

# SANTE™

THE MAGAZINE FOR RESTAURANT PROFESSIONALS

VOLUME 9.4  
JUNE 2005

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sweet **charm**

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## just don't bet the farm!

by andrew hunter



**Chef Andrew Hunter is the president of San Francisco-based RDMS (rd-ms.com), a firm that offers creative culinary concepts and profitable business systems to the foodservice industry. Clients include a wide range of companies, from visionary startups to established leaders. He is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, with 25 years of foodservice experience in culinary development, menu operations, and training.**

Forecasting trends is a risky business, which is why those of us who have been entrusted to do so must take the job seriously. After all, people's livelihoods are at stake. Most of us would like to believe that the next list of hot ingredients, innovative techniques, and emerging cuisines are in our crystal ball. The fact is there's a lot of guesswork in forecasting. Some guesses are more educated than others—but we're still guessing.

Well-intentioned bad guesses abound. For example, a sincere guy phoned me a while back, saying, "The United States is about to lift the trade embargo on Cuba, and I want to be ahead of the curve." His vision was to open Cuban fast-food joints across the country. He was going to fund the first couple with his home equity and savings, then persuade investors to bet their own money on the concept. Unfortunately, a great sandwich doesn't make a cuisine, and the rest of Cuba's food is an unremarkable assembly of stewed meat and beans. Luckily, he decided that the concept was not ideal for our grab-and-go society. He's back to being a computer whiz and investing in his kid's college fund.

### STUNTS, FADS, AND TRENDS

When asked to talk about trends, I tell people there's a lot of confusion out there. And, frankly, the confusion is propagated by many of the major food and news publications. They give coverage to stunts, often mistake fads for trends, and typically forget to remind chefs that "being on trend" doesn't mean much if they aren't paying attention to the pillars of their hospitality oath.

A *stunt's* primary purpose is to grab headlines, cover stories, and morning-show banter. Each is typically short-lived, rarely copied, and easy to spot. I'll refrain from naming stunts here to protect the guilty.

*Fads* can be tougher to identify. They're like a trend's younger brother—they look the same but aren't as cool. A gardening analogy might illustrate

the difference best: fads are seasonal, while trends are perennial. Time is usually our best resource for distinguishing between the two. Unfortunately, some restaurants striving to be trendy invest money or—worse—their identity in fads. They bet the farm and then close their doors a year later because their customers have gone to "the latest" joint down the street. My crystal ball says that chefs-as-chemists (think foams, liquefied ingredients, and misted aromas) is a fad because it can be sustained only by an elite group of talented chefs who cater to an equally elite group of customers. Small doses of chemistry, like bursts of flavorful powders, are entering mainstream menus. This development is exciting, but most chefs who substitute chemistry for cuisine will be forced to reinvent themselves.

A *trend* is a movement that is popular from one season to the next. As its novalike quality begins to fade, it becomes a part of mainstream eating habits, cravings, and lifestyles (think chipotle peppers). Ingredients are rarely trends by themselves. Blueberries, wild fish, chocolate, and exotic sea salts aren't individual trends but part of the functional-foods trend. I wouldn't invest in good carbs or bad carbs per se but rather in the healthy and sustainable lifestyle movement that's sweeping the nation. I would also put my money on artisan products and ingredients with provenance like Chinook Bay salmon, Traverse City Bing cherries, small-batch Kentucky bourbon, and handcrafted San Francisco sourdough. These are real products made by real people that have local and regional investment.

Stay abreast of trends, capitalize on fads, and even pull a stunt of your own once in a while. It will keep your business vibrant, your staff motivated, and your customers intrigued. But don't invest large sums of money or your restaurant's identity in the process. And whatever you do, don't forget your hospitality oath: to serve great food at a fair price in a relaxing environment. That will beget generations of customers at your fine establishment.