

Flavour

WHAT CONSUMERS WANT NOW



SE ASIAN
& KOREAN

FLAVOUR
INFLUENCES

MORE THAN
GOCHUJANG

BIG FLAVOUR
FOCUS

AAK
Foodservice

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Less, but better

What UK diners really want when eating out



When choosing where to eat, fresh, high-quality ingredients and good service are among their top priorities.

Quality, health and affordability are leading the way for British diners. People are choosing less, but expecting better and crucially dishes still have to deliver on taste.

Bold flavours, visual impact and globally inspired menus continue to resonate, giving a sense of occasion without a premium price tag.



Whether it's better ingredients, bolder flavours or a more memorable experience, the opportunity is to understand what your customers value most, and deliver it every time.

Healthier, but never at the expense of flavour

Eating out has to feel worth it

Quality is the deciding factor, not price

Setting the table in 2026

We co-develop products and menus with operators and wholesalers, so we get to see trends as they land in real kitchens. Here's what we're seeing in 2026.



Value under pressure

Economic pressure is squeezing operators and diners alike. People are still eating out, but every visit has to earn its price.

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Premium, personal, memorable

Customisation, accessible premiumisation and experience-led formats are driving demand, as guests look to make a dish their own.



Health gets functional

Wellness now means food that does something for you. GLP-1 weight-loss medications are driving smaller portions, more snacking and new dayparts.

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Competition from every angle

Supermarkets and convenience stores are chasing the same customers, while apps, kiosks and delivery reshape how people buy.



Chicken rules the roost

Chicken is leading QSR growth, with Circana expecting it to outperform burger, pizza and sandwich concepts through to 2028.



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"Operators have to prove value more clearly while delivering something distinctive."
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Amid a growing influence from contemporary US chains sauces and dips are now a hero menu item.

Sauces and dips let you offer real variety through customisation and personalisation without changing the core menu.

Limited-time offers are starting to be used to test novel or quirky flavours and generate social media buzz.

Flavour-led innovation that combines novelty with familiarity, rather than replacing classic sauces is the recipe for success!

Up & coming trends:



Have It My Way

Customisation, control and choice in every bite. Opportunities for single serve growth.



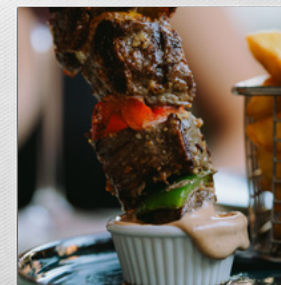
Clean & Whole

Anti-HFSS sentiment shaping the development of 'clean' recipes and products.

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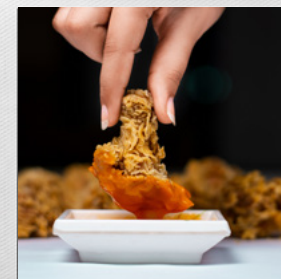
Eat The World

Flavour exploration and food as experience is driving new flavours: American, Peruvian, Caribbean, Italianish and Southeastern Asian.



Fun-ctional

Condiments and sauces to add colour, texture, flavour.



Sauce Maxxing

Layering and custom sauces, large format sauce cups for dipping.



Added Benefit

Some product development places sauces as a mechanism for providing a daily dose of nutritional benefits.

Oils under the spotlight

Cost, health and flavour are changing how kitchens choose their oils.

26/27 key oil trends

21%

Replacing saturated fats with unsaturated seed oils is associated with a **21% reduction in cardiovascular events**, as well as lower total, cancer and cardiovascular mortality.



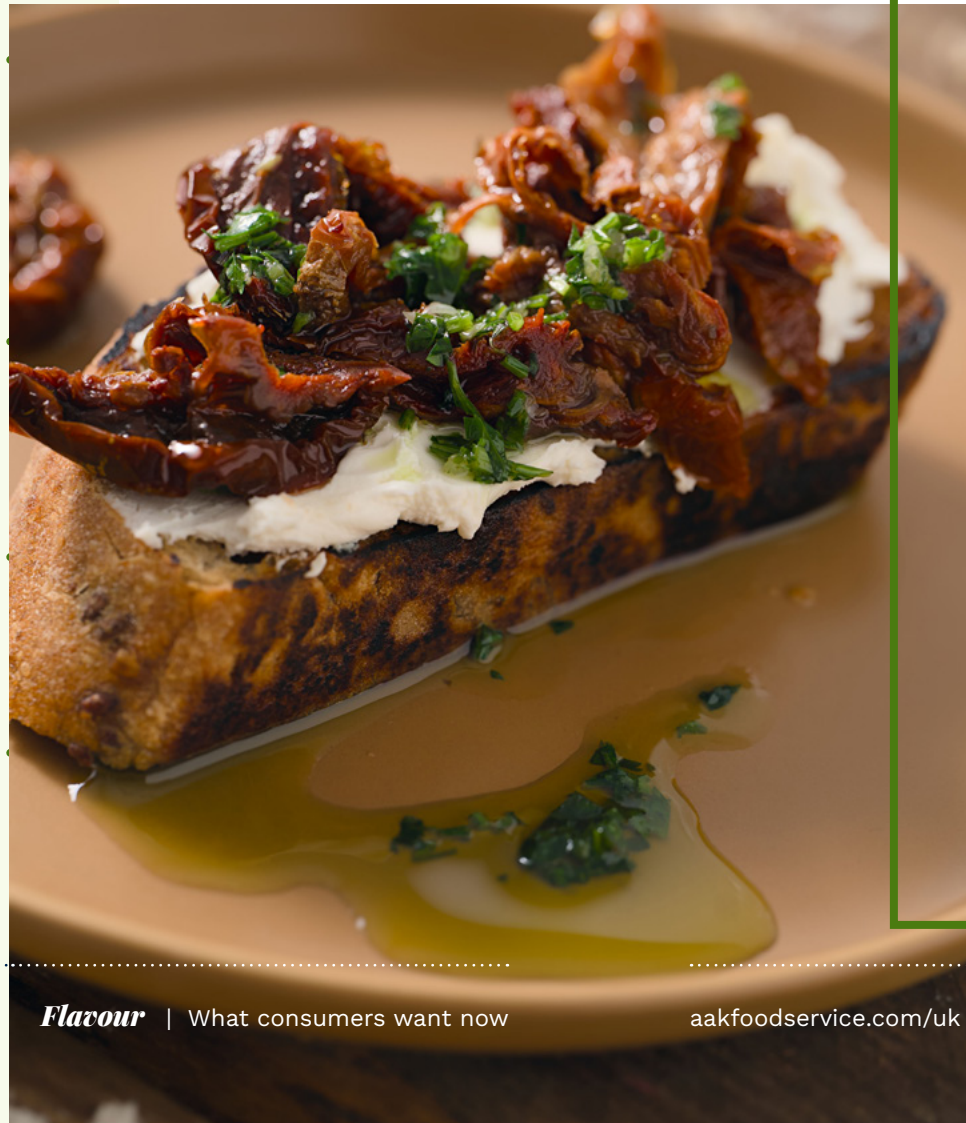
Health organisations worldwide recognise **seed oils as a source of essential fatty acids** and link them to a lower risk of type 2 diabetes.

60%

60% of consumers are reducing ultra-processed food consumption in light of health implications.



The **omega-6 fats in seed oils help lower LDL (bad) cholesterol** and are linked to a reduced risk of heart disease and stroke.



Performance meets nutrition

Kitchens are moving beyond a low-fat mindset towards oils that are nutrient-dense, minimally processed and functional. High-oleic sunflower and rapeseed oils stand out, with better oxidative stability, a more favourable fat profile and longer life in the fryer.

Cost pressure isn't going anywhere

Geopolitics and energy remain the biggest drivers of oil prices. Energy-linked costs such as freight, packaging, agricultural inputs and manufacturing all feed into what operators pay.

Seed oils under scrutiny

Diners want to know what their food is cooked in, and seed oils are getting attention. 62% say they have actively avoided rapeseed oil, with avocado oil and beef tallow growing in popularity. The evidence points elsewhere. The British Heart Foundation puts rapeseed oil's saturated fat at the lowest of any oil, around half that of olive oil, with the best omega-3 to omega-6 balance of any plant oil.

From scraps to flavour

Specialty oils bring a burst of flavour. Chefs are drizzling flavoured oils over salads, cold plates and vegetable-led dishes, or emulsifying them into dressings. Waste is becoming flavour too, with leek and onion tops, herb stems and carrot tops infused into oils to keep costs down.

Dip, drizzle, repeat

Olive oil has left the side plate

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Olive oil is being reinvented as a dish, not just a drizzle. Load it up with big flavours and make it shareable!

Loaded, not plain

The bowl of plain oil served with bread is giving way to something more interesting. Loaded oils layer in roasted garlic, roasted red peppers, olives, capers, herbs, lemon zest and chilli flakes, turning a simple dish of oil into a plate worth ordering.



Made for sharing

Snacking and grazing culture is turning simple dips into shareable eating moments. In the UK and Ireland it's showing up on sharing plates and in dipping formats, mostly in high-end restaurants, pop-ups and street food for now, and it's being pushed hard by chefs and creators on social. A low-cost way to add a course, build an occasion around the table, and give diners something to photograph.

Dip, drizzle, repeat

Mediterranean

The heart of the trend. Olives, artichokes, sundried or grated fresh tomato, capers, anchovies, garlic and fresh herbs, often finished with a splash of balsamic, so every dip carries full flavour.

Middle Eastern

Levantine ingredients are giving the format a new twist. Mint and coriander replace the usual herbs, sumac, Aleppo pepper and za'atar bring warmth, and pomegranate molasses adds a sweet, aromatic edge.

Chilli Kick

Chilli is a mainstay. Fresh chilli and red chilli flakes are the most common additions, while harissa and chilli crisp bring punchier heat. Hot honey adds sweetness to balance it out.

Where loaded oils go next

From dipping to grazing. The format is moving beyond bread. Antipasto and charcuterie-inspired versions are turning the original into a meal-worthy grazing occasion, with snackable oil plates and condiment-style uses that work across the menu rather than only at the start.

Keep it simple

Clean label expectations still hold in the condiments aisle. Naturally derived, cold-extracted, home-style formulations are what diners are looking for, with fewer artificial additives.

Ingredients that tell a story

Preserved foods, herbs, spices and globally inspired additions make an oil dish feel crafted rather than assembled. The ingredients are the story, so they need to be worth talking about.



Keep it simple

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Precision at the table

Squeeze bottles are being used for aromatic extra virgin finishing oils in premium settings, giving chefs control over exactly where the flavour lands.

Antipasto and charcuterie

The sharing platter, in dippable form. Med flavours are joined by stuffed peppers, pepperoncini, cornichons, salami and cheese, chopped through the oil to turn a starter into something more substantial.

More cheese please!

Cheese takes the format into indulgent territory. Parmesan appears throughout, while burrata, ricotta, feta and herbed Boursin add a richer, creamier dimension that makes the dish feel meal-worthy.

Nutty goodness

Nuts bring texture to the table. Rarely the star, but they give unctuous oils the crunch they need. Walnuts, pine nuts, pistachios and almonds all work, and there are no rules here.



Flavour

influences

Flavour influence: SOUTH EAST ASIAN

Sour, sweet, spicy, funky

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South East Asian cooking is all about balance. Sour fruits, coconut, chillies and dried fish come together in flavours that are bright but never one-note.

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Producers are now using them everywhere, from marinated meats and sandwich fillings to stocks and ready-made sauces.

Fresh relishes add a hit of brightness, while coconut curries and laksa broths bring comforting creaminess.

Flavours to watch:

JEOW SOM (LAOS)

NAM PLA PRIK
(THAILAND)

MALAYSIAN LAKSA

SAMBAL

SRIRACHA

SATAY

Flavour influence: KOREAN

More than gochujang

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Gochujang may get the headlines, but Korean BBQ is about the whole table.

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Grilled kimchi, spring onion, ssamjang and plenty of garlic go onto whatever's on the grill, which is then wrapped in lettuce for freshness.

Banchan, the small side dishes, matter just as much as the meat.

Chefs are borrowing these flavours for deep, rich sauces and marinades, sharp pickles, crunchy fried elements and even pizza.

Flavours to watch:

GOCHUJANG

SSAMJANG

KIMCHI

BANCHAN

SESAME

PICKLES

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Flavour influence: MEXICAN

Much more than salsa

A splash of salsa doesn't make a dish Mexican.

The country's cooking is as varied as its landscape, and its regional flavours are now reaching menus and supermarket shelves.

Tomatillo, salsa verde, Yucatán pibil, smoky chipotle, Oaxacan mole and sweet, spicy chamoy sit side by side, just as they do in Mexico.

As diners look for authenticity, generic "Mexican" products will need to raise their game.

Flavours to watch:

SALSA VERDE

PIBIL

CHIPOTLE

OAXACAN MOLE

CHAMOY

Flavour influence: TEX-MEX

Tex-Mex comes of age

Tex-Mex has had mixed press over the years, but it's finally coming into its own.

Born along the Rio Grande in the 1800s, it blends Mexican cooking with Texan and American tastes: generous cheese, sour cream and queso, and warm spices like cumin.

Fajitas, chilli con carne, enchiladas and nachos work for both mealtimes and snacking, and spicy cheese sauces, seasoning kits and salsas make it easy to get right.

Flavours to watch:

QUESO

FAJITAS

CHILLI CON CARNE

ENCHILADAS

NACHOS

CUMIN

Flavour influence: US REGIONAL

United states of flavour

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It's time to look past burgers and hot dogs to America's regional food, and the stories behind it.

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Bright Hatch chillies from the Southwest, smoky spice rubs from the Deep South and Lowcountry, New York pickles and krauts brought by Eastern European immigrants, and buttery Buffalo wings.

Dishes are increasingly credited to the communities they come from, including West African, Puerto Rican, Indigenous American and Gullah Geechee. It's all about heritage and flavour.

Flavours to watch:

HATCH CHILLI

SMOKY BBQ RUBS

BUFFALO

PICKLES & KRAUTS

GULLAH GEECHEE

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Flavour influence: MIDDLE EASTERN

Simple ingredients, big flavour



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The Middle Eastern cupboard is vast and adaptable, covering the whole palate.

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Turn simple ingredients into big flavour with spices, oils and sauces, which makes them a smart fit when budgets are stretched. From the sour, bitter note of preserved lemon to the heat of harissa, there are many unique elements to middle eastern cuisine.

Famous chefs have helped take pomegranate molasses and preserved lemon mainstream, and regional hot sauces and spice blends are following.

Flavours to watch:

HARISSA

TOUM

PRESERVED
LEMON

POMEGRANATE
MOLASSES

SHATTA

AMBA

ZHOUG

HAWAII

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Seven flavours to watch

From bright and herbal to sweet and smoky, these are the flavour profiles driving sauces, dips and dressings in 2026. Some are familiar favourites finding new uses. Others are just getting started.



Salsa verde

Tangy, herby and endlessly adaptable. Salsa verde cuts through fried foods and fatty meats, and adds flavour without piling on calories.



Fruit forward

Diners want sweetness from natural sources. Think pineapple in hot sauces, plums and peaches in glazes, and mango into curry-spiked mayo.



Cheese

Salty, comforting and rich in natural umami, cheese is now a seasoning as much as an ingredient. Think parmesan ranch and spicy queso dips.

Big flavours



Smoked

Tomatoes, chillies, garlic and even cream cheese are being smoked and blended into sauces, making every season barbecue season.



Umami

Miso, truffle, soy, koji and fish sauce are being layered for extra impact, in miso mayo, truffle pesto and koji barbecue sauce.



Savoury

Sweet meets savoury. Honey, maple and fruit paired with miso, soy, seaweed or sea salt. Versatile condiments that work on everything.



Tangy

Sour is getting subtler, with bright, acidic notes that cut through richness rather than overpower it.

Why balance now beats burn

Heat is about more than Scoville ratings. The focus now is flavour, depth and regionality, with heat blended into other profiles and milder chillies giving familiar condiments and comfort foods a new lease of life.



Hot tang

Heat meets vinegar, citrus and ferments. Habanero, jalapeño and gochugaru add a sharp kick that cuts through fatty and smoky flavours.



Aji

Peru's fruity, mild-to-medium pepper comes in yellow, green and red. It works in everything from hot sauces to dressings and dips.



Mustard

The original heat source is reinventing itself, from double hits with horseradish or chilli to mellow honey and maple blends.

Hot stuff



Fric

Fruity meets spicy. Mango, pineapple, lime, yuzu and rhubarb bring sweet, tangy balance to hot sauces, ketchups and dressings.



Chipotle

Smoky, sweet-savoury and gentle enough that many barely register it as heat. It's the gateway chilli for heat-curious diners.



Hot & creamy

The Goldilocks option. Sriracha or chamoy is tempered with sour cream, mayo, ranch or hummus to deliver heat without alienating milder palates.



Swicy

Hot honey started it, and sweet heat is now everywhere, from chicken wings and pizza to chilli crisp ice cream.



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STUFF**



The one in the yellow tub



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Flavour, with the facts behind it

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From the pressures shaping menus to the flavours diners are asking for, this guide brings together what we're seeing across foodservice in 2026.

Cost and consumer priorities. The truth about seed oils. The cuisines driving menu innovation, from Korean BBQ to regional Mexican. And the heat that keeps on coming.

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The information provided is informed by a number of our Intelligence providers, most notably 'The Food People's 'Condiments, Sauces & Seasonings 2026' and 'Loaded Olive Oil 2026' reports and IGD consumer behaviour reports.

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