

# Are Functional Foods the Next Wave in Healthy Eating?

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## Protein Bar & Kitchen

Protein Bar & Kitchen, which specializes in protein-rich dishes, is among the growing number of concepts touting functional foods.

When Tracy and Todd Sallee's young son developed autoimmune diseases and had to overhaul his diet to heal, the whole family joined in. They rebuilt their microbiomes by drinking probiotic-rich, fermented tea known as kombucha. By the Sallees' own account, their son's health improved.

Inspired by this, the Sallees began making their own kombucha, selling it at farmers markets around Tucson, Arizona, and then opening a shop, Fermented Tea Company.

Kombucha is just one example of a functional food. Shelley Balanko, senior vice president of the Hartman Group, defines functional foods as those that offer specific wellness benefits to the consumer—not just nutrition. Customers aren't looking for the artificial vitamin fortifications of yore, she adds. They want those benefits to come from natural ingredients.

The Sallee family's kombuchas are made with natural tea blends, each with their own unique botanical benefits like calming chamomile or free radical-fighting green tea. Fermentation adds probiotics, which are linked with a healthy gut flora. Other added ingredients boast their own purported health benefits; prickly pear helps regulate blood sugar, while ginger can reduce inflammation.

Balanko sees functional foods as the next big thing in the health world. "Today's consumer sees themselves as having unique needs and is seeking specific, unique products to fulfill those needs," Balanko says. "Functional foods have become more and more relevant."

Chicago-based Protein Bar & Kitchen focuses on protein as a functional macronutrient. Even if customers are unaware of the benefits of proteins, the large wall lettering at the restaurants loudly proclaim "Protein is Power" and "Every diet needs protein for all-day brain and body energy." Digital screens and promotional signs highlight the benefits of protein and other ingredients. "We want our guests to know that there are zero bad choices on the menu," says Jeff Drake, CEO of Protein Bar.

Everything on the menu may be nutritious, but not every guest wants the same thing. Protein Bar caters to a variety of diets (from vegan to paleo), taste preferences, and benefit seekers. For example, vegans who are also watching their carbs can order riced cauliflower that packs plenty of protein thanks to chia seed, hemp heart, and nutritional yeast. It's proven quite popular, making up 25 percent of bowl sales a month after its launch, Drake says.

Variety and customization ensure patrons of The Plant Café Organic can get whole foods to fit their individual needs. The San Francisco-based, organic fast casual features a customizable menu of California- and Asian-inspired meals, juices, smoothies, and cleanses. Regardless of what they order, customers can expect foods with disease-fighting, digestion-promoting benefits simply because organic offerings don't have additives.

"We believe it's a functional food in terms of what's not in it," says The Plant Café CEO Matthew Guelke. Additives, chemicals, and hormones found in non-organic and processed foods can add damaging toxins to the body, as well as inhibit digestion so that when people do eat healthy food, they don't absorb as many nutrients, Guelke says. His food philosophy is based on lessons he learned at the Hippocrates Health Institute, which he attended to learn about the healing power of foods after a relative was diagnosed with cancer.

Variety and customization, such as those offered by Protein Bar and The Plant Café Organic, can be good ways for brands to add functional foods to a menu, Balanko says. This menu formatting allows guests to add as many functional ingredients as they wish. And by letting the customer decide, brands don't risk alienating those who aren't looking for specific benefits but want something that's generally nutritious and tasty.

Either way, functional ingredients should be called out on menus and in signage, Balanko says. Eager to tailor their diets to their unique needs, customers want to test the health claims of such foods on themselves. They're less likely to take a clinical trial finding seriously, Balanko says. "They're taking a very intuitive approach. They're experimenting with themselves. They say, 'I'm going to consume this and see how I feel.'"

That experimentation can be aided by clearly denoted functional ingredients and perhaps statements that specify certain benefits. Balanko cautions against going overboard on written educational materials. Turning a menu into an encyclopedia can overwhelm customers. "The folks that are actually interested in all the information are the ones that already know," she says.

Done carefully, however, education via labeling and decoration can have a big impact. Recently, Protein Bar launched the Beauty Brew smoothie with collagen and proteins. Specific health benefits are called out in the item description (collagen is linked with good skin and hair, as well as joint, cartilage, tendon, bone, and gut health). "The Beauty Brew has been wildly successful," Drake says. "It's currently the No. 1 selling protein shake on our menu."

Guelke has seen similar results from functionally named items. Juices with names like Immune Builder and Skin Refresher tend to be more popular than those without.

The Sallees have built education into their business model through short product descriptions and conversations. Now it's even more crucial; the Fermented Tea Company recently began selling kombuchas infused with CBD oil, which is derived from the same plant as marijuana. Although CBD is nonpsychotropic and often used for medicinal purposes, its association does elicit questions from many customers—just as kombucha has in the past.

"[Customers] ask what kombucha is, so we explain and let them try it," Todd Sallee says. "We tell them some benefits and then people tell us their ailments and ask which kombuchas would be good for them."