

50+ Fast Food
Trends, Stats,
and Facts You
Should Know

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GUEST POST

50+ FAST FOOD TRENDS, STATS, AND FACTS YOU SHOULD KNOW

Written by: Elly Hancock on Dec 15th, 2022.



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The fast-food industry is evolving. Whether it's plant-based burgers, upgraded drive-thrus, curbside pickups, healthy kids' menu options, or recyclable packaging, the fast-food industry is trying hard to keep up with new trends and keep customers coming back for more.

But advanced technology, a health-conscious public, and the global pandemic are affecting consumer and industry behavior in unpredictable ways.

We've rounded up 50+ statistics and trends to give you everything you need to know about the fast-food industry now, and how it will likely change in the near future.

THE FAST-FOOD INDUSTRY IN 2023

LINDSAY WINCHERAUK

Despite more and more of us opting for healthier meals than the fast-food industry typically offers, the industry continues to grow. It's a huge contributor to the global economy, employing millions of people worldwide and supplying us with plenty of tasty food.

1. THE FAST-FOOD INDUSTRY GENERATES BILLIONS IN REVENUE



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The fast-food industry generates a lot of revenue. And when we say a lot, we mean, a lot.

Globally, we're talking around \$885 billion in revenue, and it's growing yearly.

That's more than 10 times Facebook's Revenue in 2020.

Although we're gradually becoming more health-focused and switching to better-for-you options, the fast-food market is showing no signs of slowing down. By the end of 2027, it's expected to be worth \$931.7 billion with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 4.6%.

2. FAST-FOOD IS A HUGE PART OF THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

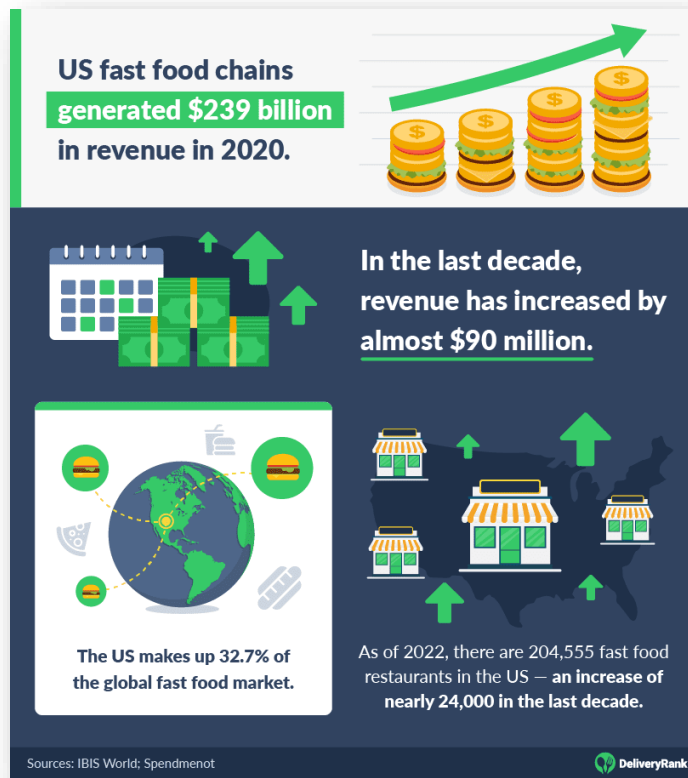


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Not only does the fast-food industry bring in billions in revenue each year, but it's also a huge contributor to the global economy, especially in terms of employment.

There are over 897,600 fast food chains around the world, employing more than 14 million people. And new fast-food jobs are opening every year. Since 2010, employment in the quick service restaurant (QSR) sector in the US has grown by 35%.

3. THE US HAS MORE FAST-FOOD CHAINS THAN ANYWHERE ELSE



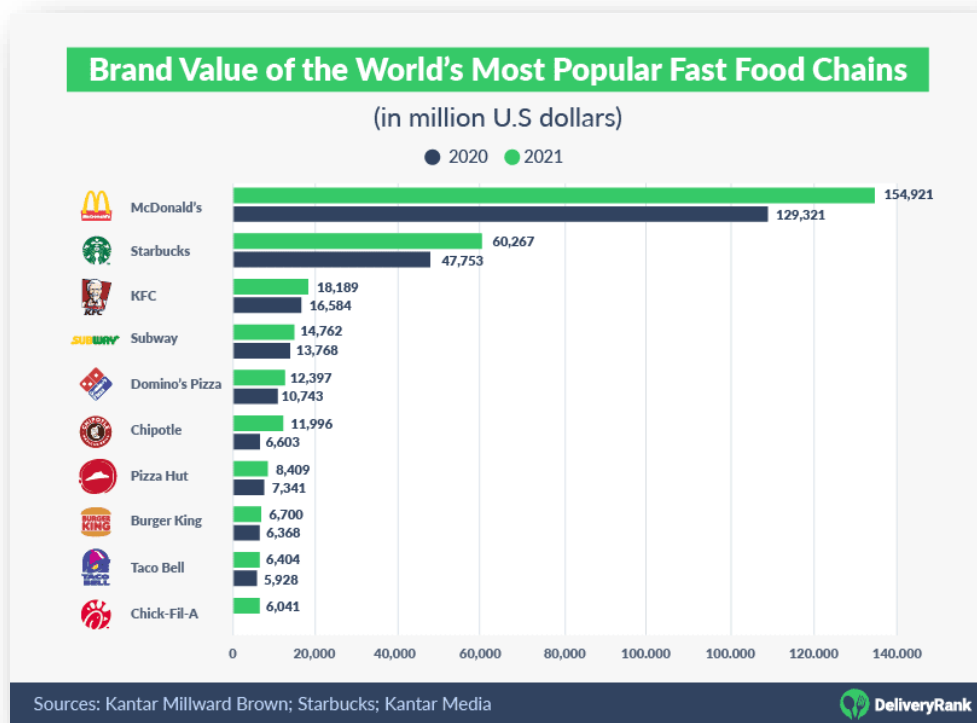
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The US has more fast-food chains than any other country in the world. In fact, the US makes up over 32% of the entire global fast-food market.

As of 2023, there are 204,555 fast food restaurants throughout the US, which is an increase of 3.49% from 2021. And in comparison, to 10 years ago, that's a growth of nearly 24,000 new fast-food franchises.

US fast food chains generated around \$239 billion in revenue in 2020 and employed over 4 million people. This is slightly lower than the \$273 billion generated in 2019, likely as a result of the pandemic and the forced closures of fast-food chains. However, in comparison to previous years, profit was still much higher overall. In fact, over the last decade, revenue has grown by almost \$90 million.

4. MCDONALD’S HOLDS THE MOST BRAND VALUE GLOBALLY



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McDonald’s holds the most brand value of all fast-food chain restaurants, with an estimated value of \$1.5 billion in 2021. That’s an increase of 19.8% from 2020.

Starbucks and KFC came in second and third place, though their value combined was not as much as McDonald’s alone. Starbucks held a brand value of \$60.2 billion in 2021, while KFC’s value was approximately \$19 billion.

Perhaps not coincidentally, McDonald’s is also the fast-food chain that spends the most money on ads. In the US in 2020, McDonald’s spent \$489 million on ads, yet Starbucks spent over six times less, with \$77 million invested into advertising.

5. ...BUT OTHER POPULAR FAST-FOOD CHAINS HOLD MORE FRANCHISES



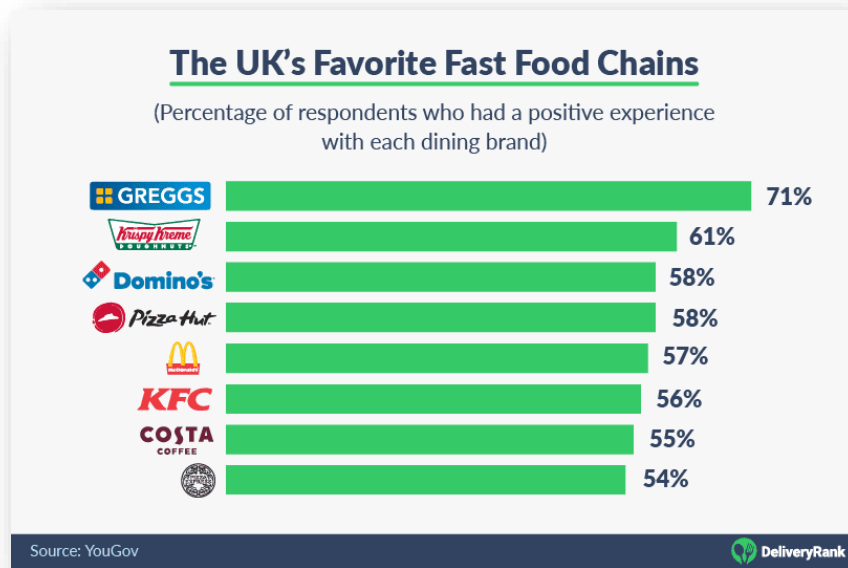
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Although McDonald's holds more brand value than any other fast-food chain, it doesn't have the most restaurants.

That honor goes to Subway, which totaled around 22,000 franchises across the US, as of 2020. McDonald's only has just over 13,000 units yet generates the most profit.

Subway actually comes in 8th place in terms of sales across leading fast-food chains. In 2020, Subway brought in \$8.32 million, while McDonald's saw over \$40 million in revenue in the US.

6. THE UK'S FAVOURITE FAST-FOOD CHAINS



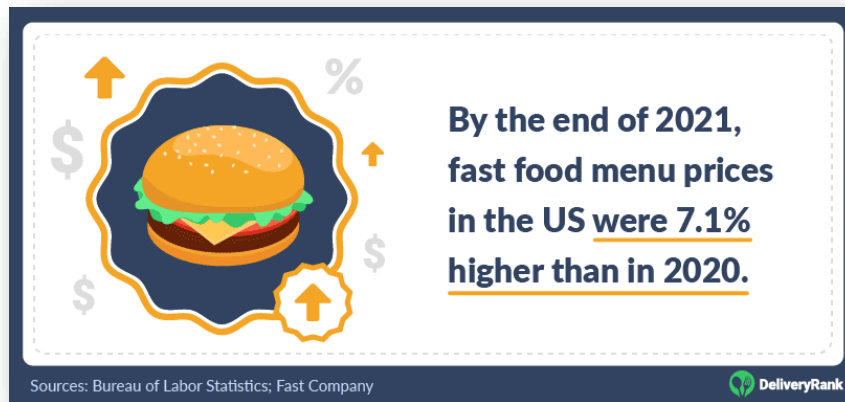
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In the UK, consumers have their own preferences for fast food.

Although McDonald's still made it into the top 5, UK consumers prefer Greggs, with 71% of respondents stating they had had a positive experience with this pastry diner.

Around 57% of people said the same of McDonald's, while both Domino's and Pizza Hut overtook McDonald's slightly, with 58% each. While Greggs makes less profit (around £1.23 billion total sales revenue in 2021) and has less share of the market than McDonald's, it's clearly doing more to increase and maintain the loyalty of its customers.

7. FAST-FOOD PRICES ARE INCREASING DRASTICALLY



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Prices in QSRs across the US have steadily increased over the years, and 2020 and 2021 were no different. Actually, prices continued to grow monthly, even though overall QSR sales fell during and just after COVID. In the US, sales from fast food chains fell from \$273 billion in 2019 to \$243 billion in 2020, but this didn't stop the prices of food items from increasing.

By January 2021, QSR menu prices had grown around 6.2% higher over the course of the previous year. By the end of 2021, menu prices of fast-food chains were 7.1% higher than in 2020.

If these trends continue, we could be paying more for our favorite burger and fries than we first thought.

8. FAST-FOOD EMPLOYMENT LEVELS HAVE DIPPED



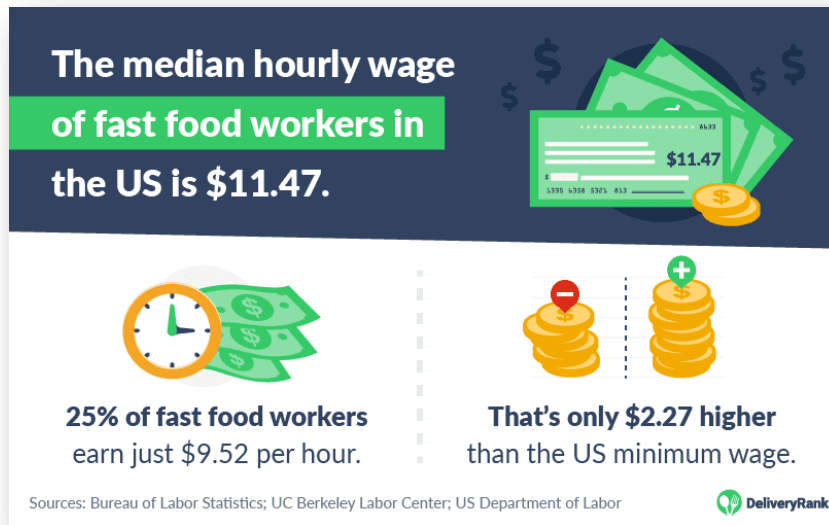
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Up to 2020, employment in the fast-food sector was growing, with around 4 million employees across the US. However, employment levels took a massive hit with the pandemic forcing some fast-food restaurants to reduce their workforce or close.

In comparison to pre-pandemic levels, 41% of US chains have cut their workforce by 1-20%. And 29% have over 20% fewer employees than before.

We may see employment increasing as the global economy recovers. However, new fast-food trends emerging from the pandemic – such as AI and upgraded drive-thrus – are also forcing many fast food chains to rethink how they operate. And this could lead to less dependence on employees (more on that [later](#)).

9. FAST-FOOD EMPLOYEES SEE LOW WAGES



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Fast-food companies want to keep costs low. Unfortunately, that usually comes at the expense of employee wages.

The median hourly wage of a fast-food worker in the US is \$11.47. However, 25% of employees in the fast-food sector earn less than \$9.52 an hour, which is just \$2.27 higher than the US minimum wage.

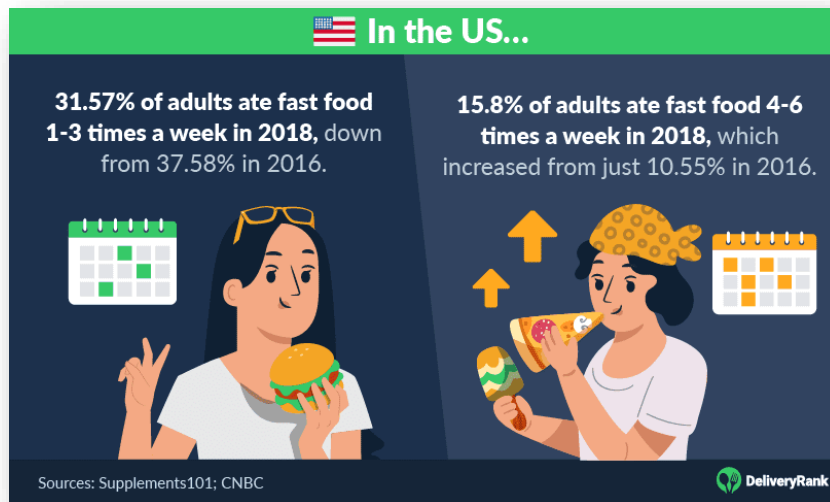
The reality for fast food workers is that they're more likely to live close to the poverty line. Around 52% of fast-food workers in the US are enrolled in a public program offering financial support, compared to 25% of the entire US workforce.

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GLOBAL FAST-FOOD HABITS

While every one of us probably loves a bit of fast food, some of us visit fast food franchises more often than others. How we consume fast food is affected by location, age, and even the time of day.

10. MAJORITY OF AMERICANS EAT FAST-FOOD EVERY WEEK



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In 2018, 31.57% of American adults claimed they ate fast food 1-3 times a week, which decreased from 37.58% in 2016.

A further 15.8% of adults opted for fast food meals 4-6 times a week, which means some Americans are consuming fast food almost daily. Interestingly, this figure has increased since 2016, when just 10.55% of US adults ate fast food for 4-6 of their weekly meals.

11. UK CONSUMPTION OF FAST-FOOD

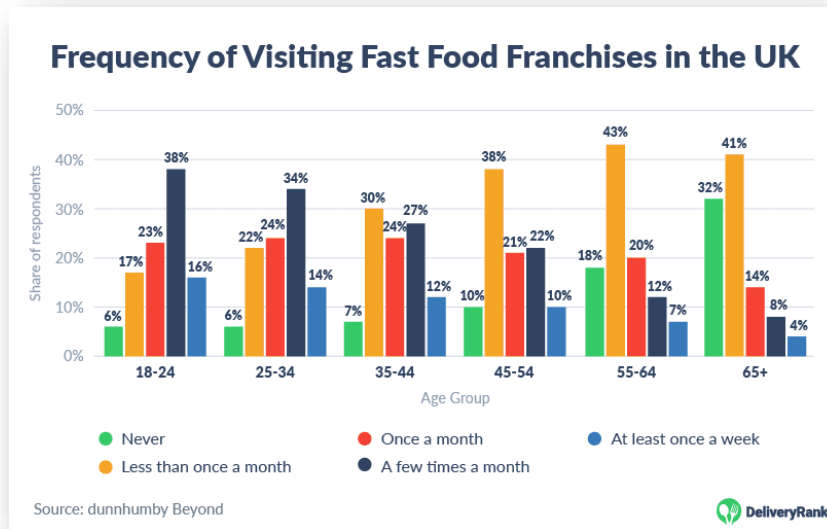


14

Brits are some of the biggest fast-food eaters in the world. And current trends highlight just how much fast food they really eat.

Although ready meals (AKA TV dinners) are more popular than fast food in the UK, people still consume around 22 million fast food meals weekly. Young adults in the UK are 7 times more likely to eat fast food than other age groups.

12. AGE EFFECTS FAST FOOD CONSUMPTION



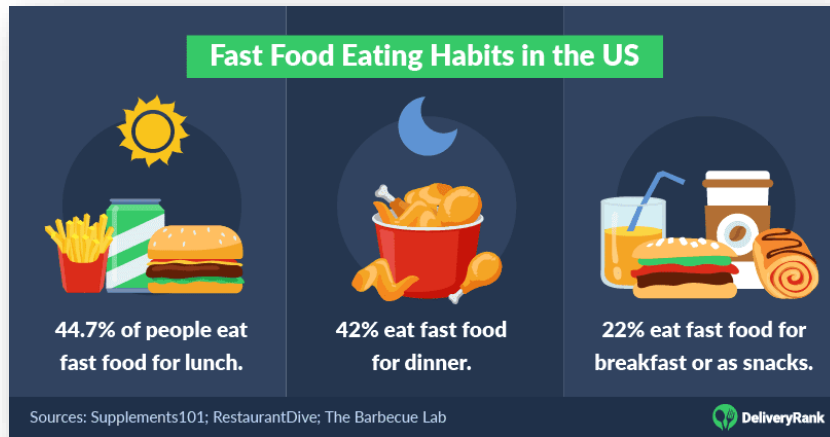
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When it comes down to who eats the most fast food, age is a huge contributing factor. Trends show that as we get older, we eat less fast food.

When people in the UK were asked how often they visit QSRs, 16% of respondents aged 18-24 said they eat fast food at least once a week, which is the highest of any age group. 38% said they eat fast food a few times each month.

But people aged 35+ were more likely to say they eat less fast food, with the majority claiming to consume fast food less frequently than once a month. And in the 65+ category, around 32% said they never eat at a fast food chain.

13. MOST PEOPLE IN THE US EAT FAST-FOOD FOR LUNCH



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In the US, fast food lunches are common, with 44.7% of people saying this is their ideal time of

the day to eat fast food. Dinner is a very close second, only 2% lower at 42%.

People still consume fast food for breakfast and as snacks, too. Around 22% of respondents said they opt for fast food for breakfast, and 22% eat it as a snack. Interestingly, spending on fast food for breakfast and snacks increased by 5% between 2015 and 2020, with fast food chains expanding their menus to cater for these meals.

14. MEN EAT THE MOST FAST-FOOD

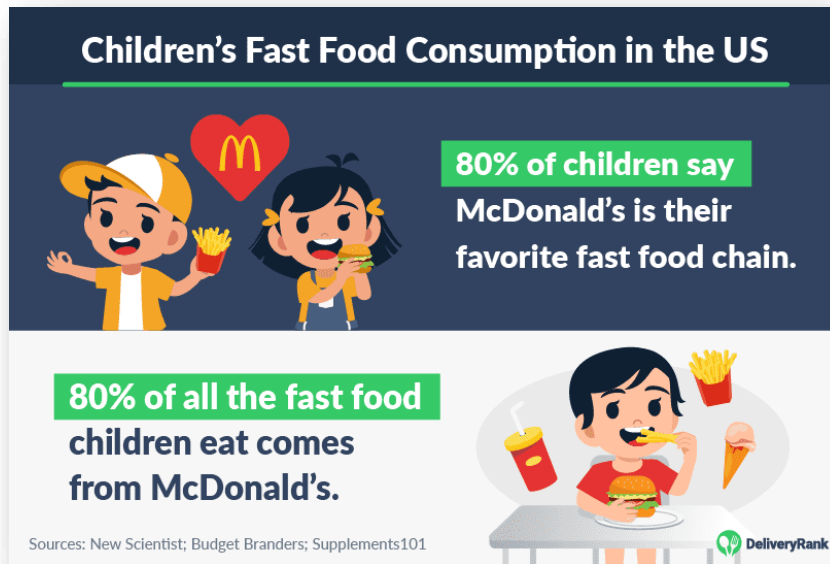


17

Men eat more fast food than women, but only slightly. On any given day, 38% of men in the US visit a fast-food restaurant, compared to 35% of women.

Their preferred fast-food meals differ, too. While men prefer to eat fast food for lunch, women tend to opt for fast food as a snack rather than a full meal.

15. CHILDREN FAVOUR MCDONALD'S OVER OTHER CHAINS



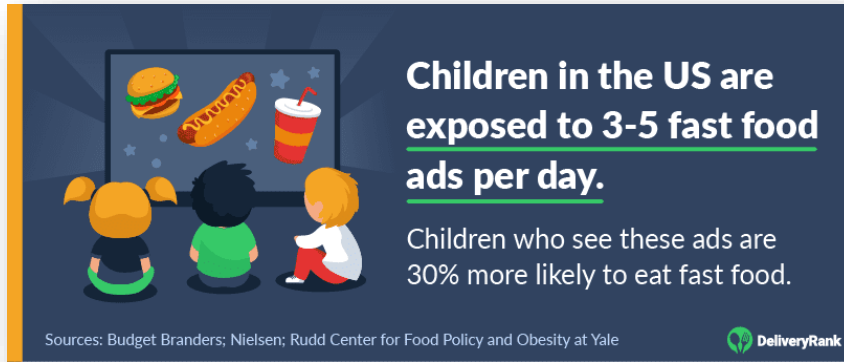
18

Children all over the world love fast food, but most favor one brand over others.

80% of children in the US say McDonald's is their fast-food place of choice. And indeed, 80% of the fast-food US kids eat is from McDonald's.

Fast food consumption is high among children, and it's increasing. Between 2009-2010, children aged 2-9 in the US gained under 11% of their daily calories from fast food. Between 2015-2018, this figure was higher, at around 14%.

16. MORE ADS MEANS MORE CONSUMPTION



19

Over half of food-related ads in the US are for fast-food. Approximately 52% of all food ads in the US are geared toward fast food, with many children viewing them on a daily basis.

Children are actually exposed to around 3-5 fast food ads per day in the US, and the link between ads and fast-food consumption is evident. Children who see fast food ads are 30% more likely to eat the advertised food.

17. CONSUMER SPENDING ON FAST-FOOD REACHES BILLIONS EVERY YEAR



20

Consumer spending in the fast-food industry has slightly decreased in recent years, though the pandemic is likely to blame for this decline. In 2018, consumer spending topped \$299 billion in the US, but in 2020, this dropped to \$272 billion.

Still, the average American spends \$1,200 each year on fast food. Over a lifetime, that equates to over \$70,000.

18. MOST PEOPLE EAT FAST FOOD FOR CONVENIENCE



21

Although many of us enjoy the taste of our favorite fast-food meal, the main reason we opt for fast food is convenience.

In a 2020 survey in the US, over 71% of people said they choose fast food because it's convenient, with only 37.6% opting for fast food for taste. A further 33% said they choose fast food because of its low cost in comparison to other options.

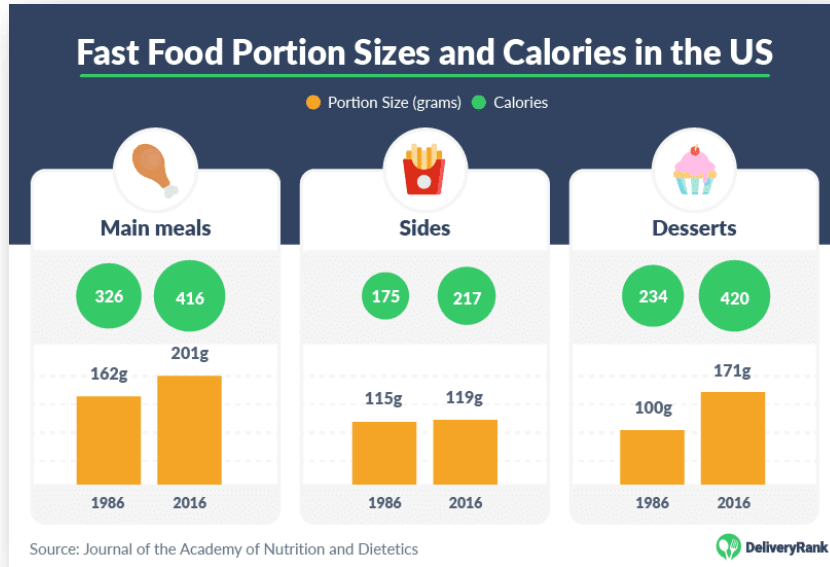
But with popular [food delivery services like Blue Apron and Sunbasket](#) offering low-calorie meal kits delivered straight to your door, fast food restaurants are finding themselves with unexpected competition.

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FAST FOOD TRENDS AROUND THE WORLD

Fast-food has evolved over the last few decades, with new and expanded menus, more emphasis on food sourcing, and changes in the ways fast food is delivered to customers.

19. FAST-FOOD PORTION SIZES HAS GROWN



23

Since the 1980s, the portion sizes of fast food have been gradually increasing. And despite many chains now offering better-for-you options, calorie counts have still risen considerably.

In the 1980s, the average fast-food entrée in the US weighed 162g and contained around 320 calories. But 30 years later in 2016, entrées weighed just over 200g and contained nearly 100 more calories.

Desserts and sides have also steadily increased in total calories. Sides typically have 40 more calories, while desserts have almost doubled in size and contain 70+ more calories.

20. CHAINS ARE TRYING TO DROP CALORIES



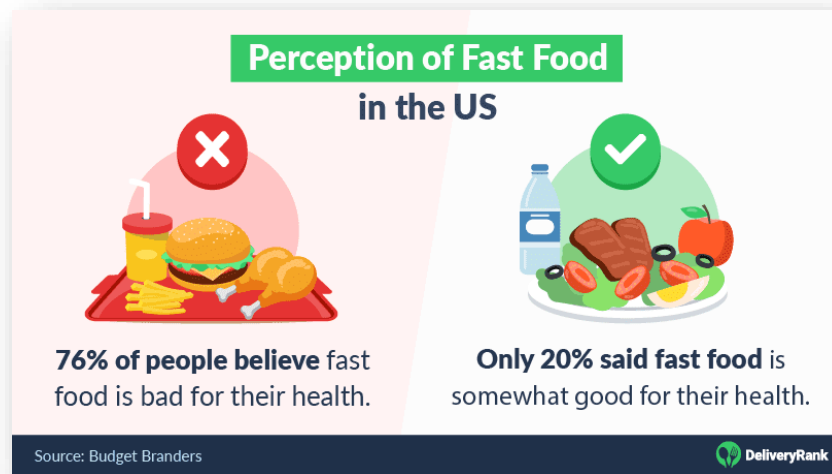
24

With portion sizes growing and obesity a global concern, fast food chains are under pressure to drop calories in their menu items.

Research conducted in the US found that the average fast food menu item in 2013 contained 12% fewer calories than in 2012. McDonald's was one of the first chains to make changes, removing high fructose corn syrup from its burger buns and reducing the use of artificial preservatives. But 10 years later, there's still more work to be done.

In the UK, fast food chains (alongside cafés and restaurants) have been urged to lower the caloric content of their foods by at least 20% by 2024, in an effort to tackle the ongoing obesity crisis.

21. MOST PEOPLE BELIEVE FAST-FOOD IS UNHEALTHY



25

Long-standing consumer perceptions are tough to change, even with major fast-food chains lowering the caloric content of their menu items.

The majority of fast-food eaters believe it's unhealthy, with 76% of people in the US saying junk food is bad for your health. Only 20% of respondents said they thought fast food was somewhat good for your health.

22. CONSUMERS WANT HEALTHIER FAST-FOOD OPTIONS



26

Most of us are now looking for healthier options on fast food menus.

In a US survey, 39% of people said having healthy options on the menu is a key factor influencing their decision to eat at a fast-food restaurant.

That means the fast-food industry is under pressure to adapt and expand its menus, which many chains are doing, especially for children. By 2015, around 30% of US fast food chains were offering healthier options on kids' menus, such as fruit and vegetables.

However, research conducted in the US showed that offering healthier options for children doesn't mean kids are eating them. The findings from the 2018 report showed that only 50% of parents purchased a healthier side dish for their children, while only 56% opted for a lighter drink.

23. BURGERS ORDERS ARE SURGING

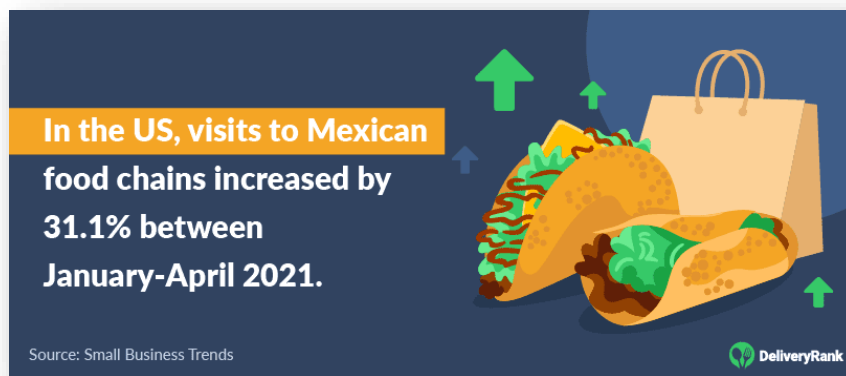


27

Across the US in the first quarter of 2021, fast food orders surged by around 33%. And burgers were one of the most popular choices.

Between January and April 2021, there was a 54.4% increase in visits to burger chains. Burgers come in 4th on the list of the most frequently ordered food items, with around 40.8% of people ordering them. Fries and onion rings still topped the list, accounting for 55.3% of orders.

24. THE DEMAND FOR MEXICAN FOOD IS ALSO HIGH



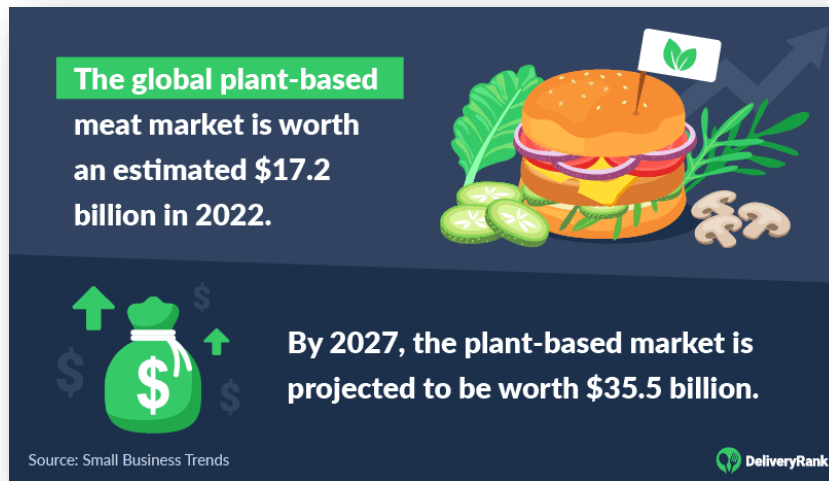
28

Burgers aren't the only food item seeing an increase in consumer demand.

In the first quarter of 2021 in the US, 32.1% more people visited Mexican fast-food restaurants than in the previous year. Clearly, consumers want more variety from fast food chain menus – long gone are the days of a plain burger and fries.

Fried chicken also saw a huge increase in sales, with 29.5% more visits to chains selling it.

25. MAJOR CHAINS ARE OFFERING PLANT-BASED ALTERNATIVES



29

You don't have to go far to hear the word "vegan" nowadays. More and more of us are moving toward a plant-based lifestyle, or simply cutting down on our meat consumption.

McDonald's is one of the leaders in this category with the introduction of its McPlant burger. Many more competitors are also likely to branch out their vegan menus. Also taking up this trend are other, possibly even healthier, [vegan delivery services](#).

Globally, the plant-based meat value is worth an estimated \$17.2 billion as of 2023, and this is expected to grow year over year. By 2027, it's forecasted that the plant-based market will double to \$35.5 billion. One thing is for sure — veganism is here to stay.

26. SUSTAINABLY SOURCED MEAT IS A CONSUMER REQUIREMENT



30

More of us are paying attention not only to the nutritional value and contents of our food, but also to where it comes from.

In the US, 41% of people said they were “very interested” in locally sourced meat and poultry. In another worldwide survey, between 15-22% of people said that sustainably sourced meat is more appealing than a low price, making it more important than ever that fast food chains support sustainable farming practices.

Sustainably sourced meat usually costs more, but consumers are generally willing to pay those higher prices. A large share of respondents in a UK survey stated they would pay extra for free-range or enhanced-welfare meat.

In particular, 20% of people aged between 25-34 said they “strongly agreed” with paying more for sustainably sourced meats. This was the highest of all age categories.

27. SOME COUNTRIES ARE CRAVING MORE FOOD TYPES



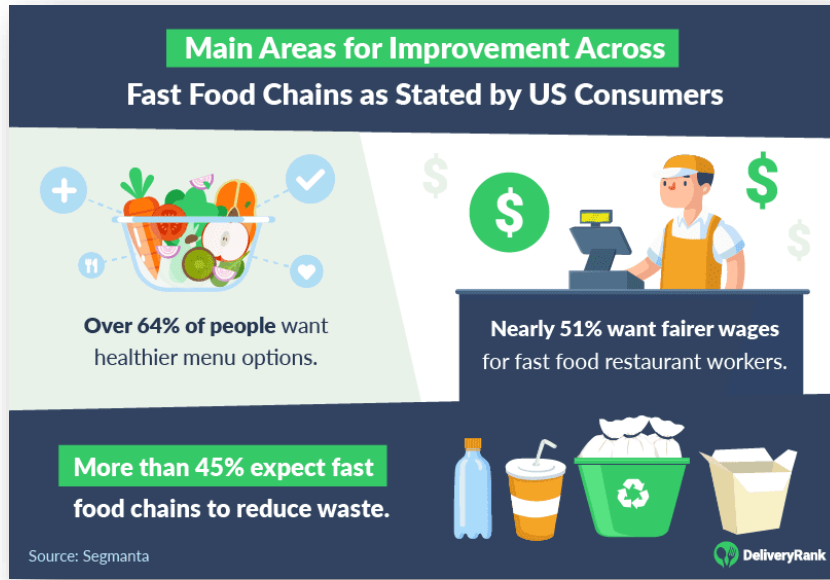
31

Fast-food variety is something most consumers want, And there’s already an assortment of different cuisines that are tickling the taste buds of our global population.

When European consumers were asked what they’d like to see more of, Chinese, American, Mexican, Indian, Japanese, and Greek were among the most popular choices.

Healthy food was stated by consumers in the United Kingdom (23%) and Spain (34%), highlighting that we’re becoming ever more health conscious and in search of lighter, more nutritious options.

28. FAST-FOOD CHAINS ARE UNDER PRESSURE TO IMPROVE



32

Consumers are wanting more from their favorite fast-food chains, and not just in regard to the food on offer.

In a 2020 US survey, healthier ingredients and food items were the main areas where fast food eaters think restaurants can improve, with over 64% of people hoping for lower-calorie options.

But consumers also want fast food chains to improve in other areas – and labor costs are a priority. Over 50% of respondents wanted to see fairer wages for fast food restaurant workers, highlighting the pressure to increase hourly rates.

Reducing waste was also a key concern, with 45.5% of respondents wanting fast-food chains to focus their attention on sustainability and reducing the impact of fast-food waste on the environment.

29. MORE CUSTOMERS HAVE BEEN OPTING FOR DRIVE-THRU OR CURBSIDE PICKUP



33

The pandemic stopped people all over the world from visiting their favorite fast-food restaurants. Although fewer of us are eating at fast food restaurants, that doesn't necessarily mean we're eating less of it — we're just changing where we're eating it.

Drive-thrus and curbside pickups were already popular pre-pandemic, but COVID-19 forced the growth of these dining options. During the peak of COVID-19 in the US, 88.5% of people opted for drive-thru or curbside pickup options to get their fast-food fix.

Many fast-food chains are expanding their drive-thrus to make way for the future. Taco Bell in Brooklyn Park has already upgraded its drive-thru to include four lanes rather than two. And Starbucks, one of the most valued fast-food brands, said curbside pickup is a key factor in its post-pandemic recovery plan.

30. DIGITAL DELIVERIES ARE BECOMING MORE POPULAR



34

The pandemic forced just about everyone to order their favorite fast food online.

Had there been no pandemic, the penetration of online food delivery in the US market was estimated to be 12% in 2023. However, thanks to COVID-19, that figure is now forecasted to be 16%. And it's expected to grow year after year.

By 2025, online food deliveries are predicted to take up 21% of the US market. Had there been no pandemic, the projected penetration was only 15% by 2025.

COVID-19 has certainly created a shift in how we're buying and eating fast food. By 2024,

69.9 million of US consumers are expected to use food e-delivery services.

There are already plenty of affordable and healthy [online delivery services](#) claiming space in the food industry, putting fast food chains under pressure to innovate fast.

31. THE eDELIVERY KEY PLAYERS ARE BUSIER THAN EVER



35

The number of smartphone delivery app users in the US in 2023 is projected to hit 53.9%, up from 44.1% in 2021. With more of us ordering online, eDelivery companies will have to prepare.

In fact, revenue in the QSR eDelivery market reached an impressive \$25.7 billion in 2018. By the end of 2023, this figure is forecasted to rise by a third, to \$33.2 billion.

Grubhub, Uber Eats, DoorDash, Postmates, and Caviar are some of the most popular and busy food delivery companies. Grubhub currently holds the largest market share at around 29%. But DoorDash’s market share is increasing faster than any of the others, with US consumers stating this as the most used eDelivery service in the last 12 months.

32. CHINA IS AHEAD OF THE GAME



36

Most countries are using eDelivery, but this model is most prevalent in China, the world's largest online food delivery market.

Revenue for eDelivery food services reached \$58.7 billion in 2021, with an expected growth rate of 12.1% between 2022-2027. This means the eDelivery market in China is forecasted to reach over \$118 billion by 2027.

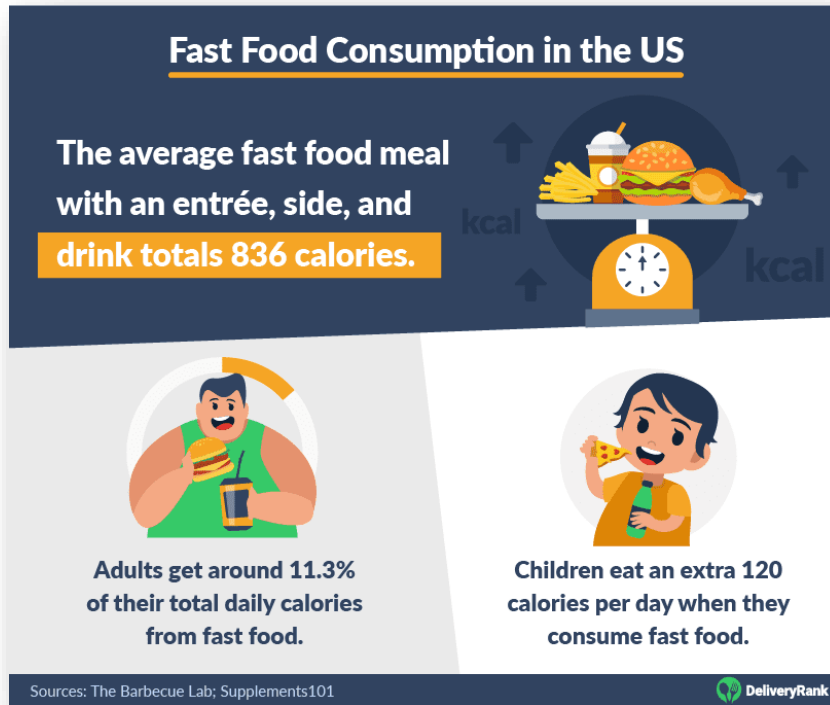
In China, Meituan Waimai and Ele.me are the most commonly used eDelivery apps, accounting for 92% and 77% of orders.

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The Impact of Fast-Food Consumption

One thing is certain — as a global population, we consume a lot of fast food. But what effect does that have on our health? And what footprint does it leave on our environment?

33. FAST-FOOD LEADS TO AN OVERCONSUMPTION OF CALORIES



38

Studies show that despite a slight decrease in the last few years, calories in fast food meals have steadily increased over the last 30 years. In fact, Americans get around 11.3% of their average total daily calories just from fast food.

The average fast-food meal with an entrée, side, and drink totals around 836 calories, which is nearly half the daily recommended calorie allowance for women.

For children, it's even worse. When kids eat fast food, they tend to eat an extra 120 calories per day. While the odd fast-food meal here and there won't make much difference, regular visits to the drive-thru can add up to measurable weight gain.

34. FAST-FOOD CAN INCREASE OBESITY RISK

The infographic is divided into two horizontal sections. The top section has a light grey background and features an illustration of three fast-food restaurants: a burger joint, a pizza place, and a general fast-food store. A red exclamation mark is placed above the pizza place. Text on the left states: "Living near a fast food restaurant increases your risk of obesity by 5.2%." The bottom section has a dark blue background and features an illustration of a pregnant woman in a green shirt eating a burger and drinking a soda. A yellow exclamation mark is to her left, and a yellow plus sign is to her right. Text on the right states: "Eating fast food twice a week doubles your risk of developing Type 2 Diabetes." At the bottom left, it says "Source: The Barbecue Lab" and at the bottom right is the "DeliveryRank" logo.

Living near a fast food restaurant increases your risk of obesity by 5.2%.

Eating fast food twice a week doubles your risk of developing Type 2 Diabetes.

Source: The Barbecue Lab

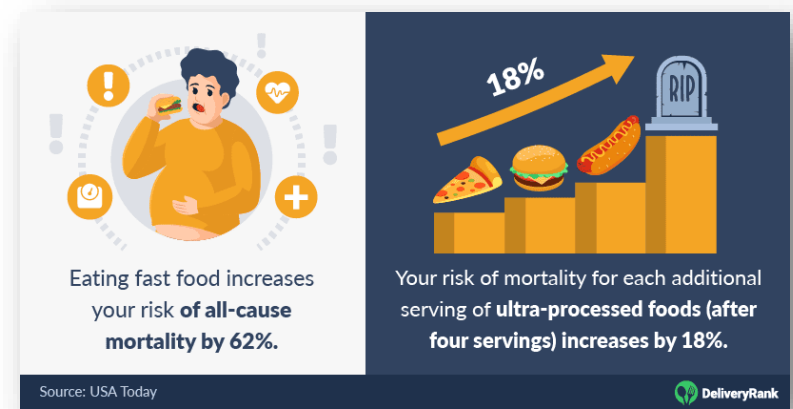
DeliveryRank

39

Consuming too many calories inevitably leads to weight gain, which comes with many health risks.

Eating fast food twice a week or more can double someone’s risk of developing Type 2 diabetes, since it encourages insulin resistance. Just living near a fast-food restaurant can increase your risk of developing obesity by over 5%.

35. FAST-FOOD INCREASES EARLY MORTALITY RISK



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With a higher risk of obesity and Type 2 diabetes also comes an increased risk of developing other health problems, and even of early mortality.

A 2019 French study found that eating ultra-processed foods, including fast food, increases your risk of early mortality by an astonishing 62%. In fact, for each additional serving of ultra-processed foods per day (after four servings), your risk of early mortality rises by 18%.

36. WE UNDERESTIMATE THE NUMBER OF CALORIES IN FAST-FOOD



41

Most of us have no idea how many calories are actually in our burgers and fries. In fact, we tend to severely underestimate how many calories our favorite fast-food meals contain, which is a scary thought.

In a Harvard Medical School report, a group of children, adolescents, and adults were asked how many calories they thought were in a range of McDonald's, Wendy's, Burger King, Subway, KFC, and Dunkin' Donuts meals.

Compared to the actual nutritional content, all groups underestimated calories in these meals by at least 170. Adolescents missed the mark the most, estimating over 250 fewer calories than the actual number.

37. SOFT DRINKS LEAVE US WANTING MORE



42

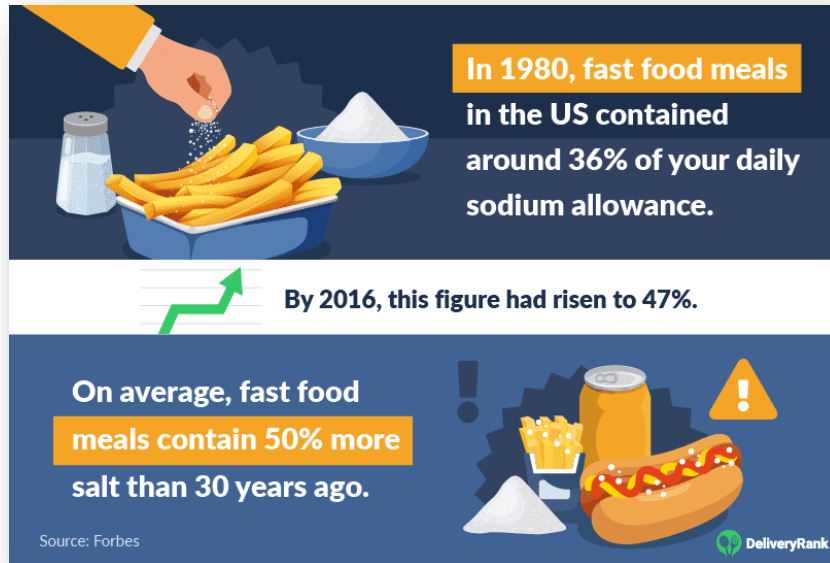
The soft drink from your favorite fast-food chain might taste great, but it's probably not great for you.

Most soft drinks contain a high level of high-fructose corn syrup, which is not only bad for your teeth, but also leaves you wanting more.

The blood sugar spikes that follow these drinks can make you feel dehydrated, ironically making you want another drink. Do fast food chains use this syrup because it tastes nice, or is it to get you to buy more?

Actually, research shows that excess availability of corn syrup led to a significant drop in prices, which meant fast food chains (and other soft drink companies) could save money by switching to corn-based ingredients. Regardless of the cheaper price, though, it leaves us spending more.

38. FAST-FOOD CHAINS ADD MORE SALT TO YOUR MEAL



43

Many fast-food chains have tried to find ways to reduce the overall sodium content in their meals in recent years, but that doesn't mean it's gone completely. Salt content is still much higher than a few decades ago.

30 years ago, the average fast-food meal in the US contained around 36% of your recommended daily sodium allowance. By 2016, this had increased to 47%, with a fast-food meal containing nearly half of your daily salt content.

On average, they're putting 50% more salt in your food than they were in the 1980s. Thirsty yet?

39. FAST-FOOD MAKES US HUNGRIER



44

Ever eaten a fast-food meal and felt hungry again 30 minutes later? That's no coincidence.

Fast food is typically very high in salt, sugar, and fat, and studies have shown these foods can cause a spike in insulin, which leads to a drop in blood sugar. Thanks to that rise in insulin, it's likely you'll start to feel hungry again a short time after eating your fast-food meal.

Fast food is also designed to be highly palatable. That means it breaks down quickly as you chew it. Aside from the fact that your box is empty in no time at all, being highly palatable also triggers the reward centers in your brain, training it to crave these foods over more nutritious options.

40. BEEF PRODUCTION IS HARMING OUR ENVIRONMENT



45

As a global population, we eat too much beef. The health implications aren't the only issue — this is actually one of the main factors contributing to climate change. For every kilogram of beef farmed, roughly 60 kilograms of CO₂ is produced. In case you haven't heard, CO₂ is a harmful greenhouse gas that's damaging our environment. Farming beef creates around 14 times more CO₂ than raising pork and chicken, making it one of the worst culprits for climate change.

41. FAST-FOOD CREATES EXCESSIVE WASTE



46

Around the world, we waste a total of 1.3 billion tons of food every year, which is a third of all food produced for human consumption, including fast food.

Fast food chains are some of the biggest contributors to food waste. On average, individual fast-food kitchens create 200,000 pounds of food waste each year.

With over 160,000 fast food chains throughout the US, that equates to around 32 billion pounds of waste annually.

42. FAST-FOOD PACKAGING IS A PROBLEM



47

Not only do fast-food chains waste hundreds of tons of food every year, but they also waste a lot of packaging. Much of this packaging includes single-use plastics, which we all know are damaging our environment.

Fast food restaurants in the UK waste around 11 billion tons of packaging every year, most of which isn't recyclable. While many fast-food chains are taking steps to reduce waste, it's still a global problem. Globally, McDonald's throws away roughly 3 tons of packaging waste every minute.

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THE FUTURE OF FAST FOOD: TRENDS TO WATCH

As we look ahead to the next year and beyond, what does the future have in store for the fast-food industry? Things look set to change drastically as fast-food chains adapt to emerging customer trends, advancing technologies, and environmental pressures.

43. FAST-FOOD LABOUR COSTS WILL RISE



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In the US, labor costs were steadily rising at around 3% to 5% prior to the pandemic. The minimum wage is already set to rise to \$15 per hour in many states, with talk of a national minimum wage hike. This means fast food chains will be facing a steep increase in labor costs.

Some states, and some fast-food chains, have already implemented these changes. Starbucks has committed to paying its employees a minimum of \$15 an hour within the next 3 years.

While some say it's good to see fast food chains upping wages, the rise in labor costs likely means cutting costs elsewhere. Where that will be, we don't yet know.

44. FAST-FOOD CHAINS WILL CUT THEIR WORKFORCE



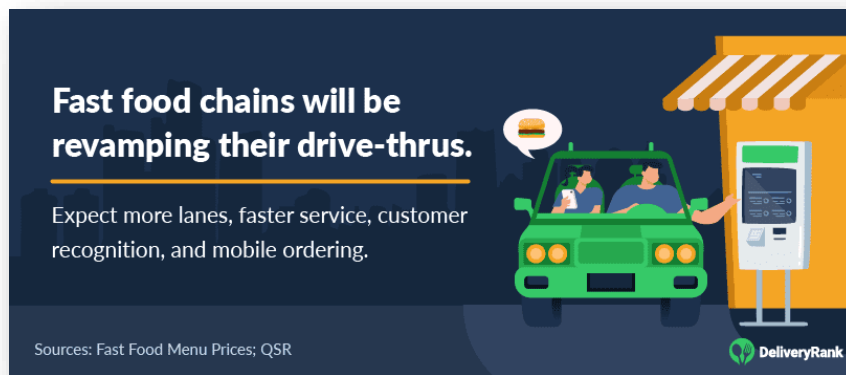
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Many fast-food chains are struggling to fill positions, while others are simply employing less staff. But something else is also putting fast food jobs at risk — technology.

Digitally driven curbside pickups are a key trend for the future. They will mean easier, faster ordering for customers, as well as less busy drive-thrus — resulting in less need for staff.

Drive-thrus are also likely to be getting upgrades, moving toward more automation and less human interaction. Not to mention the rise in eDeliveries, which means fewer people visiting fast food chains overall.

45. EXPECT BETTER DRIVE-THRU EXPERIENCES



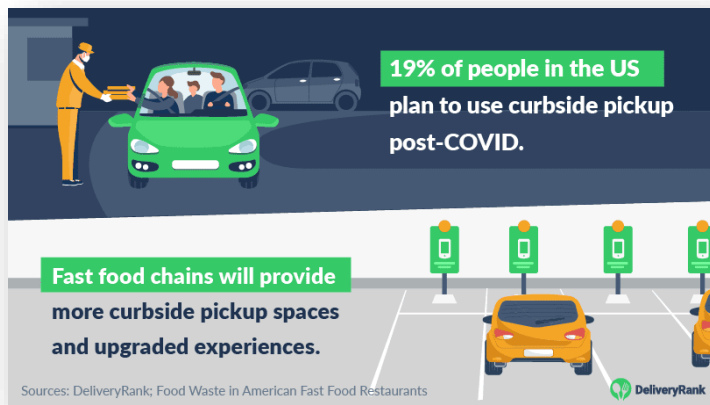
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Drive-thrus will likely be getting a complete makeover in the not-too-distant future.

Fast food chains that don't currently have drive-thrus will be installing them, and those that do will be upgrading them. Think more lanes, faster-than-ever service, mobile ordering, customer recognition, and much more.

With more customers on the road, however, many fast-food chains will be providing smaller restaurants, so there'll be fewer seats to choose from.

46. CURBSIDE PICKUP WILL BE THE NORM



52

The number of curbside pickups surged during lockdown, with 28% of people in the US saying they used them throughout the pandemic. More interestingly, 19% said they plan to use them post-COVID, showing that curbside pickups may be here to stay.

Popular fast food chains are already finding ways to update their curbside pickup spots, whether by creating new spaces or digitizing the spaces already available for a seamless ordering experience.

47. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE WILL CHANGE FAST-FOOD ORDERS



53

Fast-food chains are embracing artificial intelligence (AI) and using it to improve customer experience.

It's likely we'll see new, digitized features such as voice-command and personalization. Many fast-food chains will use AI to create tailored experiences for customers, including recommendations based on previous orders.

Chains that maximize the use of AI will be able to recognize customers before they pull up. They'll be able to see who their customers are and know what they order, so recommendations will pop up on screens before a customer even has time to open an app.

Taco Bell is already using AI to recommend the fastest route for customers when they arrive — either drive-thru or curbside pickup — to provide faster-than-ever service.

48. MEAL KITS WILL GIVE CONSUMERS MORE VARIETY



54

With the pandemic having forced restaurants to close their doors, many turned to meal delivery kits to maintain their customer bases.

These meal kits not only give customers a fun eating experience, but they give restaurants a cheaper alternative way of serving customers. It's a trend that's sticking around, and one that's likely to put fast food chains under pressure.

With an increasing number of easy meal delivery options, customers have more variety. And that might just mean they turn away from their favorite fast food chain in favor of something new.

49. FAST-FOOD eDELIVERY WILL GROW

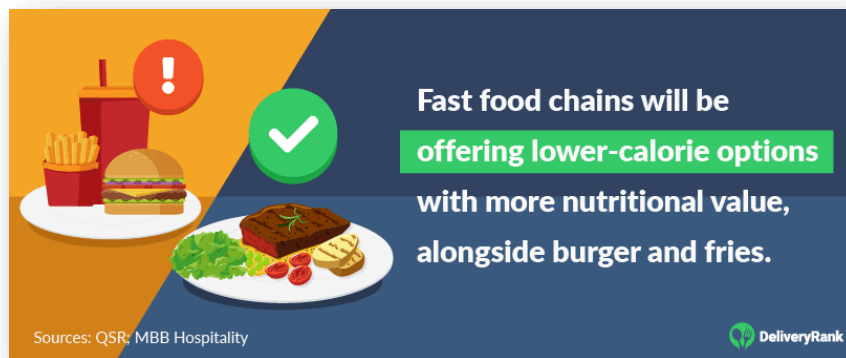


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The pandemic gave customers the opportunity to enjoy their favorite restaurant foods from the comfort of their own homes, and they enjoyed it.

Many consumers are actually expecting an option for eDelivery now. Some fast-food chains are opting for in-house delivery services, while others are choosing to partner with third-party providers such as Uber Eats and DoorDash. Either way, consumers want fast food delivered to their door.

50. EXPECT HEALTHIER MENU OPTIONS



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Healthier menus were top of consumers' list of areas they'd like fast food chains to improve. Fast food chains are listening, with many already offering lighter options. Expect to see more fast-food chains improving the nutritional content of their popular dishes, while also offering new, lighter meals to accommodate the calorie-conscious among us.

Not only will fast food restaurants be offering health-friendly meals, but also healthier drinks. Kombucha is a fast-growing trend known to be full of health benefits, and it's likely fast-food chains will soon be offering this on their menus.

51. MORE PLANT-BASED AND VEGAN CHOICES

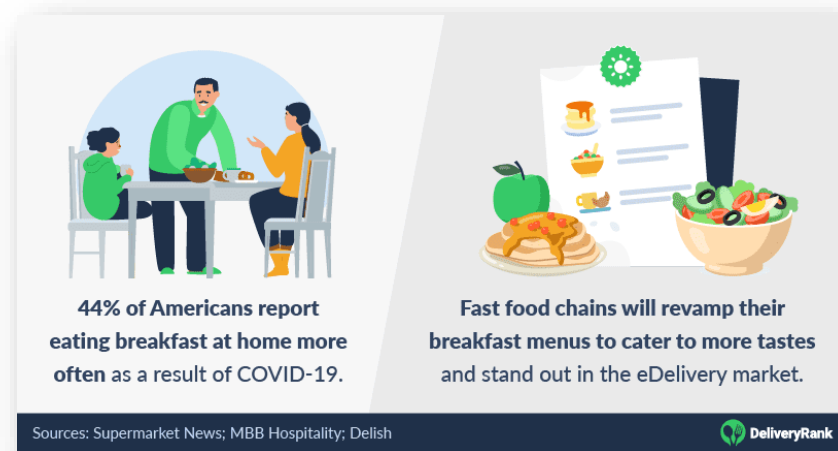


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The plant-based and vegan market is growing rapidly. More and more of us are turning toward veganism and consuming less meat overall.

Many fast-food chains are innovating to adapt their menus and cater to these choices. From vegan burgers and no-fish filets to dairy-free cheese and gluten-free buns, we can expect a whole lot of change in the fast-food menus we're used to.

52. BREAKFAST MENUS WILL EXPAND



58

Fast food breakfast menus typically only consist of a few breakfast sandwiches, eggs, and perhaps yogurt. But things are changing.

As a result of the pandemic, 44% of Americans report eating breakfast at home more often. This trend isn't likely to go away any time soon, so fast food chains will need to revamp their menus to cater for more tastes and options, especially if they want to stand out in the eDelivery market.

53. MORE ORGANIC OPTIONS



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Organic food sales have been increasing steadily for many years. In 2019, worldwide organic food sales reached \$106 billion – an increase from \$95 billion the year before.

More and more of us are also seeking out [organic delivery services](#) rather than opting for fast food meals.

Fast food chains are capitalizing on this growing food trend by paying more attention to the food they source, especially meat. These chains are aware of the risk they run if they do not take steps to source sustainably farmed meat or make organic ingredients a priority.

54. MORE SUSTAINABLE PACKAGING



60

Sustainability doesn't just cover food ingredients. Fast food restaurants are rethinking the way they package their goods, opting for more environmentally friendly options.

In particular, we'll see fast food chains getting rid of plastic straws and cutlery, eliminating Styrofoam packaging, and reducing food waste.

Generally, consumers are willing to pay more for sustainably sourced ingredients and sustainable packaging, making the extra investment from fast food chains important if they want to appeal to their loyal diners.

THE BOTTOM LINE

THE BOLLOW LINE

Even as more of us are looking elsewhere to satisfy our cravings, the fast-food industry continues to grow.

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The QSR industry is quick to adapt to new trends, and many chains are already thinking of new, healthier menu choices, eDelivery options, and adopting technology to keep us coming back for more.

But there's new competition in the space. The pandemic created a huge shift in how we consume food, and now restaurants are upping their game and offering online deliveries and meal-kits, too.

Can the fast-food industry evolve fast enough to maintain the same market share? Probably, but only time will tell. Anyone for a pizza?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Elly Hancock is a UK-based freelance writer with a love of all things food. She's a strong believer in the motto 'everything in moderation', but enjoys re-creating recipes into healthier options. If she's not in the latest restaurant or cooking up a storm in the kitchen, you can find Elly on a long dog walk or in the gym.

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