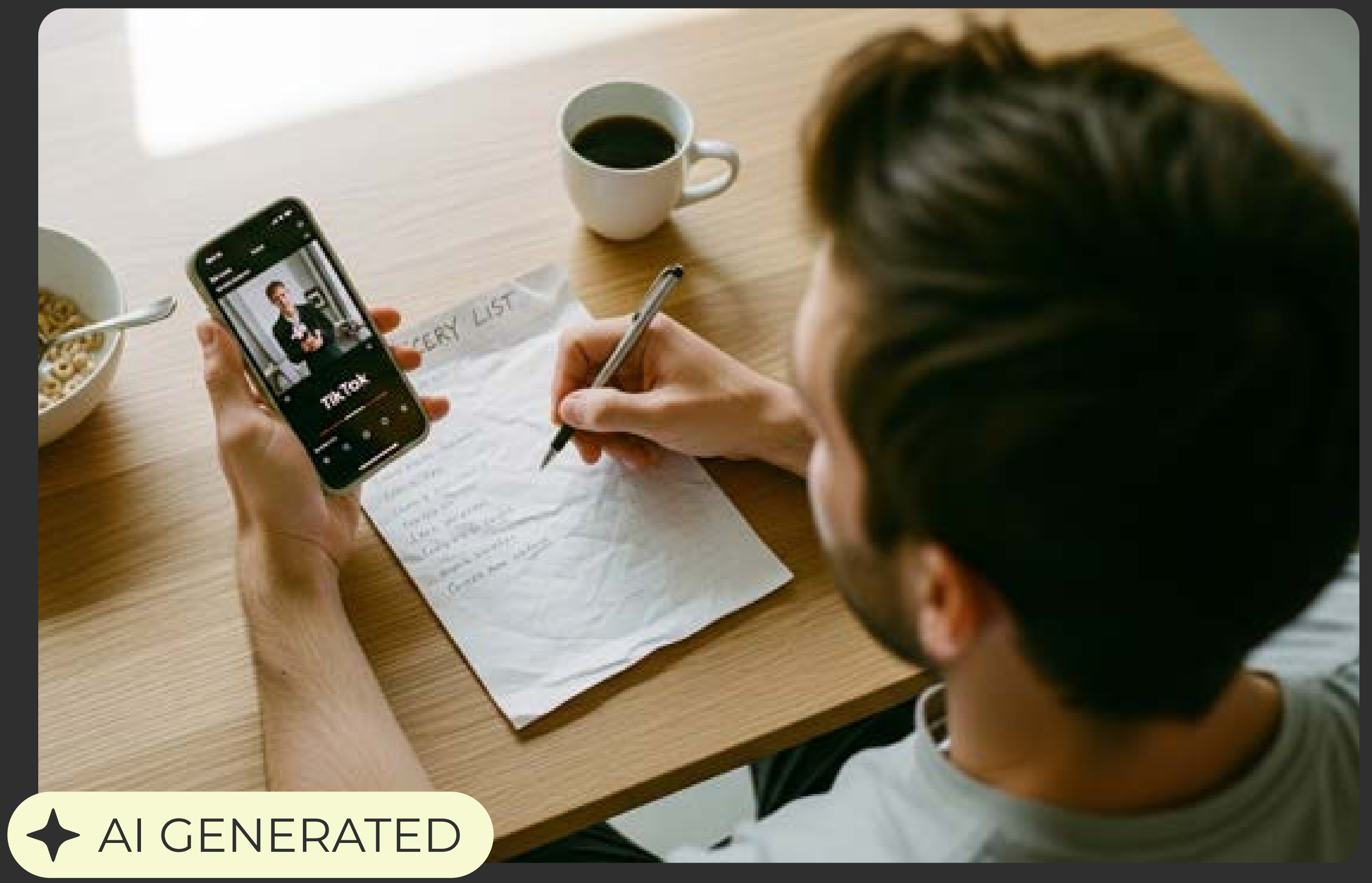
The decline of legacy brands and the rise of celebrity platform brands represents more than a market trend—it's a fundamental restructuring of power in the food industry. Consumers know what they want, and brands can no longer respond with, "Fine, but this is what you're getting instead." Companies that recognize this shift and adapt accordingly will thrive, while those clinging to outdated approaches risk joining Del Monte in the corporate graveyard of once-mighty brands that failed to listen and evolve.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

FOR FOOD BRANDS:

Adopt a growth-hacking mindset by leveraging digital channels to test new concepts quickly and cheaply, gathering direct consumer feedback before committing to large-scale production.

Recognize that the “microphone” of social media is as valuable as retail shelf space, and get those algorithms working for you. Focus on creating authentic, engaging, and unpolished content for platforms like TikTok to drive real-time discovery and sales.



FOR RESTAURANTS:

Chefs were the original food influencers. Encourage culinary leaders to act as digital creators and get those faces and personalities in front of your customers. Consumers increasingly trust behind-the-scenes transparency over polished campaigns.

You can also reverse that process by developing limited-run “collab menus” with influencers to drive buzz and trial through their existing social media reach.

FOR RETAILERS:

Trends don’t wait for category management planning cycles—grocers need to be more agile in their processes to keep up with the speed of change. Integrate social-first campaigns into your Retail Media Networks (RMN). The goal is shoppable storytelling, not just shelf space.

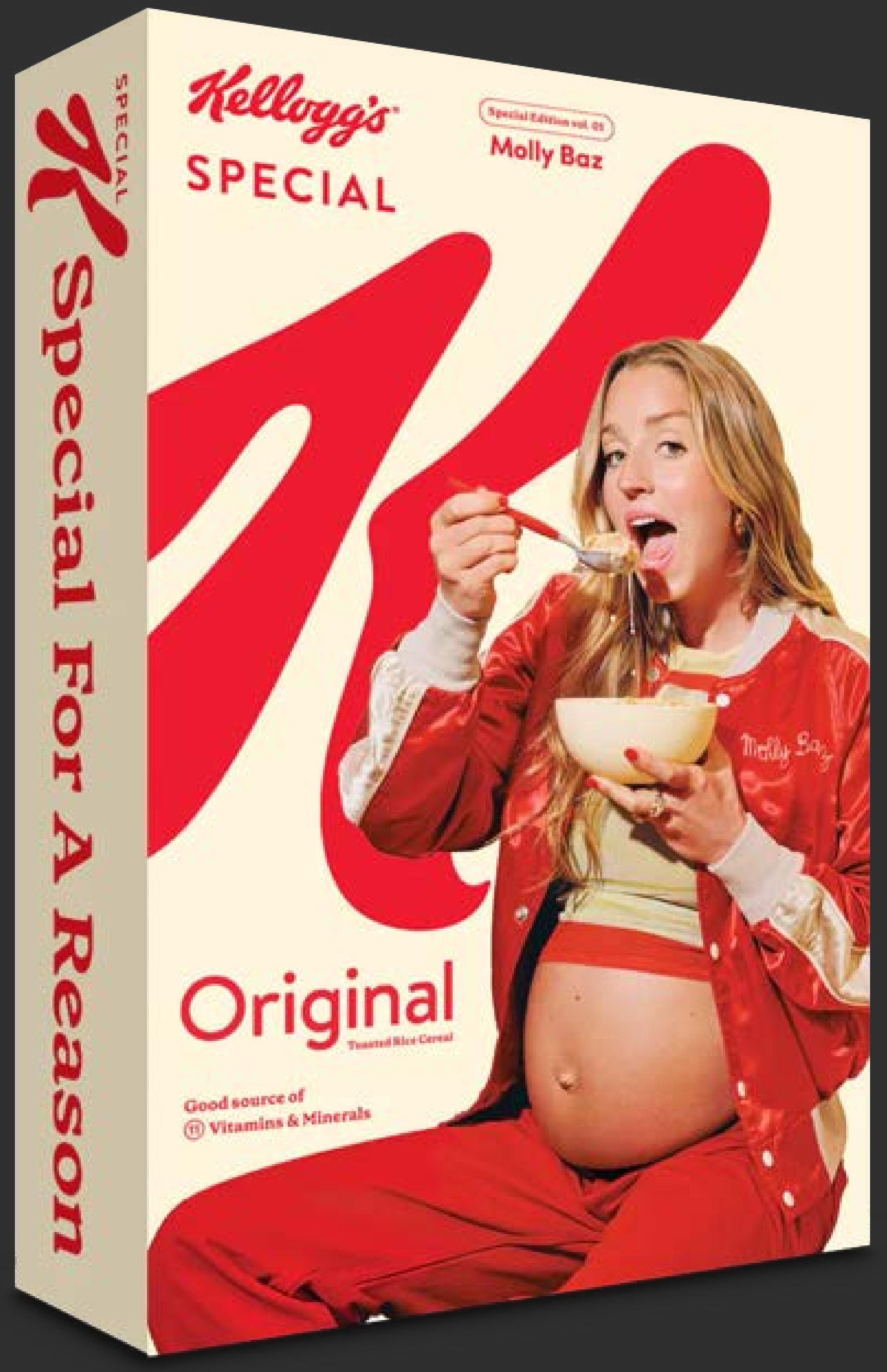


Image Source: Molly Baz Special K Collab, Kellogs Store

1. Food & Beverage Magazine, Why 84% of Gen Z Are Trying Social Media Food Trends, 2025
2. Fast Company, Glen Powell just pulled off his hardest stunt ever: Successfully launching his Smash Kitchen brand in Walmart, October 2025
3. Bain & Company, Insurgent Brands Steal the Spotlight in 2025, March 2025
4. Bain & Company, Insurgent Brands Steal the Spotlight in 2025, March 2025
5. Mintel, Global New Products Database

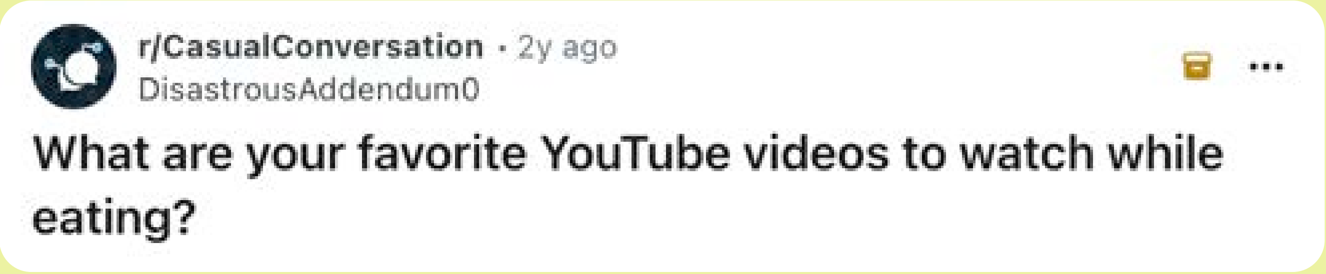
HUNGRY HUMANS WANTED: FOOD AS THE CURE FOR THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC

In a world where AI has stripped the "social" from social media and human interaction feels increasingly transactional, food is emerging as our most potent antidote to isolation. The U.S. Surgeon General has declared loneliness a global health threat equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.[1] That is a powerful, thought-provoking declaration.

THE DEATH OF HUMAN RITUAL IN THE AGE OF AI

There's no doubt AI is entertaining, or at least engrossing, but it's not social. Connection is the number one human need, and food is a primary way we connect. We willingly participate in contactless living—ordering food in, streaming entertainment on our screens, exercising, and even working from home—yet we're social beings at our core, and we need interactivity with our fellow human beings.

The statistics paint a sobering picture: between 2003 and 2024, time spent attending or hosting social events declined by 50%, creating what researcher Derek Thompson calls "The Anti-Social Century."[2] We live in the most isolated period in recorded history, spending more time alone than any previous generation. The proliferation of AI companions and digital relationships has created a dangerous illusion of connection without the messy vulnerability that defines authentic human bonds.



Traditional workplace rituals have vanished in our rush toward down-to-brass-tacks online meetings and efficiency. The casual coffee conversation before a meeting, the spontaneous kitchen encounters, the peripheral connections with friendly cashiers who make our day better—these micro-moments of human contact are being eliminated in favour of frictionless digital interactions. We don't even have to pay for our food orders at the door anymore, eradicating the quick exchange of greetings and gratitude with the delivery person. Yet these seemingly insignificant exchanges form the foundation of social well-being and community belonging.

▶ HAPPENING NOW:

VICES ARE BECOMING SOLO ACTIVITIES

We've observed for years now that alcohol consumption is declining, especially among younger generations. Though we can't prove a causal relationship, marijuana use is on the rise. And while there are many places you can go to share a drink with friends (and strangers), there are few where you can get high together. It's largely a solitary activity enjoyed at home. Couple that with the rise of online betting, meaning no need to go to the track or a casino, and we see that time spent indulging our vices is becoming increasingly solitary. Are you likely to go out for food if you're consuming edibles at home and checking on your sports betting picks? It's a phenomenon that's surely contributing to the appeal of food and shopping apps.

THE MISSING PILLAR OF LONGEVITY: SOCIAL CONNECTION

`Eating for Longevity` was one of our 2025 trends. But what Bryan Johnson's #Don'tDie movement and Blue Zone diets undervalue is the importance of social connection in longevity. Johnson's extreme biohacking protocol, with its rigid calorie counting and social isolation in pursuit of optimal biomarkers, represents a fundamental misunderstanding of what drives longevity. His approach treats the body as a machine to be optimized rather than part of a social ecosystem that requires nurturing relationships for true vitality.

Blue Zones research consistently shows that social connections are as critical to longevity as diet and exercise. In Okinawa, the concept of moai, lifelong circles of friends providing mutual support, contributes significantly to the region's exceptional longevity rates. Sardinian centenarians live embedded in multigenerational communities where aging is celebrated rather than feared, providing continuous social support and purpose throughout life.

Studies demonstrate that people with strong social networks (real ones, not online) have a 50% greater chance of longevity than those with fewer ties. The Harvard Study of Adult Development, spanning over 80 years, found that relationship quality, not wealth, fame, or individual health metrics, was the strongest predictor of life satisfaction and longevity.[3]

THE PET-HUMAN CONNECTION: WHEN ANIMALS BECOME FAMILY

The pet humanization trend that we explored in our 2022 trend "What's Good for Me is Good for Fido," recognized the importance of pets as emotional support systems and social catalysts. It also reflects how we seek and maintain emotional connections in our increasingly isolated lives.

Eighty per cent of pet owners say having a pet makes them feel less lonely, while 54% report that their pets help foster connections with other people.[4] During COVID-19, when human social networks collapsed, pet relationships became even more critical for psychological survival.

Food-centred pet experiences extend this principle, creating opportunities for nurturing and ritual that fulfill fundamental psychological needs. But the pet humanization trend extends far beyond individual comfort to how we think about family, caregiving, and social structure. Pet food companies now develop products that mirror human nutrition trends, recognizing that pet care has become an extension of human self-care.

THE RESTORATIVE POWER OF MICRO-CONNECTIONS

The solution to our loneliness epidemic lies, in part, not in grand gestures but in micro-connections, brief but meaningful interactions that accumulate into social well-being. The Dutch supermarket chain Jumbo's "slow checkout lanes" provide a perfect example of how small design changes can create profound human impact. These *Kletskassa* or "chat checkout" lanes encourage customers and cashiers to engage in unhurried conversation, explicitly prioritizing human connection over efficiency.

The results speak for themselves: Jumbo has expanded slow checkout lanes to nearly 200 locations after overwhelmingly positive customer response. Nearly half of Dutch adults over 75 experience at least moderate loneliness, and these simple interactions provide critical social contact for isolated community members.[5] Jumbo's cashiers are trained to recognize signs of loneliness and engage in appropriate conversation, transforming routine transactions into therapeutic encounters. The takeaway? Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name.

THE FUTURE OF FOOD AS SOCIAL MEDICINE

Food is a primary way we connect as a species, starting way back with hunter/gatherer tribes to ceremonial feasts and all the way through the advent of restaurants and even office lunch rooms. The convergence of the loneliness epidemic and AI's displacement of human interaction creates unprecedented opportunities for brands and organizations to become facilitators of genuine connection in a world where attention, authenticity, and human warmth have become scarce and valuable commodities.

Successful food brands of the next decade will be those that understand their role as social catalysts rather than mere nutrition providers. Restaurants that create genuine community experiences, retailers that foster human interaction, and food companies that facilitate shared moments will capture loyalty from connection-starved consumers. Shared food provides so much more than just physical sustenance; it opens a space for connection that no algorithm can replicate. The brands that recognize this opportunity will build the most enduring relationships with consumers who increasingly hunger for real human connection in an artificial world.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

FOR FOOD BRANDS:

Consider packaging that includes conversation starters or shared activity suggestions that break social ice naturally.

Develop pet-inclusive food experiences that acknowledge the consumers who consider pets family members. Create products or experiences that allow people to share food moments with their animal companions, recognizing pets as legitimate social relationships rather than accessories.

Position your brand as a social catalyst by creating opportunities for consumers to connect around your products. Host community events, facilitate user-generated content sharing, and design experiences that bring strangers together through food appreciation.

FOR RESTAURANTS:

Host regular community events like supper clubs, cooking classes, or “Dinner with Strangers” gatherings that bring people together intentionally. These events should prioritize genuine connection over entertainment or performance, creating space for authentic conversation.

FOR RETAILERS:

Create community spaces within stores that encourage lingering and social interaction, changing your supermarket into the market square. Coffee corners, seating areas, or sampling stations can transform shopping from transaction to social experience, building customer loyalty through relationship rather than convenience.

Implement "slow checkout" lanes inspired by Jumbo's success, where cashiers are trained and empowered to engage in genuine conversation with customers who desire human interaction over speed. This could be an especially big draw if you know the demographics of a store's vicinity skews towards seniors.

Host micro-connection events like cooking demonstrations, food tastings, or potluck-style gatherings that bring customers together around shared food interests, creating community around your retail location.

FOR AGRI-FOOD:

Create community partnerships by collaborating with local food organizations, schools, and restaurants on farm-to-table initiatives or "meet your grower" events to rebuild public trust and meaningful connection.

Highlight farming practices and crops that support community wellbeing (such as pollinator strips, cover cropping, or school garden support) to appeal to values-driven consumers and institutional buyers.

Food security is a major social issue. Participate in food rescue networks like Second Harvest that provide fresh produce to community food programs, helping combat both food waste and loneliness.

1 U.S. Surgeon General, Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation, 2023

2. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey, June 2025

3. Harvard University, The Study of Adult Development

4. Habri, Social Isolation & Loneliness, October 2021

5. Statistics Netherlands et al., Health Monitor Adults and the Elderly, 2024

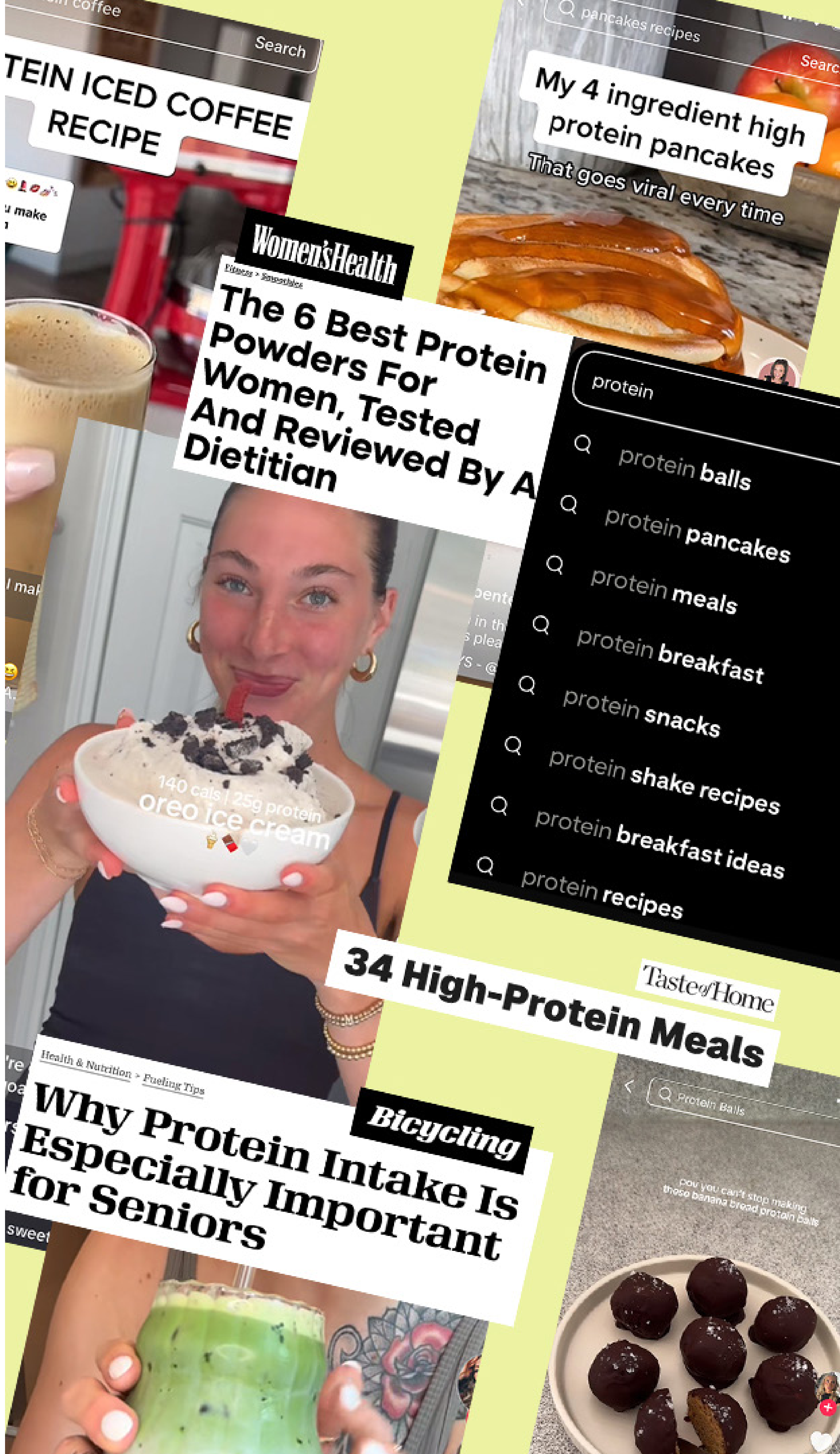
MAXED OUT ON MAXXING: SINGLE-NUTRIENT FOCUS GIVES WAY TO FUNCTIONAL BALANCE

While protein dominated the wellness conversation for years and fibre has recently surged through social media trends like “fibermaxxing,” 2026 and beyond will mark the emergence of a more sophisticated approach: nutrient balance. Consumers are moving beyond the reductive “maximize this, minimize that” mentality and single-nutrient fixation, toward understanding food as a complex orchestra of interconnected nutrients that work in harmony with our equally complex bodies to optimize wellness, performance, and longevity. One-trick nutritional ponies are about to ride into the sunset.

“CAN I GET THAT WITHOUT PROTEIN?”

The proteinization of everything created a generation of health-conscious consumers fixated on hitting arbitrary protein targets, often at the expense of other essential nutrients. We have reached ‘peak-protein’ when it’s added to everything from water to popcorn and even cold foam for your coffee.

The “fibermaxxing” trend that exploded across TikTok in 2024–2025 began as another social media health hack, with users sharing colourful bowls packed with chia seeds, berries, and high-fibre foods. But it has matured into genuine nutritional wisdom. Unlike previous trends that



promoted extreme approaches, fibermaxxing inadvertently taught consumers to think about nutrients as building blocks rather than magical bullets.

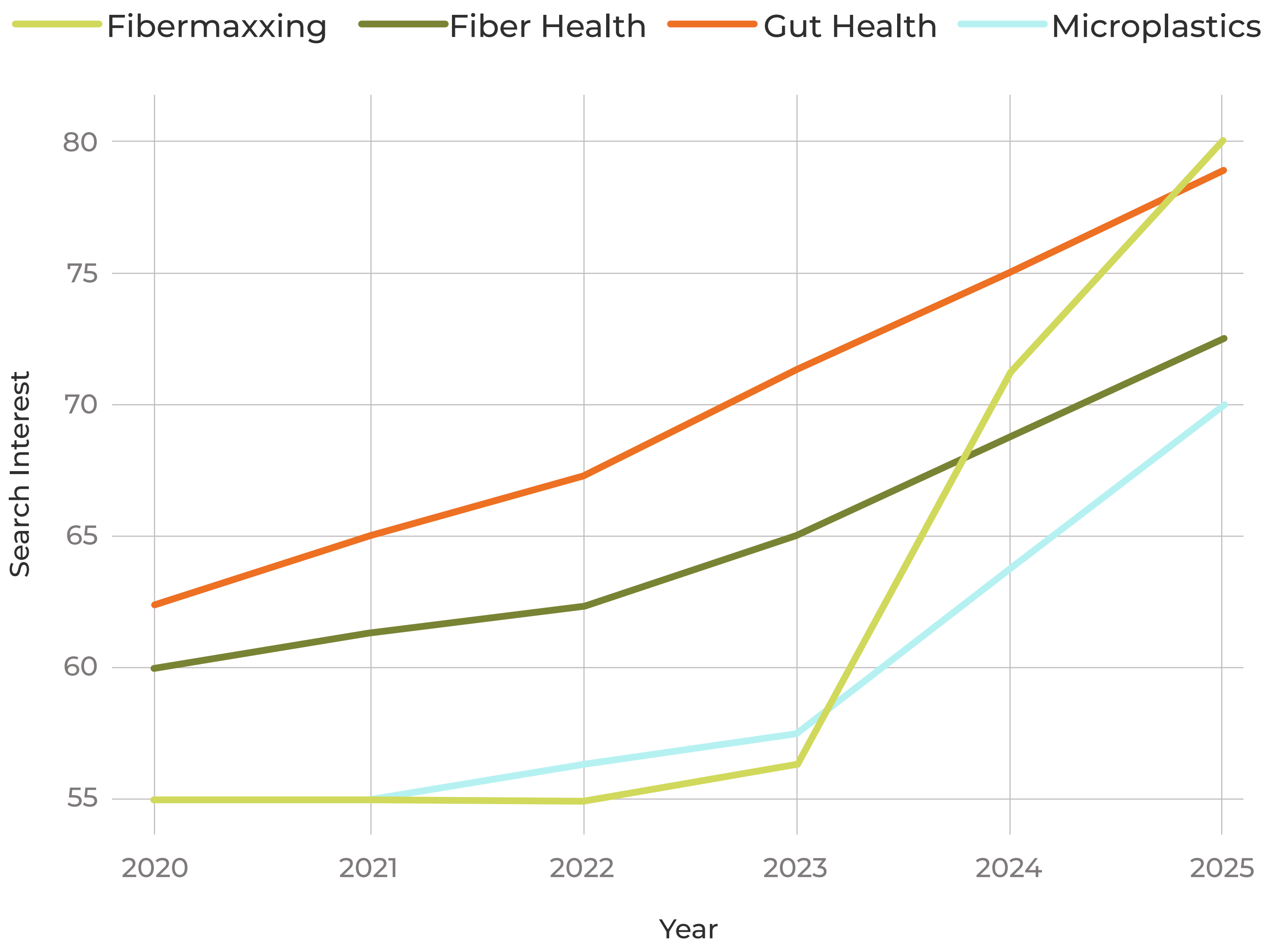
Research consistently shows that the most successful dietary interventions combine protein and fibre rather than going all in on either alone. A 2024 study in Obesity Science & Practice found that participants who increased protein and fibre intake while reducing calories achieved significantly greater weight loss than those focusing on protein alone.[1] The Mediterranean Diet's enduring success stems from this principle; it naturally provides balanced ratios of protein, fibre, healthy fats, and micronutrients without requiring conscious optimization.

THE MICROPLASTIC DEFENSE REVOLUTION

Perhaps no development better illustrates the shift toward nutrient balance than the emerging role of fibre as protection against microplastics. Recent research suggests that dietary fibre, particularly insoluble varieties like wheat bran, can physically bind microplastic particles in the digestive tract, promoting their elimination before absorption into systemic circulation.

This discovery transforms fibre from a simple digestive aid into nutritional armour against modern environmental threats. The protective mechanism works through multiple pathways: fibre strengthens the gut barrier, supports beneficial bacteria that outcompete harmful microbes, and physically adsorbs toxic chemicals that often accompany microplastic particles.[2]

THE FIBRE RENAISSANCE



Source: amazonaws

The implications extend far beyond individual health. As microplastics have infiltrated virtually every corner of the food system, from seafood to fruits, vegetables, bottled water, and even our non-stick cooking pans, fibre represents one of the few accessible interventions consumers can control. This could be an entirely new angle for fibre marketing.

KILLER PROTEIN BAR INGREDIENTS: Chocolate Protein Dough (75%) (Protein Blend (Hydrolysed Whey Protein (Hydrolysed Whey Protein Isolate (MILK), Sunflower Lecithin), Hydrolysed Collagen, Caseinate Calcium (MILK)) (31%), Maltitol Syrup, Polydextrose, Oligofructose, Water, Fructo-oligosaccharides, Hydrogenated Palm Kernel Oil, Maltodextrin, Cocoa Powder (2.5%), Multivitamin Complex (Calcium Carbonate, Maltodextrin, Magnesium Oxide, Vitamin C (Ascorbic Acid), Citrus Bioflavonoids (35% Hesperidin), Green Tea Extract (95% Polyphenols), Choline Bitartrate, Grape Seed Extract (95% Polyphenols), Lutein (Marigold Flower Extract), Iron (Ferrous Sulphate), Lycopene (Tomato Extract), Vitamin E (DL-Alpha Tocopherol Acetate), Anti-Caking Agent (Silicon Dioxide), Inositol, Quercetin, Zinc Oxide, Niacin (Nicotinamide), Vitamin D3 Preparation (Maltodextrin, Starch, Sucrose, Cholecalciferol), Coenzyme Q10, Pantothenic Acid (Calcium Pantothenate), Black Pepper Extract (95% Piperine), Vitamin A Preparation (Maltodextrin, Dextrin, Modified Starch, Vitamin A Acetate Oil, DL-Alpha Tocopherol), Lactobacillus Acidophilus, Vitamin K (Phylloquinone), Vitamin B6 (Pyridoxine HCl), Thiamin, Riboflavin, Manganese Sulphate, Folic Acid, Chromium Chloride, Copper Sulphate, Selenium (Sodium Selenite), Biotin, Vitamin B12 (Cyanocobalamin), Glycerol, Potassium Chloride, Multivitamin Complex (Calcium Citrate Malate Granular, Buffered Magnesium Citrate, Vitamin C (Ascorbic Acid), Ferrous (Iron II) Bisglycinate Chelate, Zinc Citrate Dihydrate, Natural Vitamin E (D-Alpha-Tocopheryl Acetate), Vitamin B3 (Nicotinamide), L-Selenomethionine, Vitamin A Acetate (Retinol), Vitamin B5 (Calcium Pantothenate), Vitamin K2 Menaquinone-7 (MK7), Manganese Sulphate, Beta Carotene, Copper Sulphate Anhydrous, Vitamin B12 (Methylcobalamin), Vitamin B6 ('P5P' Pyridoxal-5-Phosphate Monohydrate), Vitamin D2 Ergocalciferol, Vitamin B2 (Riboflavin), Vitamin B1 (Thiamine HCL), Chromium Picolinate, Vitamin B9 (L-5-MTHF), Potassium Iodide, Sodium Molybdate, Vitamin B7 (Biotin)), Flax Seed Oil, Sweetener: Xylitol, Preservative: Sodium Benzoate, Carboxymethylcellulose, Emulsifier: Xanthan Gum, Sunflower Lecithin, Sweetener: Aspartame, Sucralose), Orange Spread (12%) (Vanilla Flavour Frosting(Sugar, Vegetable Oils (Palm, Rapeseed), Water, Humectant (Sorbitol Syrup), Skimmed MILK Powder, Cream Cheese Powder (MILK) 3.5%, Natural Flavouring, Acid (Citric Acid), Salt, Emulsifier (E435), Preservative (Potassium Sorbate)), SOYA Protein Isolate, Maltitol Syrup, Colour: Annatto [E160b(ii), Maltodextrin], Orange Oil (0.1%)), Dark Chocolate Flavour Coating (10%) (Sugar, Palm Oil, Fat Reduced Cocoa Powder (14%), Emulsifier: SOYA Lecithin, Polyglycerol Polyricinoleate), SOY Crispies (SOYA Protein Isolate, Tapioca Starch, Salt), Orange Crunchies (0.3%) (Orange, Sucrose, Maize Starch)

▶ HAPPENING NOW:

KILLER BAR TAKES NUTRIENT MAXXING TO THE EXTREME

There's nothing quite like taking things to an absurd level to drive home a point. Well, it doesn't get much more absurd than Killer bar, a new product out of the U.K. It's a real protein bar, and the creator claims it's delicious. He also begs you not to eat it. Why? Because it is so densely packed with ingredients commonly found in ultra-processed foods that it's actually bad for you. It claims over 200 health and nutritional benefits, with 19 grams of protein. It's high in fibre and low in salt. And it can cause diarrhoea and increase your risk of "cancer, stroke, and early death." Of course, its purpose is to draw attention to the fact that while some ultra-processed foods (UPFs) may correctly claim a variety of health benefits, they may actually be terrible for you. Ultimately, the point is, while governments need to step up on regulating UPFs, consumers need to pay more attention to labels and choose whole foods more often.

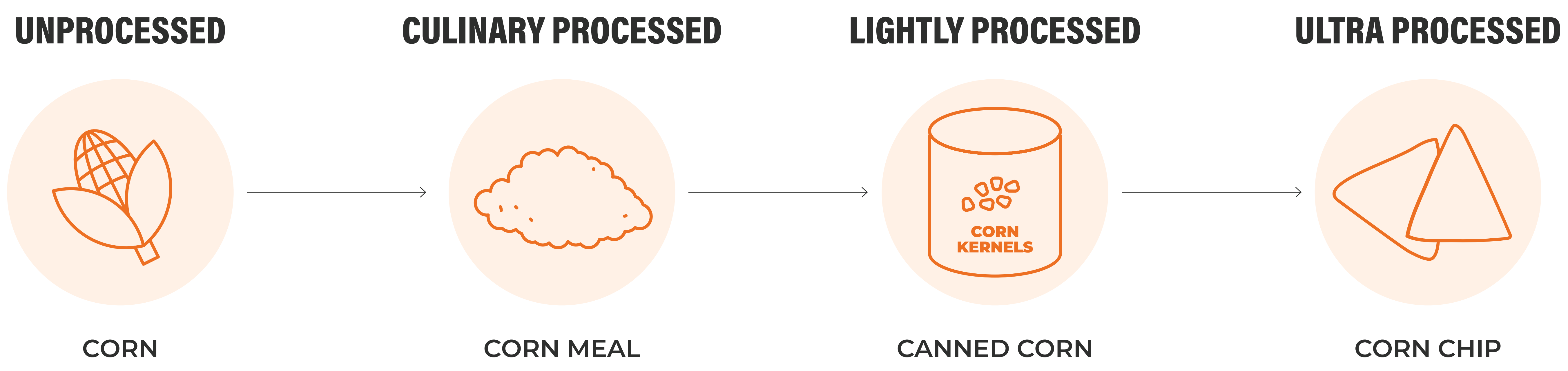
THE GUT HEALTH HUB PHENOMENON

The convergence of fibre science, microbiome research, and functional nutrition has created what industry analysts call the "gut health hub," a recognition that digestive wellness serves as the foundation for systemic health. (And if you look back, you'll see "gut health" crops up frequently in our Trend Reports.) Nearly 59% of global consumers now view gut health as critical for entire-body wellness, driving demand for products that support microbiome diversity rather than simply adding single nutrients.[3]

This shift has major implications for product development. Rather than the traditional approach of fortifying foods with isolated nutrients, like adding protein to pasta, calcium to orange juice, or vitamins to breakfast cereals, the gut health hub approach recognizes that nutrients work best in their natural matrices, surrounded by cofactors, enzymes, and complementary compounds that enhance bioavailability and function. The most successful new products will combine multiple functional benefits rather than highlighting single nutrients. Sounds a lot like the old saw, "eat a balanced diet," something our grandparents likely did without being told to.

FUNCTIONAL FOOD

Many of Canadian legacy brand Sprague Cannery's products deliver protein and fibre using only simple, organic, plant-based ingredients you could find in a grocery store.



THE END OF ULTRA-PROCESSED PROTEIN

The proteinization of everything inadvertently created a slew of UPFs masquerading as health products. Protein bars packed with artificial ingredients and synthetic protein powders became dietary staples for health-conscious consumers who prioritized macronutrient targets over food quality. The fibre gap, with 94% of Americans failing to meet daily fibre recommendations, stems partially from replacing whole foods with processed alternatives that strip away naturally occurring fibre and micronutrients.[4]

The nutrient balance approach emphasizes whole food sources that naturally provide balanced nutrition; for example, legumes like lentils, chickpeas, and black beans deliver both high-quality protein (8–15 grams per half cup) and significant fibre (4–8 grams per serving), along with essential micronutrients like folate, iron, and potassium. These foods represent the original functional ingredients versus the ultra-processed faux meats we've referenced in previous trend reports. This category has seen remarkable change and evolution over the many years we've covered it; it's easy to look back and see some of the roots of rebellion starting here.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

FOR FOOD BRANDS:

Develop combination products that naturally pair protein and fibre rather than fortifying single nutrients.

Position fibre as protective nutrition against modern environmental challenges like microplastics. Marketing that emphasizes fibre's role as "nutritional armour" could resonate with consumers seeking proactive health solutions.

Focus on digestive comfort and gradual fibre introduction. Products that help consumers increase fibre intake slowly, through blended formulations or portion-controlled options, address the primary barrier to fibre adoption: digestive discomfort from rapid dietary changes. It also supports GLP-1 users and those trying to boost their GLP-1 naturally. (For more on that, see last year's trend, `Supporting the GLP-1 Journey`.)

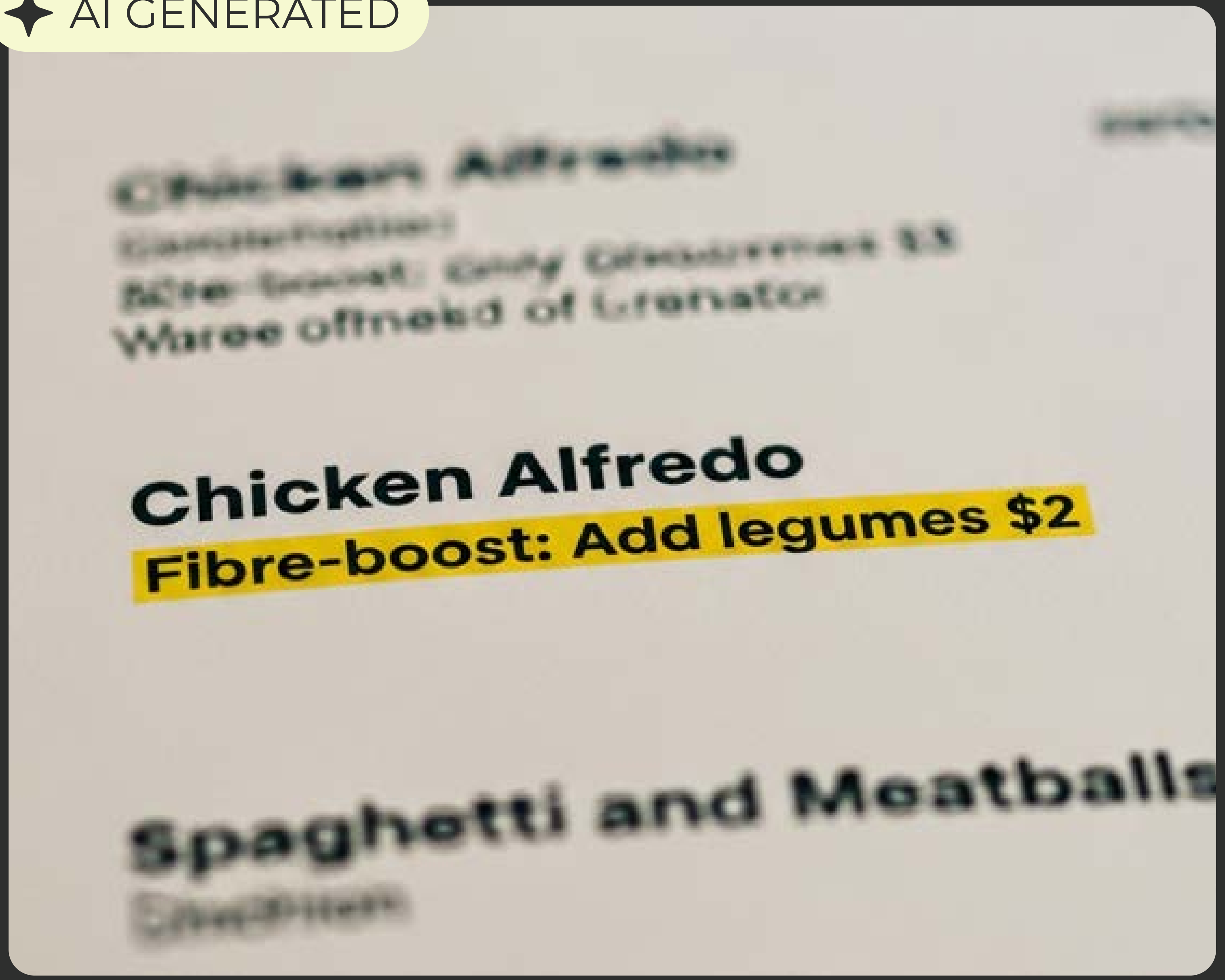
AI GENERATED

FOR RESTAURANTS AND FOODSERVICE:

Design menus around naturally balanced dishes that combine protein, fibre, and healthy fats. Mediterranean grain bowls, Asian-inspired vegetable and protein combinations, and Latin American bean-based dishes naturally achieve nutrient balance.

Offer "fibre-friendly" modifications to popular dishes by adding legumes to pasta, incorporating seeds into salads, or providing whole-grain alternatives that enhance rather than compromise flavour and satisfaction.

AI GENERATED



FOR RETAILERS:

Develop private label products that emphasize natural nutrient combinations rather than single-nutrient fortification.

Provide educational materials that help shoppers understand how to build balanced meals without complex calculations. Simple guides showing fibre-protein combinations or microplastic-protective eating patterns can differentiate your store as a frictionless health destination.

FOR AGRI-FOOD:

Know your “audience” and grow for gut health. Shift your seed selection toward varieties high in both fibre and protein, like ancient grains or specialty pulses, to address consumer interest in balanced nutrition and digestive health.

When marketing to brands and processors, emphasize how your regenerative practices not only boost soil and crop health, but can translate into more nutrient-rich, minimally processed foods.

Join forces with processors, universities, and food brands on trials that tie agronomic practices or input choices to food nutrient density, positioning your products as “functional” from the ground up.

FOR SUPPLEMENT COMPANIES:

Create products that bridge the gap between whole foods and supplements, incorporating naturally occurring fibre sources like psyllium and inulin that provide multiple functional benefits beyond simple fibre content.

1. Mindy H. Lee et al., Successful dietary changes correlate with weight-loss outcomes in a new dietary weight-loss program, May 2024
2. Huiping Wang et al., Fighting microplastics: The role of dietary fibers in protecting health, June 2024
3. Innova Market Insights, Food Ingredients First, October 2025
4. National Library of Medicine, The Importance of Dietary Fibre for Metabolic Health, April 2023

SOWING SEEDS OF DOUBT: THE POLARIZATION AND POLITICIZATION OF THE FOOD SYSTEM

The chasm between science-based evidence and values-based proclamations about the food system is widening into a cultural and political battleground. Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) have emerged as both scapegoat and legitimate health issue, and the Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) movement has elevated food system distrust to the federal policy level.

As California becomes the first jurisdiction globally to legally define and ban ultra-processed foods from schools, the gulf between political rhetoric and policy action reveals a deeper crisis: consumers are losing faith in both food companies and the government agencies meant to protect them.

The question isn't whether UPFs deserve scrutiny; it's whether we can rebuild trust in food systems through evidence-based solutions rather than "influencer logic" policymaking.

The May 2025 MAHA Commission report painted a damning picture of American children's health, noting that nearly 70% of their calories come from ultra-processed foods and linking this to skyrocketing rates of diabetes, obesity, and mental health disorders.[1]

Image Source: Luke Armstrong, LinkedIn

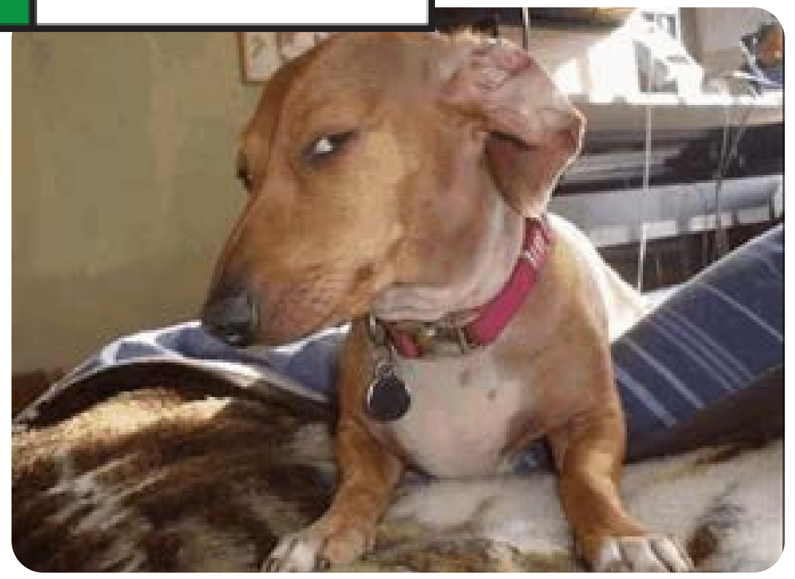
THE UPF DEFINITION DILEMMA

What's the definition of an 'ultra-processed food'? Carlos Monteiro's 2009 NOVA classification system, which coined the term "ultra-processed," was designed to warn against the increasing consumption of prepackaged foods in Brazil.

However, applying this broad categorization to food systems creates significant complications. Most food you can buy that wasn't just caught, picked, or harvested has some level of processing. The NOVA system's reliance on industrial processing as the primary criterion means that nutritious foods like tofu, whole grain bread, and yogurt often fall into the same "ultra-processed" category as sodas and candy. This nuance is lost in political messaging that treats all processing as harmful. The result is consumer confusion and a loss of trust in food manufacturers.

The Generally Recognized as Safe (GRAS) designation, established in the U.S. in 1958, also faces unprecedented scrutiny. The GRAS system allows substances with established safety records to be used in food without specific FDA approval, streamlining innovation while maintaining safety standards. The potential elimination or severe restriction of GRAS could dramatically slow food innovation and increase costs without necessarily improving consumer safety.

GRAS GENERALLY RECOGNIZED AS SAFE



THE REALITY BEHIND FOOD SYSTEM DISTRUST

The erosion of trust in food systems reflects broader societal trends: declining faith in expertise, polarization of scientific issues, and the rise of "influencer logic" in policy decisions. Social media algorithms amplify dramatic claims about food dangers while suppressing nuanced scientific discussions, creating an information ecosystem that rewards sensationalism over accuracy.

THE TRUST EROSION: EVIDENCE OF DECLINING CONSUMER CONFIDENCE

The MAHA movement has coincided with a dramatic erosion of consumer trust in both food companies and government regulators, creating unprecedented challenges for the food industry. The International Food Information Council's 2025 survey reveals even steeper declines; overall confidence dropped from 78% in 2012 to just 55% in 2025.[2] Growing concerns about food recalls, negative media coverage, and a perceived lack of transparency among food manufacturers have driven this shift.

This drop in trust has migrated north of the border, as shown by the latest research from the Canadian Center for Food Integrity (CCFI). Incredibly, Canadians now trust food from other countries more than they do imports from the United States.

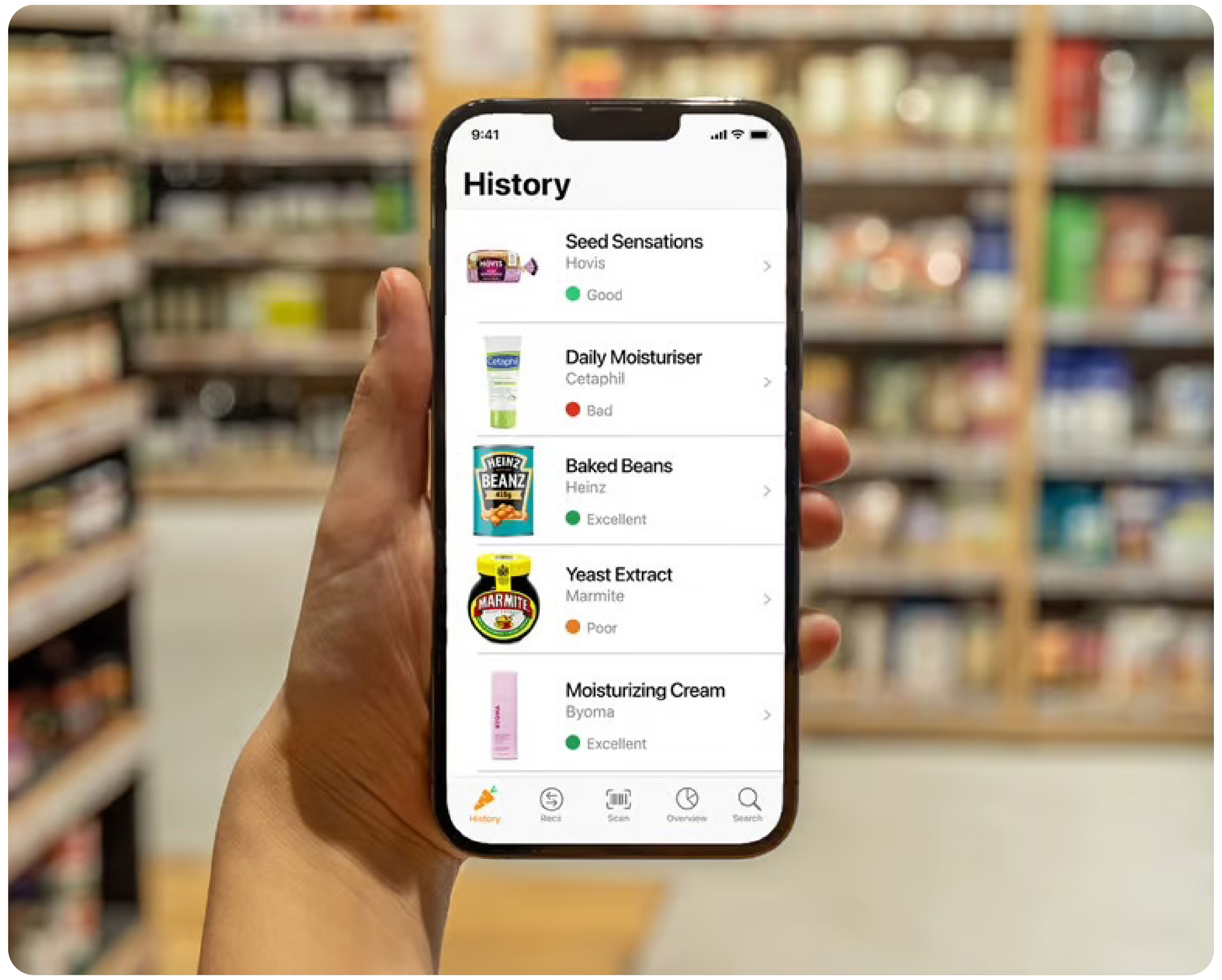


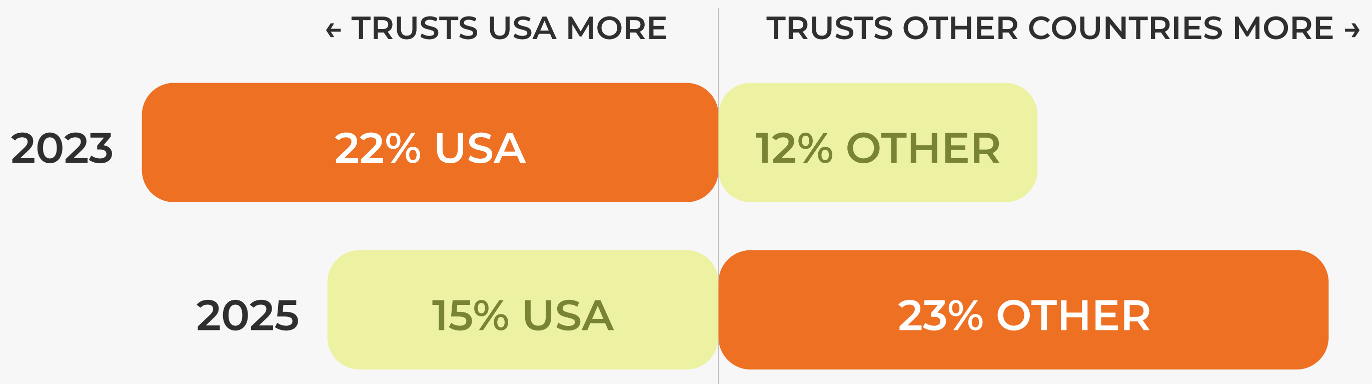
Image Source: Standard Co UK

CONSUMERS FORCING TRANSPARENCY

The Yuka app is a popular tool used to decipher product labels and analyze the health impact of food products and cosmetics. Yuka aids consumers in key decision-making about the "healthiness" of items in their cart.

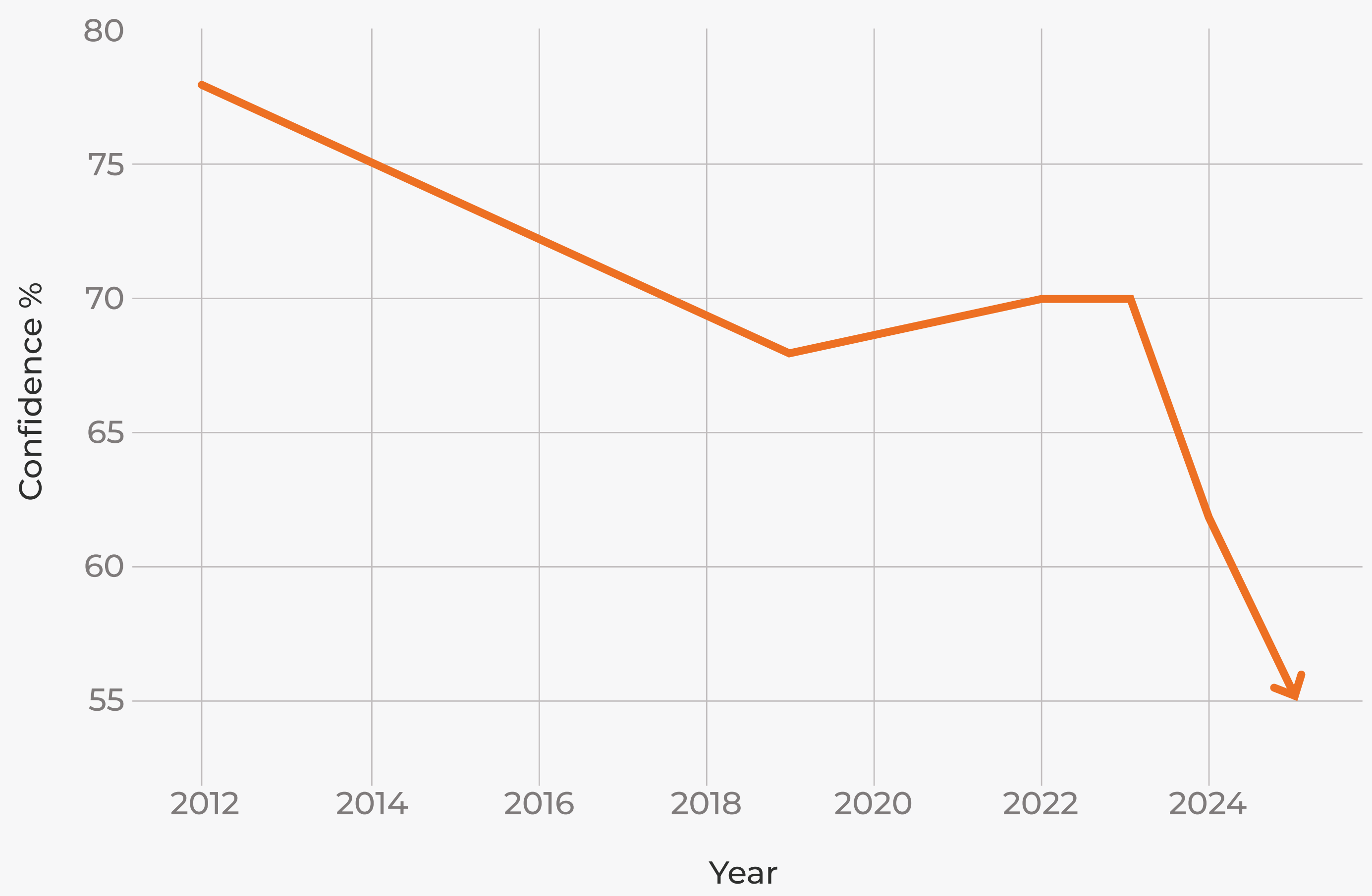
TRUST IN IMPORTED FOOD

Trust in imported food has flipped in just two years. In 2023, Canadians were more likely to place greater trust in food imports from the U.S. than from other countries. By summer 2025, that relationship has reversed; 23% now say they trust food from other countries more than from the U.S., nearly double the share from two years ago.



Source: CCFI, Public Trust Records, 2025

US FOOD SAFETY TRUST CRISIS DECLINE



Source: amazonaws

CCFI's research also found that MAHA messaging resonates particularly strongly with consumers who already harbour skepticism about food processing and corporate motives. These consumers view any level of processing as potentially harmful, even when scientific evidence supports safety and nutritional benefits.[3] Consumers struggling to understand food science default to suspicion rather than trust. It's not surprising that 62% of consumers now cite ultra-processed foods or pesticide use as their top food safety concern.[4]

THE ECONOMIC REALITY OF FOOD CHOICE

Working parents struggle with time constraints that make extensive meal preparation challenging, while food costs consume growing portions of household budgets. Lost in the political rhetoric about food choices is the economic reality facing most families. As Johns Hopkins researcher Julia Wolfson explains: "When cooking an entirely unprocessed meal, you have to [ask], 'What am I going to cook? What am I shopping for?' You then also have to prep and store the food in a way that it won't go bad. It's a lot of planning and cognitive functioning and mental energy, which is not time- or cost-neutral."[5]

The average North American spends less than an hour daily preparing food, often while managing children, work demands, and other responsibilities. Wolfson's 2024 study found that people who spend more time cooking consume fewer ultra-processed foods and have higher-quality diets overall, but this correlation reflects privilege as much as choice. Time for meal planning, shopping, and cooking requires flexibility that many working families lack.

▶ HAPPENING NOW:

HONEST EGGS LETS YOU TRACK A CHICKEN

Australia's Honest Eggs, a regenerative egg farm, has taken radical transparency a step further, literally. To prove their chickens truly are free-range and cage-free, they've fit some of their hens with a step tracker they call Fitchix. Consumers can track an individual chicken's perambulations around the farm and feel good about supporting a more natural way of life. And maybe find inspiration to get their own steps in!

Image Source: Honest Eggs: FitChix, [2024 One Show - Healthy & Wellness]

THE PATH TO REBUILDING TRUST: RADICAL TRANSPARENCY

The International Food Information Council found that 40% of Americans say their confidence would grow if they better understood how government and food companies ensure food safety. This creates opportunities for companies that invest in genuine transparency rather than defensive messaging.

The MAHA movement's impact on consumer trust represents a watershed moment for the food industry; companies can either adapt to new expectations for transparency and accountability, or continue losing market share to more responsive competitors. That consumer loyalty that took decades to build can now be destroyed in moments through social media amplification of consumer concerns, legitimate or not.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

FOR FOOD COMPANIES:

Prepare for the UPF reckoning by conducting honest assessments of your product portfolios and identifying items that could be reformulated to meet evolving definitions of “minimally processed.” Invest in research that demonstrates the safety and nutritional value of necessary processing steps.

Diversify product offerings to include both convenient processed options and minimally processed alternatives that meet different consumer needs and time constraints. Focus on removing unnecessary additives while maintaining food safety and shelf stability.

Embrace transparency by clearly communicating why specific ingredients and processing methods are used, their safety profiles, and their functional benefits. Develop educational content that helps consumers understand the difference between harmful processing and beneficial food technology.

AI GENERATED

FOR RETAILERS:

Develop clear merchandising strategies that help consumers understand food processing levels and make informed choices without stigmatizing entire product categories.

Partner with suppliers to develop private-label products that meet changing consumer expectations for reduced processing while maintaining affordability and convenience. Focus on removing unnecessary additives from private label formulations.

AI GENERATED

FOR INSTITUTIONAL FOODSERVICE:

Audit current menus to identify products that may fall under emerging UPF definitions and develop transition plans for reformulation or replacement. Work with suppliers to find compliant alternatives that maintain student acceptance.

FOR AGRI-FOOD:

People are curious about farms, and that's your chance to be proactively transparent. Offer open-farm days, agritourism, virtual field tours, or live Q&A with agronomists and farmers to demystify farm inputs and production practices.

When introducing new growing methods, biotechnologies like CRISPR, or crop protection products, make sure they are positioned with a clear consumer-end benefit. If they know what's in it for them, in a direct, understandable way, you reduce the risk of misinformation.

1. Make America Healthy Again Commission, The MAHA Report, February 2025
2. IFIC Food & Health Survey, A Focus on Food & Ingredient Safety, 2025
3. The Centre for Food Integrity, Decoding MAHA: New Consumer Research Defines How to Engage, August 2025
4. PwC, Voice of the Consumer Survey, June 2025
5. The Atlantic, Avoiding Ultra-Processed Foods Is Completely Unrealistic, October 2025

RESTORING REALITY: EMBRACING AUTHENTICITY OVER ARTIFICIAL PERFECTION

In a world increasingly dominated by synthetic ideals, consumers will rebel with their wallets, choosing products that celebrate imperfections, embrace handmade irregularities, and proudly display their human origins. This goes beyond simple nostalgia; it's a strategic rejection of artificial polish in favour of authenticity, where visible cracks become golden veins of value, much like the Japanese art of kintsugi that transforms broken pottery into treasured art. From "no-filter" beauty content (more on that in our next trend, `Eat Good, Look Good`) to intentionally irregular packaging design, wrinkles, pores, and handmade uniqueness will be proof of character, craft, and truth as new markers of authenticity.

This cultural shift reflects exhaustion with algorithmic sameness and mass-produced uniformity. Social media users are ditching overly edited photos, polished captions, and staged lifestyles in favour of something raw, real, and relatable. The movement gained momentum as people recognized that endless exposure to fabricated flawlessness was creating disconnection rather than aspiration.

Gen Z is leading this charge; influencers on TikTok, a platform that embraces raw, unfiltered content, enjoy engagement rates up to five times higher than are typically

generated on other social platforms.[1] They're drawn to the stories behind imperfect products: that hand-knitted scarf with slightly uneven stitches, the ceramic mug shaped by an artisan's hands with subtle asymmetries that carry the maker's personality. These imperfections aren't flaws to be hidden but badges of authenticity that create emotional connection. In a world where AI can generate perfect images, write error-free copy, and create seamless experiences, the messy reality of human creation becomes precious. The cracks in our work, literal and metaphorical, become the places where light gets in, to paraphrase Leonard Cohen.

CELEBRATING THE KINTSUGI PHILOSOPHY

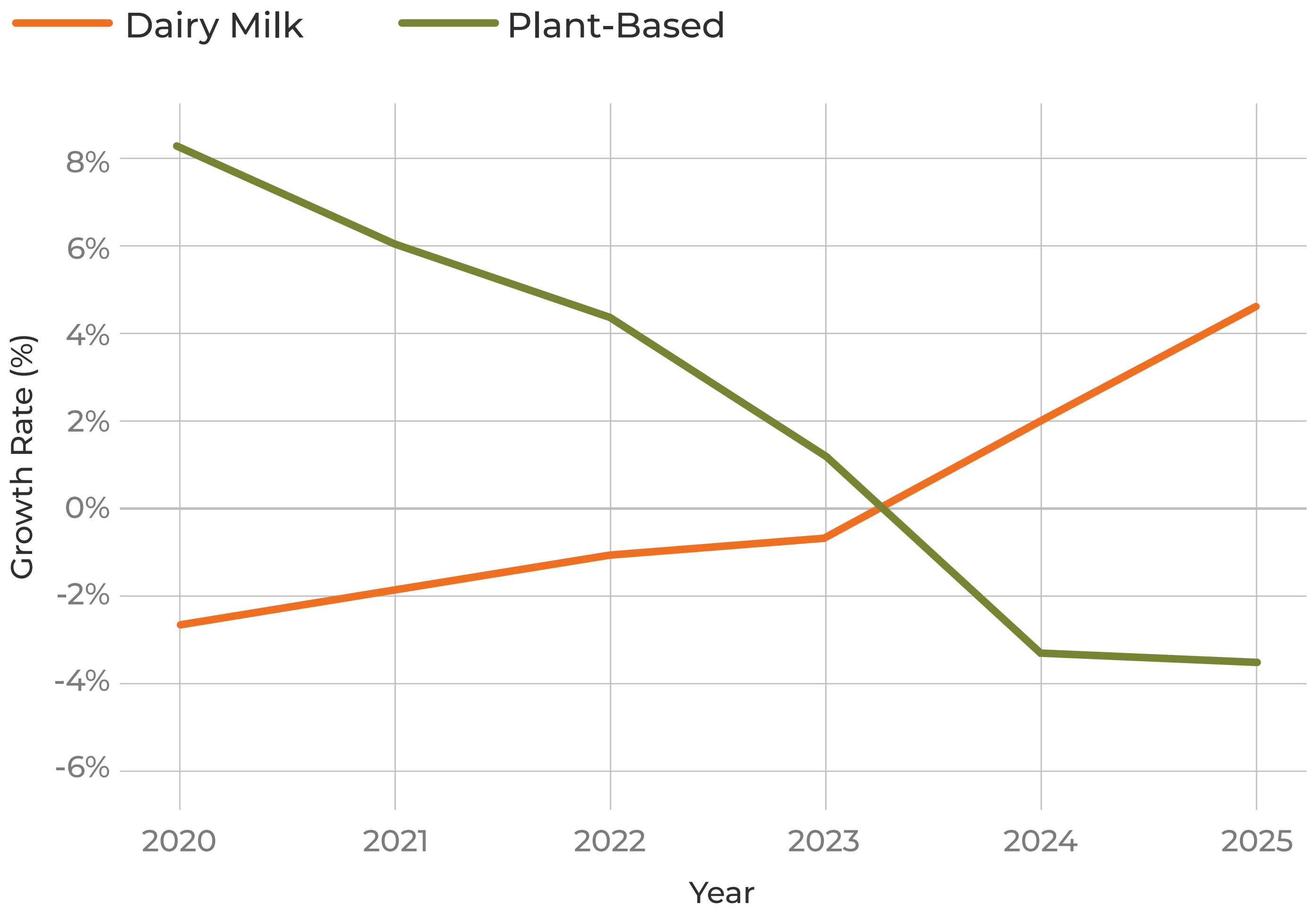
The ancient Japanese art of kintsugi—repairing broken pottery with gold-dusted lacquer to highlight rather than hide the cracks—has become a powerful metaphor for modern consumer values. Instead of concealing damage, kintsugi celebrates the object's history and makes it more valuable through visible repair. This philosophy directly challenges Western notions of perfection, suggesting that flaws and scars are not signs of weakness but symbols of resilience and unique character.

Image Source: Britannica

THE RETURN TO REAL FOOD

Nowhere is the rejection of artificial perfection more pronounced than in food, where consumers are actively turning away from processed alternatives toward authentic, traditional options. The "Got Milk?" campaign's 2025 return capitalizes on this trend, with dairy milk sales growing 4.6% in dollar terms while plant-based alternatives declined 3.5%.[2] As The California Milk Processor Board's ad says, "Real is so back".

DAIRY'S COMEBACK VS. PLANT-BASED



Source: amazonaws

This reversal represents more than changing taste preferences; it reflects deeper skepticism about ultra-processed foods marketed as healthy alternatives. Plant-based meat alternatives, once celebrated as the future of protein, are increasingly viewed as overly engineered products that sacrifice real food for technological novelty.

Steve James of the California Milk Processor Board explains the shift: “We’ve been leaning into this yearning for simple, real, natural—and frankly, it’s where the consumer is.” The preference for authenticity extends beyond ingredients to processing methods, with consumers seeking products that feel crafted rather than manufactured.

PROTEIN’S RETURN TO BASICS

The most dramatic manifestation of the trend appears in protein consumption, where traditional animal sources are experiencing unprecedented resurgence while plant-based alternatives face consumer rejection. Protein interest is growing three times faster within the meat category than in the plant-based segment.[3]

U.S. meat consumption is projected to reach 269 pounds per capita by 2027, up from 258 pounds in 2023 and 240 pounds in 2018, even in a time of food inflation.[4] Meanwhile, the percentage of people trying to avoid meat fell from 37% in 2022 to just 22% this year.[5]

▶ HAPPENING NOW:

FINDING VALUE IN IMPERFECT FOOD

While it’s understood psychologically that “we eat first with our eyes,” that doesn’t mean that something that looks imperfect doesn’t taste perfectly good. Now those foods are moving from the clearance racks to premium shopping and products, like Misfits Market. Weirdly shaped peppers? You can’t tell in a fajita! Salmon tails? That’s high-quality protein, every bit as much as the fillets. More and more manufacturers and retailers are helping consumers find the value—and themselves find the profit— in food that doesn’t make the cut aesthetically.

THE HANDMADE PREMIUM AND FAILURE OF FAUX PERFECTION

The celebration of imperfection has created a premium market for handmade, artisanal products that proudly display their human origins. Hand-drawn packaging, irregular lettering, and visible brush strokes have become signifiers of luxury precisely because they signal individual attention rather than mass production. Brands are learning that "perfect" design often feels sterile and corporate, while intentional imperfections create warmth and authenticity. Artisanal bread with irregular crusts commands higher prices than uniform factory loaves. The imperfections aren't accidents to be overlooked—they're the primary value proposition.

The phenomenon reflects consumers' desire to support human creativity in an age of automation. When AI can generate perfect images and content, the slightly wobbly line of human drawing becomes relatable and embraceable.

The backlash is particularly pronounced in categories where consumers have experienced "improvement" that actually made products worse. Plant-based meat alternatives promised to replicate the taste and texture of animal products while being healthier and more sustainable. Instead, many consumers found them to be highly processed, expensive alternatives that didn't deliver on taste or nutritional promises (see our past trend reports for more about this).

Similar dynamics appear in other categories where technological "solutions" have created new problems. Beauty filters that promised confidence instead created anxiety about real appearance. AI assistants that offered effortless efficiency eliminated the human warmth that made interactions meaningful. When products become too perfect, too processed, too seamless, they lose the human qualities that create emotional connection.

TRENDING

"IT'S GOT WABI SABI"

34.4M VIEWS | 6.6M LIKES

A viral King of the Hill edit that's been reworked with cinematic music has become a trending audio for TikToks about unique traits like freckles, birth marks, and snaggle teeth.

View the tiktok here.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

FOR FOOD BRANDS:

Celebrate visible imperfections in your products rather than hide them. Irregular shapes, natural variations, and handmade textures should be highlighted as proof of authenticity and artisanal quality. Consider packaging that showcases rather than conceals these human touches.

Embrace transparent production processes by showing the human hands behind your products (it also builds trust, to counter our Sowing Seeds of Doubt trend). Feature your makers, highlight traditional techniques, and explain why your imperfections are actually improvements over mass-produced alternatives.

Return to simple, recognizable ingredients rather than complex processed alternatives. Consumers increasingly view ingredient lists as indicators of authenticity, preferring inclusions they can understand and pronounce over technically advanced but artificial-feeling alternatives.

FOR MARKETERS:

AI is a useful and powerful tool, and it does have a place in marketing. But, it will be important to resist the urge to over-edit, over-style, or rely solely on generative AI visuals; there's a key difference between styling and stylizing in production. Prioritize real, unfiltered, and context-rich photography and video that reflects the genuine character of your product, people, and place. Where appropriate, using natural lighting, not hiding visible imperfections, and featuring diverse and authentic talent will build trust and relatability. And don't hesitate to get outside the studio to capture "behind the scenes" farm and food moments and humanize your content.

FOR PACKAGING AND DESIGN:

Incorporate intentional imperfections like hand-drawn elements, irregular typography, or visible brush strokes that signal human creation. These elements should feel authentic to your brand story rather than artificially added.

Tell the story behind imperfections through packaging copy that explains why your irregularities represent superior craftsmanship rather than quality control failures. Help consumers reframe flaws as features.

Image Source: Fortnum & Mason Coffee, Dieline 2024 Award Winners

FOR RETAILERS:

Support local makers and artisans whose products naturally embody the authenticity consumers seek. These partnerships provide real stories and differentiate your retail environment from corporate competitors.

Design store environments that feel warm and imperfect rather than sterile and corporate, using natural materials, varied lighting, and human-scale details that create authentic shopping experiences.

FOR RESTAURANTS AND FOODSERVICE:

Highlight ingredients and preparation methods that emphasize realness over processing, featuring local suppliers, traditional techniques, and seasonal variations that create natural menu imperfections.

FOR AGRI-FOOD:

Promote imperfect crops by working with supply chains to ensure “ugly” fruit/veg and off-grade grains are celebrated and marketed, either as specialty items or for value-added processing, rather than wasted.

Tell the “story” of hands-on selection, visible maker marks (e.g., in cheese or small-batch canning), or saving heirloom seeds. Invite consumers to appreciate differences due to weather, soil, or traditional techniques.

Encourage farmers, field reps, or real customers to share their own photos and stories. Highlight actual moments—muddy boots, hands in the soil, the not-quite-perfect produce—that document the real work and occasional messiness behind agri-food excellence.

1. SalesHub, Gen Z Influencers Are Reshaping Social Media Marketing (Here’s How), June 2025
2. Circana, Dairy and Plant-Based Dairy Alternative Trends, 2024
3. Tastewise, Culture Shift 2026, 2025
4. Innova Market Insights, Now & Next in Meat & Poultry in the U.S.., July 2024
5. FMI, Power of Meat, 2025

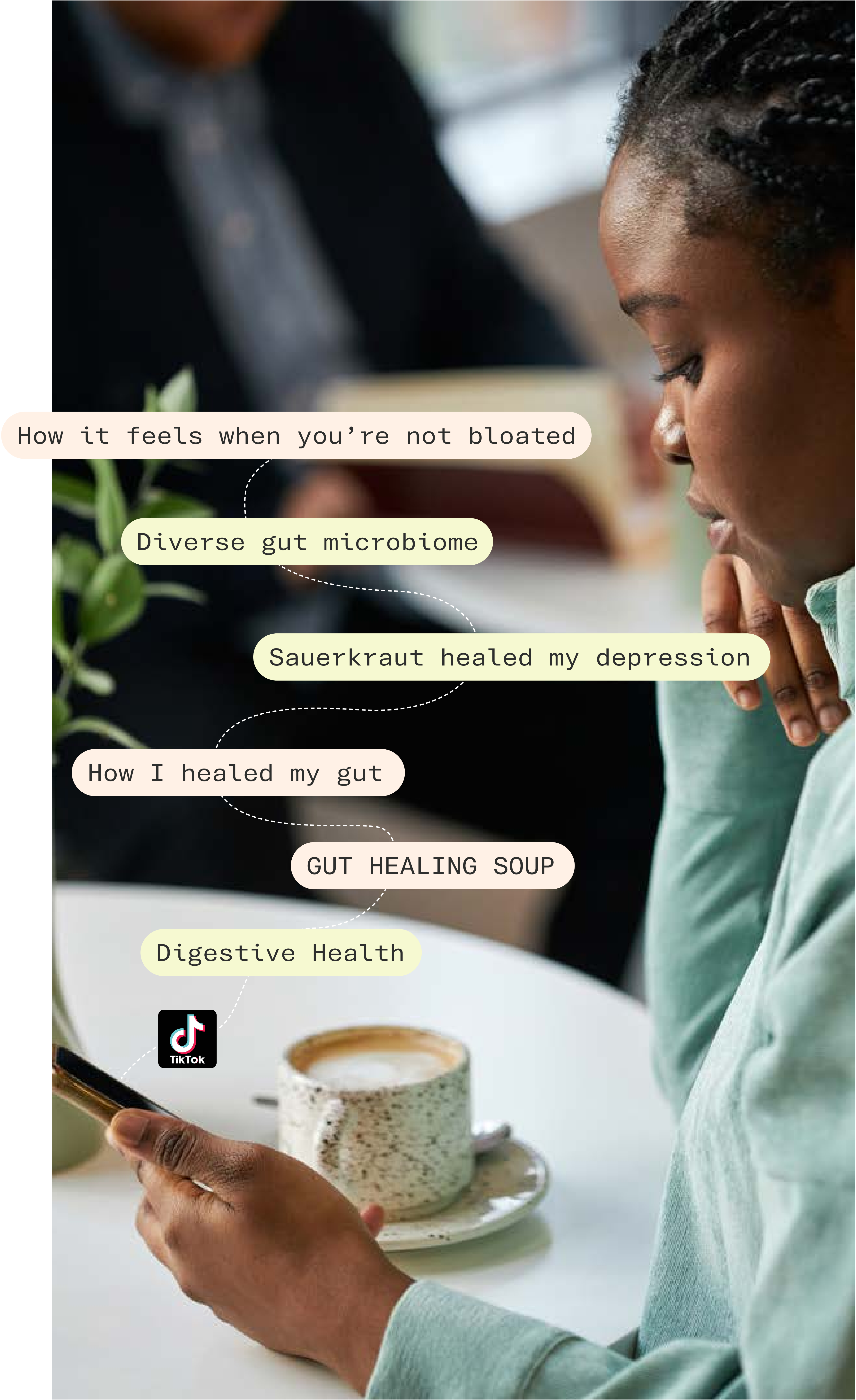
EAT GOOD, LOOK GOOD: REDEFINING THE BEAUTY REGIMEN WITH NUTRITION

Just as we saw a return to real food in our previous trend, we expect to see a return to real beauty that focuses on food and beverage to support it. After all, your skin is your largest organ, and what you put on your skin and face is absorbed by your body. Consumers are ingesting a lot of ingredients through their skin that they would never put into their mouths and swallow! There is growing consumer understanding of the gut-skin axis and that topical treatments address symptoms while nutritional approaches target root causes.

With that in mind, it's no surprise that the boundaries between food, medicine, and beauty are dissolving as consumers discover that radiant skin starts in the gut, not the skincare aisles. It's predicted that by 2030, skin and hair will be recognized as the body's most accessible biomarkers, with beauty brands competing directly against health and wellness providers as trusted gatekeepers of preventative care.[1]

THE GREAT SUPPLEMENT MIGRATION

Reports from SPINS, a shopper data analysis company, demonstrate a shift in traditional supplement categories, as well. Many are declining while their beverage equivalents flourish, suggesting that beauty supplements will follow the same trajectory as lotions, balms, and creams toward functional foods and drinks. Rather than competing with established supplement companies, beauty and F&B brands can capitalize on consumer preference for convenient, tasty delivery mechanisms by creating beauty-focused functional beverages, foods, and snacks.



CONSUMERS' SUPPLEMENT FOCUSES ARE EVER-SHIFTING

TRENDS THAT ARE FADING IN SUPPLEMENTS

- ↘ Cold & Flu
- ↘ Weight Loss
- ↘ Sleep Support
- ↘ Bone Health
- ↘ Digestive Health

TRENDS THAT HAVE SHIFTED TO BEVERAGE

- ↗ Digestive Health
- ↗ Energy Support
- ↗ Performance
- ↗ Mood Support
- ↗ Cold & Flu

OTHER SHIFTING BEHAVIOURS

Weight Loss: Shift from vitamins, minerals, and supplements to medical solutions like GLP-1s

Sleep Support: Shift within vitamins, minerals, and supplements from Melatonin to more holistic solutions like Magnesium

Bone Health: Calcium-rich food sources like Dairy Milk & Yogurt trending once again

But, while some supplement categories are fading, the underlying consumer needs—cold & flu, weight loss, sleep support, bone health, and digestive health— remain strong; they're simply being met in new, more palatable formats. According to SPINS data, cold and flu supplements are declining as consumers turn instead to functional immune-boosting shots (the drinkable kind, not the injectable kind)

Image Source: Remedy Shots, RemedyDrinks.com

and beverages that deliver vitamin C, elderberry, and zinc in convenient, tasty formats.

In fact, digestive health, energy support, performance, mood support, and immune care are leading beverage innovation. This preference for food-sourced nutrient support over synthetic supplements also reflects growing consumer sophistication about nutrient absorption and bioavailability.

▶ HAPPENING NOW:

ADAPTING TO NEW BEAUTY TRENDS WITH ADAPTOGENS

Adaptogens represent another rapidly growing segment, with ingredients like ashwagandha, rhodiola, and reishi mushrooms addressing stress-related skin concerns through functional beverages and foods. Gen Z particularly embraces these compounds because they understand the connection between emotional wellness and skin health—recognizing that stress management is beauty care, which aligns with the mood support trend driving beverage innovation. Moon Juice's Vegan Collagen Protect combines traditional collagen-supporting nutrients with adaptogenic herbs that address cortisol-related skin damage.

THE GENERATIONAL BEAUTY AWAKENING

Gen Z and millennials are driving a fundamental reimagining of beauty as holistic wellness rather than external enhancement. FMCG Gurus' research reveals that 64% of Gen Z recognize the link between skin health and overall health, with over one-third making dietary and lifestyle changes specifically to improve skin appearance.[2]

This cohort understands that emotional health, energy levels, and mood directly impact skin condition—a sophisticated grasp of mind-body-skin connections that mirrors the supplement-to-beverage migration in wellness categories.

MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

FOR FOOD AND BEVERAGE BRANDS:

Capitalize on the supplement-to-beverage migration by developing functional food and drinks that address beauty concerns. The SPINS data shows clear consumer preference for convenient, tasty formats over traditional pills. Apply this to beauty with collagen drinks, skin-supporting smoothies, and probiotic beverages marketed for skin health. Create immune-supporting shots and drinks with beauty benefits.

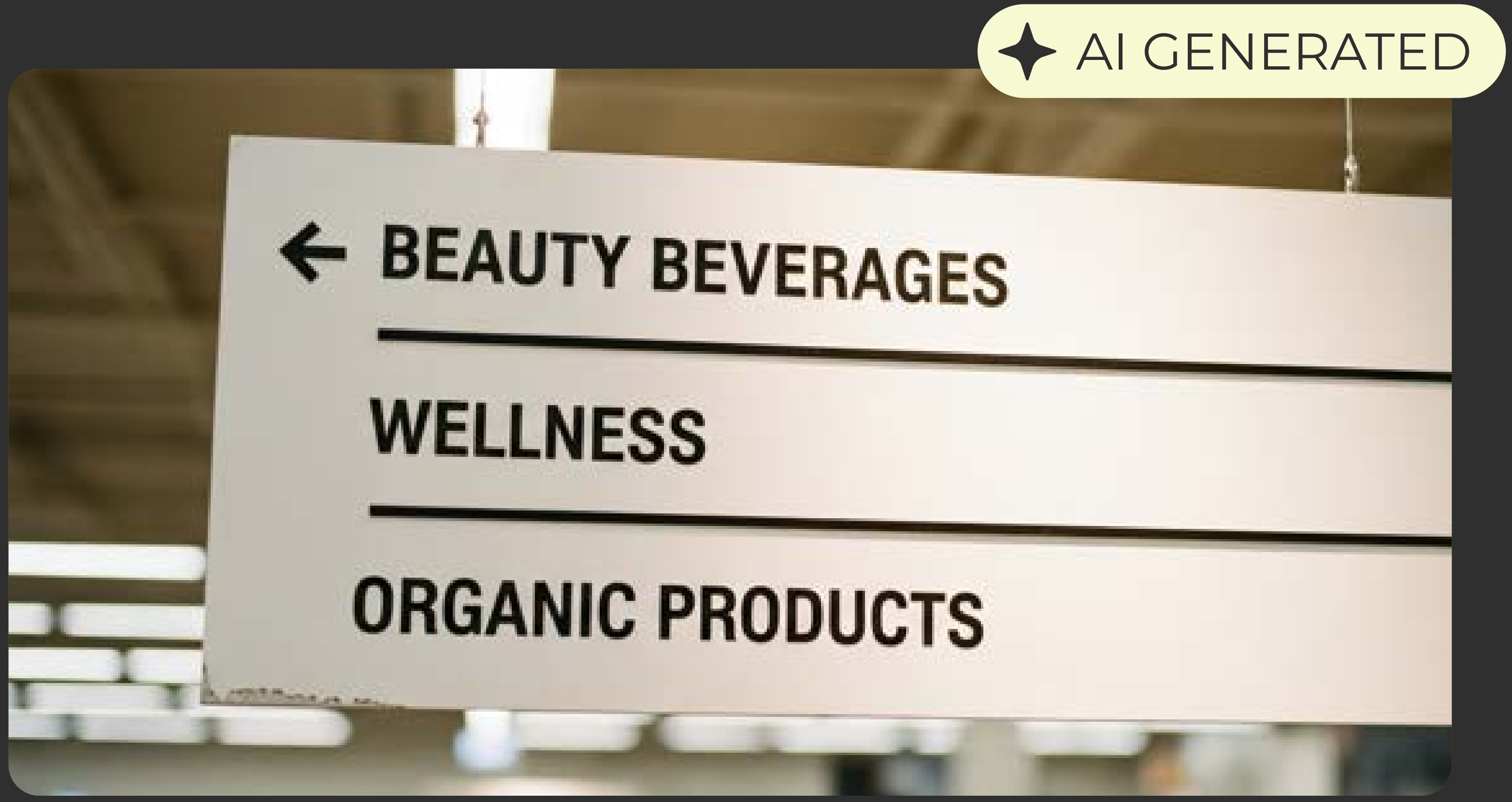
Develop sleep-beauty beverages featuring magnesium, L-theanine, or tart cherry that support both restful sleep and overnight skin repair (see our 2023 trend `Good Eats, Better Sleeps`). Market the connection between quality sleep and beauty recovery to differentiate from basic sleep aids while following the magnesium trend.

AI GENERATED

FOR BEAUTY AND PERSONAL CARE COMPANIES:

Follow the beverage migration pattern by expanding beyond topical products into functional drinks, powders, and food formats that complement your existing skincare lines. Create “inside-out” beauty systems that deliver ingredients through appealing consumption experiences.

Partner with functional beverage companies to develop beauty drinks that extend your brand into the nutrition space. This allows you to capitalize on the supplement-to-beverage migration without building entirely new manufacturing capabilities.



FOR RETAILERS:

Create “beauty beverage” sections that combine functional drinks, beauty supplements, and skin-supporting foods in integrated displays. Position yourself as the destination for this trend.

Develop “sleep beauty” merchandising that combines magnesium beverages, beauty supplements, and nighttime skincare products. This could even be the launching point for a new type of personal care “gift pack” for the holiday season.

1. Source: Mintel, 2026 Global Beauty & Personal Care Predictions, 2025
2. Source: FMCG Gurus, Inner Radiance, Outer Glow: Navigating the Beauty From Within Generation Z Cohort Report, 2025

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