

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HOW WE EAT

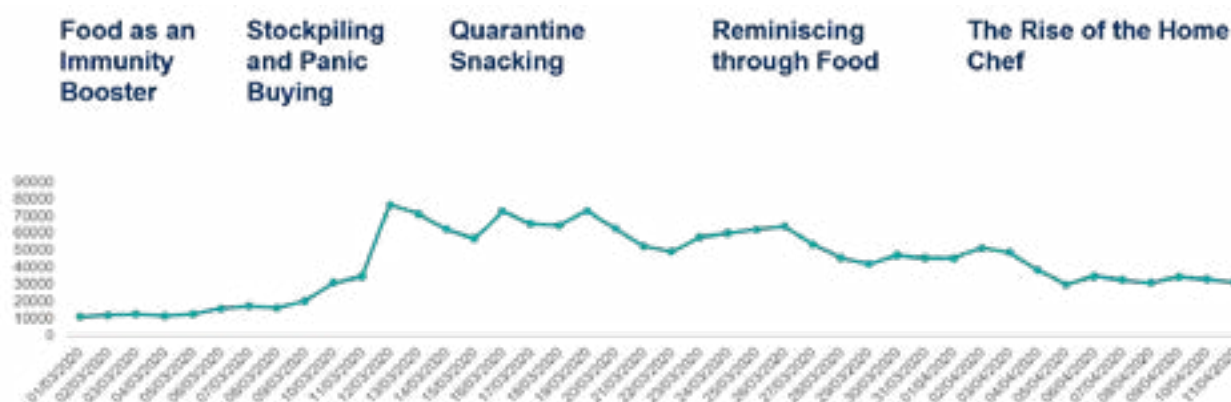
By Tara Beard-Knowland | May 2020



As the coronavirus pandemic has progressed, the way people think about food has changed. When there was less certainty, we saw consumers respond accordingly – looking for food immunity boosters and panic buying ‘essentials’. As time has gone on, a new normal has come about with more snacking (heightening the ‘clean eating’ vs. indulgence trends) and using food as a connection point with life ‘how it used to be.’ Most recently, we’ve seen the rise of the home chef, as there are fewer other options and people take the plunge with more and more challenging recipes.

Over the past weeks and months, we’ve been keeping an eye on social media conversation about the COVID-19 pandemic. When we look at global English-language posts, we see that individuals have gone through a series of phases, which reflect an evolution of their attitudes and behaviours. Applying a category lens to these phases, such as food and eating, allows us to explore how category conversations and behaviours have changed and how brands can respond to these changes. This is especially interesting with categories like food which sit at the bottom of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.

Over the past few weeks, we have seen conversations around food centre around a number of key themes:



FOOD AS AN IMMUNITY BOOSTER

In early March, awareness of COVID-19 was rising rapidly, but understanding of the virus and comprehension of the potential severity was limited. During this time, food-related posts tended to focus on eating to enhance health and boost the immune system. Fear during these early stages drove people to seek some form of control over the situation by feeling they were protecting themselves against the virus by taking measures they perceived as preventative.



Vitamin C MEGADOSING for Prevention of Illness & Coronavirus (Science)

STOCKPILING AND PANIC BUYING

As the reality of the virus and its severity began to set in, this had a jarring impact on food buying behaviours. Uncertainty drove people to stockpile as many groceries and essential foods as possible, causing shortages in supermarkets worldwide, high levels of consumer frustration and driving many supermarkets to impose purchasing restrictions. With many big, trusted brands being the first to sell out, this was a period when many consumers were more open to brand switching and trying alternative products.



Mega Costco Haul | Preparing for Coronavirus Quarantine | Family of Seven

QUARANTINE SNACKING

As quarantine became a reality for most in mid-March, people began sharing details of their quarantine lives in an effort to stay connected with the rest of the world. During this time, quarantine snacks became a key focus of conversation with posts split into two camps.

The first were those who saw quarantine as an opportunity for a healthy cleanse of their bodies and were posting their healthy snacks and recipes to support this. The second were those who found that a sudden influx of extra time drove an increase in boredom-induced unhealthy snacking, fuelled by an excess of food at home due to stockpiling. However, this camp tended to embrace the extra snacking, and the comfort it brought, as part of quarantine life at this stage.

This reflects a broader, long-term trend we see in social media – clean eating vs. indulgent eating – but it has become heightened as a result of the crisis.



REMINISCING THROUGH FOOD

Towards the end of March, as people settled into their new quarantine routines, there was some reflection on life before the pandemic and how rapidly lives had changed over the past few weeks. Food and food-related experiences are a key part of this, as many consumers reminisced about easy access to eating out and restaurant meals, as well as the ability to bond with friends and family over food that they used to take for granted. They cooked meals that reflected those great times they had 'pre-COVID' and/or talked about the things they planned to eat together once restrictions were relaxed, whatever their country.



THE RISE OF THE HOME CHEF

As staying home becomes the new normal, many find themselves embracing new home-based hobbies as they develop new ways to keep their days interesting. One key way to avoid monotony is to add variety to your daily meals and invest time and creative energy into preparing these. Consumer content centres around documenting home-made creations and posting recipe ideas for others to try. In addition to developing a key skill, avoiding monotony and providing a creative outlet, sharing these online allows many to feel part of a wider community sharing, motivating and developing their skills together.



As consumer conversation continues to develop in response to changes in the consumer mindset, the impact this has on different category behaviours should continue to be tracked to ensure that clients are able to keep abreast of and respond quickly to rapidly evolving consumer needs.

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