



## Millennials and Food

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**M**illennials—teens and young adults ranging from 19 to 37 years of age—are the second-youngest group of consumers. Generation X (or GenX, 38–51 years old) and the Baby Boomers (52–70 years old) precede them, whereas Generation Z (or GenZ, 15–18 years old) follows them. For the past five years, marketers have been tracking with fascination the likes, dislikes, preferences, and demands of the Millennials.

Millennials today are in different life stages—some are in college, still living at home; some have moved out on their own; and others have started their own families. Their lifestyles and values at the different life stages impact what the Millennials want or need, and are reflected in their leisure activities, understanding of politics and current events, and approaches to cooking, as well as how they snack and shop for food and beverages.

There are about 83.1 million Millennials today, or about 25 percent of the U.S. population. They have now surpassed Boomers, who are at 75.4 million, and are the arbiters of food culture. Millennials are more ethnically diverse than previous generations, with more than one fourth of non-Caucasian ethnic heritage and about one fifth of Hispanic origin (The Hartman Group 2016). Their cultural diversity affords them the knowledge and confidence to explore the broad spectrum of food ingredients, as demand for an increased variety of ethnic dishes from the global community continues.

### **Food Choices and Technology**

Millennials are the first generation whose lives are extensively integrated with technology. They use Google, Facebook, Pinterest, and YouTube, among others, to

search for recipes, research food products, and seek information. Millennials use social media to post their insights and experiences for sharing with their network of family, friends, and others, generating discussions. One or more collective positions on the topic result from these discussions, and they usually subscribe to some of these positions, which then shape their own values and beliefs and influence still other aspects of their lives, such as their food-buying decisions. For example, social sharing helped Pepperidge Farm Puff Pastry sales increase by almost 20% the first three quarters of the fiscal year (Wohl 2016). Millennials may return online to check posts that agree with their beliefs but not usually to change them. This behavior has been observed when they were asked for their reasons for eliminating high-fructose corn syrup or monosodium glutamate from their diets. They believed that the ingredients were harmful because of the amalgamated opinions to which they subscribed, although they could not specify the reasons for those choices (Saulo 2013).

Because Millennials like to share their food choices and dining experiences with their social network, they are used to declaring their individualism (even if formed from collective opinions) boldly. They order something different from the same restaurant to customize their experience. They have developed values for or against certain foods and food ingredients. Since sugar has been portrayed online as unhealthy (Leslie 2016), there is a rising interest in alternatives to sugary drinks, such as kombucha, vinegars, and artisanal tonics. Millennials are even redefining their preferred food container. They reach for bowls more than plates (Watson 2016). This

is probably an influence of their diverse ethnicity. In Hawai'i, where about three quarters of the population is non-White, food bowls are a staple food container, and we see their uses in everyday dishes such as poke on rice, saimin, donburi, and chili.

### Food Preferences and Health Perceptions

More than half (52%) of GenX/Boomers (ages 38–70) “really enjoy” classic American cooking and about the same number “really enjoy” foods that are fresh and less processed, compared to 33 and 37%, respectively, of Millennials. Only 25% of GenX/Boomers “really enjoy” fast food, and about 42% of them “really enjoy” mainstream ethnic foods (Saulo et al. 2013), such as Tex-Mex, Italian-American, and Anglicized Chinese. About 34% of Millennials “really enjoy” fast food, while 33% “really enjoy” mainstream ethnic foods readily available in the U.S. and 28% new dishes from around the globe. Because of their diversity in ethnicity and the rise in the demand for ethnic foods, Millennials seek new and different offerings in fresh produce, fueling the rise in sales of exotic produce. A top grocer in California shared its top-10 list for spring: papaya, dragonfruit, passionfruit, ataulfo mangoes, young coconuts, Kiwano melons, kumquats, starfruit, quick-crack coconuts, and feijoa. Chayote, malanga, cherimoya, and Florida mangoes are also new items. Dragonfruit is currently a hot item, and a statement by the TV show host, Dr. Oz, may have influenced this (Straily 2016).

According to the NPD Group, the annual consumption of ready-to-eat snacks per Boomer is 1,200, compared to 1,000 snack consumptions for each Millennial. This translates to Boomers eating snack foods 20% more than Millennials. Although snacking motivation differs among snackers, both generations prefer fruit, chocolate candy/candy bars, and potato chips as the top three snacks. They then differ in what they reach for after those— Boomers eat nuts and yogurt, whereas Millennials reach for tortilla chips and cookies (March 28, 2016).

The NPD Group also explained that consumers prepare food with fewer ingredients nowadays and prefer food that is portable. These portable foods look more like snacks than traditional meal foods. But consumers incorporate these snack-like foods into their main meals and eat them during the traditional meals of breakfast, lunch, and dinner, rather than additional or new eating

occasions (i.e., as snacks) during the day. Since snack-like foods still look like snacks, there is a resulting perception that consumers are snacking more and eating fewer meals, but NPD Group contends that consumers still eat three meals a day (April 28, 2016).

Millennials living at home behave like the younger GenZ, who focus more on convenience and indulgence rather than their diet and health. As Millennials venture out on their own, they increasingly tend to act more like the older GenX/Boomers, attending to their diet and health and purchasing foods that are minimally processed, organic, natural, and with “clean” labels (simple and recognizable ingredients). About 60% of Millennials claim that they do all the cooking in their household, preferring to use fresh ingredients, projecting characteristics of both the GenZ and the GenX. They are different from the other generations (for now until GenZ matures) in their ability to exploring openly ethnically diverse dishes and trying different spices, oils, and flavorings.

Millennials with children have a different emphasis in their lives and behave like parents of any generation. They focus on foods that their children will eat. They do not have the luxury of exploring new foods or offering healthy versions if their children will reject the food. But Millennial moms and dads with children are also different from each other. Approximately 40% of Millennial moms (18–34 years old) with children are not married, whereas almost 80% of Millennial dads (30–34 years old) live in a “recognizably traditional family environment.” Although Millennials have experienced more economic and financial hardship than the GenX/Boomers, they are more optimistic about their future status and lives (Packaged Facts 2015).

### They're It!

Millennials prefer unique and interesting food and beverage experiences, and they share these experiences with their social network. They are trendsetters. They define future shopping and purchase behavior and have assumed their place in the consumer world. The Millennials are now a reliable barometer for tomorrow's food culture. But don't forget the maturing GenZ, who will replace Millennials someday soon. They're even more diverse and use hand-held technology more than Millennials. It will be interesting to see what the food landscape will be at that point.

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