



# Food Forecast

2024



If 2022 was the post-pandemic comeback year for the food service industry, 2023 was its victory lap. Restaurants have been bustling with customers, social media has been bubbling with culinary chatter that seeps into the greater culture, and more and more food brands have been launching products that taste good and do good, for people and the planet.

At Baldor Specialty Foods, our job is finding these great foods, then getting them in the hands of great chefs. Our product catalog includes more than 6,000 items across produce, specialty, dairy, meat, poultry, and fish, and we have nearly 13,000 customers across the industry, from restaurants to grocery stores to event spaces, from Maine to Virginia. And, as a testament to our quality, our customer list includes 75% of Michelin-starred restaurants in our regions.

That quality is owed to the stringent curatorial process practiced by our expert team of merchants—which includes Kenneth Bower, Matt Rendine, and Donald Russo on Produce; Emily Murphy, Franklin Romero, and Suzy Kang on Specialty, Dairy, and Grocery; Kevin Lindgren and Peter Mistretta on Meat and Protein, and Mike Lettas from Pierless Fish on seafood and aquaculture.

"What makes Baldor different is the pride that we take in the products that we source," said Lindgren, Director of Protein Merchandising. "We're always making sure that our customers can rely on us regardless of what's going on in the world."

Baldor has long been committed to sourcing products with great flavors and impactful missions. In 2024, we're amping up that promise, focusing on brands that improve their little corner of the world so our customers can feel good about what they're purchasing and serving. These brands are leading food and restaurants into 2024 and beyond, making waves as pioneers and trendsetters. Read on for the food trends we're seeing at every level of the industry.



# 2024 Trends in Foods

Our Directors of Merchandising are available for comment on any of the below topics.

## NATURALLY LOW SUGAR

Alternative sweeteners, like stevia, were all the rage for several years. But now we're seeing a push toward products that are naturally low in sugar as opposed to using sugar substitutes. **Spindrift Sparkling Water**, which was a pioneer in this category, is a great example in the drinks space—their products rely on real fruit juice to bring a touch of sweetness. Our newest add in this category is **Copra Coconut Nectar**, a sweetener similar to agave nectar that is low on the glycemic index and offers an ideal one-to-one swap in cocktails, ice cream, and even overnight oats. Baldor is stocking a squeeze bottle of the nectar that's great for quick grab-and-go use, as well as a larger bag-in-box option for the industrial production side. And for cafés looking to make truly healthy smoothies or smoothie bowls, **Pitaya Foods Unsweetened Acai** is a great product that tastes wonderful without any added sugar.

## CULTURED OIL

Murphy, Director of Specialty Merchandising, predicts that cultured oil will quickly make its way into restaurant kitchens and households this year, much in the way that **Impossible Burgers** and **Beyond Meat** became household names. Cultured oil is a neutral cooking oil that's made from fermented sugarcane and is far more environmentally conscious than many of the vegetable and seed oils we've grown accustomed to using. Plus, it's got more heart-healthy fats and less inflammatory fats. We've brought in **Zero Acre Cultured Oil**—Chef Dan Barber is an investor in the company, which tells you about its quality and sustainability. While it's not intended to be a replacement for fine finishing oils, like extra virgin olive oil, it's perfect for cooking. Its fattiness and high smoke point (485° F) work well for roasting, sautéing, or frying.



## MUSHROOMS

Mushrooms are nothing new on menus (or in the aisles of natural foods stores as medicinal powders and tinctures). For years restaurants have served the ubiquitous portobello burger or sautéed creminis as a side or scattered over chicken or beef. But now the variety of mushrooms we're seeing is expanding mightily. A vegetarian customer might be served an elaborate entrée of roasted maitakes. We've seen King Oyster steaks, smoky King Trumpet skewers, and Hen of the Woods parmesan (like eggplant parm). Our data supports the reality that people are becoming increasingly

interested in lesser-known mushrooms, like **Pom Poms** (also known as Lion's Mane mushrooms)—the demand for these grew nearly 300% year over year. The growth is similar for **Chanterelles** and **King Trumpets**, which has led our Produce team to secure new partners and broaden our mushroom program as a whole. We believe some growing interest for certain 'shrooms, including those Pom Poms, is because of its perceived adaptogenic effects, meaning that they may help reduce stress impact from the body.

## ALLERGY AWARENESS

Although celiac disease, nut allergies, and lactose intolerance have been part of the food zeitgeist for years, we're seeing a notable surge in products that taste great and appeal to everyone and also meet the needs of those with dietary restrictions.

**88 Acres** is a company known for seed butters and protein bars that are free of several allergens, including peanuts, tree nuts, gluten, dairy, and eggs. The response to our 88 Acres partnership has been so overwhelming that we're adding additional products from their line. (Spoiler alert: Get

ready for a crazy-good granola.) Customer interest in **Kite Hill's** dairy-free sour cream, cream cheese, and ricotta cheese has been similarly strong; look for more products in the coming year. For gluten-free offerings, we're excited about our new partnership with **Original Sunshine**, whose bagels pass muster with iconic New York bagel shops like Russ & Daughters and Black Seed Bagels. According to Murphy, Original Sunshine makes the best gluten-free bagel out there.

## FAIR TRADE 2.0

Fair trade promises better prices, decent working conditions, and more equity for farmers and workers in developing countries. But at Baldor, we're seeing brands like **SIMPLi** infuse the phrase with new life and meaning. "Now brands are talking about regenerative farming practices and soil health, as well as the ecosystem beyond putting seed in the ground," explains Murphy. And the commitment goes even beyond the walls or boundaries of the farm or producer: "How is their local community doing? How are companies able to help the community grow by investing in local workforces and schools so the area can be economically and socially healthy?" SIMPLi's leadership in prioritizing workers and communities in Peru has been impressive. (We currently offer chia seeds and quinoa from SIMPLi and have exciting new expansions underway.) Across Baldor, we're working to grow the number of categories via which we offer certified fair trade products in 2024.



## LOCAL SEAFOOD

"Now more than ever I've noticed that chefs only want Northeast Atlantic area fish, Maine fish," says Lettas, Sales Manager at **Baldor x Pierless Fish**. "They want to feature smaller businesses, smaller fisheries, and local suppliers." We expect the trend toward locality and aquaculture to continue as foodservice businesses try to do their part to combat rising water temperatures and the disruption of natural environments.

Plus, the waters of the Northeast are home to some of the best fishing in the country, with a huge spectrum of seafood, and chefs are taking notice. One example: Restaurants have historically bought tuna from across the globe, but we source our sustainable, line-caught tuna from **Captain Bob** in Sea Isle, NJ and we're seeing far more interest in the product than in past years.



## FRESHWATER FISH

Within the larger trend of local seafood, we've seen a spike in interest in freshwater fish, particularly trout. While **rainbow trout** has historically come from Idaho, Pierless works with local fisheries in Pennsylvania that have forged impactful relationships with several high-profile restaurants in the New York area. "Trout have become really popular recently," says Lettas. **Green Walk Trout Hatchery** in Bangor, PA, is a terrific success story: "They're a family business that has mastered their craft and whose accolades speak for themselves. With a direct line to Michelin restaurants in the city, Greenwalk trout stands toe to toe with seasonality and sustainability to our industry."



## RESTORATIVE IS THE NEW REGENERATIVE

Since the word "regenerative" has become a bit overused as it relates to growing food, we're now seeing farmers, producers, and chefs turn toward "restorative" instead—both in vocabulary and in practice. "The term regenerative has been co-opted and watered down to some degree," says Mistretta, Protein Category Manager. "Restorative is the updated term, which is a bit more specific. It isn't just about maintaining soil health but improving soil health; restorative aims to make things better than they are." At **Joyce Farms**, for example, restorative applies to all aspects of raising animals, from rotational grazing to implementing cover crops to managing and repurposing waste. The brand **AKUA**, which uses regeneratively-farmed kelp to produce plant-based meat alternatives, is a leader in the space. In the baking world, **Farmer Direct Foods** practices regenerative agriculture and supplies its high-quality wheat flour to King Arthur Flour.



## CELERY ROOT

Every few years, a different vegetable suddenly appears on restaurant menus coast to coast. For a while, the "it" veg was cauliflower, then delicata squash. This year, **celery root**—also known as celeriac or knob celery—is stealing the culinary stage. Baldor's sales of celery root have grown 42% year over year (a little more than that in New York specifically), and we expect to see it continue in 2024. "Celeriac is one of the most underrated vegetables," says Russo, Senior Category Manager for Vegetables. High in fiber and lower in carbs than many other root vegetables, it can be eaten raw or cooked, and in a chef's hands, the applications are endless. We've seen it carved into shawarma, shredded into slaw, puréed into soup, roasted as side dish, and more.



## HERITAGE BREEDS AND SEEDS

Across categories at Baldor, there's a surge in farms and producers who are reaching into the past to build the future—specifically sourcing heritage breeds and seeds that provide the best flavor possible. A perfect example of the specific genetics of a heritage breed is the **Niman Ranch Iberian Duroc pork**. "You can think of Niman's Iberian Duroc program like you would a Cherokee purple tomato or heirloom corn," Lindgren said. "It's an old breed that tastes the way pork used to, before flavor got lost in commercialized farming." The same is true with **Joyce Farms' Aberdeen Angus Beef** and **Gloucestershire Old Spot Pork**. **Maine Grains** localizes production and sources heritage grains and beans from across the Northeast. And the **Row 7 Seed Company** leans into heritage vegetables varieties to develop seeds that will grow strong, resilient (and tastier) plants.



## LEGISLATIVE IMPACT

Legislation is making a positive impact on our food system at every level. In the meat industry, two recent laws are making waves. Prop 12 in California and Question 3 in Massachusetts ban farmers from confining pigs in gestational crates. And more states are expected to follow suit. According to Lindgren, these laws are pushing all of the country's pork producers to change their production methods and raise their animals in a more humane way. All of Baldor's pork offerings in Massachusetts are compliant,

and we offer these brands—**Joyce Farms**, **Les Viandes Du Breton**, and **Niman Ranch**—across all our delivery states. We're committed to making all of our fresh pork and bacon products Question 3 compliant by 2026. "We're 90% of the way there," Lindgren said, "and no one else is really out there doing that." Meanwhile, we're seeing more legislation in California affecting foods—with the recent law banning food additives, including red and yellow colorants—and we expect may spread Eastward as well.





### CHICKPEAS

Just a few years ago, it seemed like chickpeas only made humble appearances on restaurant menus: hummus, chana masala, maybe the occasional pasta. Now, chickpeas are everywhere, in all different forms. In New York, we're seeing lots of restaurants putting **chickpea farinata** on their menus. An Italian dish, this savory chickpea pancake is soft on the inside, crisp on the outside, and makes for a great gluten-free appetizer. We're also seeing restaurants using chickpeas in homemade crackers, and even as "fries," with the perfect balance of crunchy and custardy. We suspect chickpeas and chickpea products, from flour to snacks, will become even bigger in 2024.

### CARBON NEUTRAL

It's fair to say that carbon offsets aren't doing quite enough good as everyone hoped, which is why many brands are now focused on carbon neutral—which means sequestering or digesting carbon—instead. **World Centric**, a B Certified Corporation, produces compostable cutlery. But they're also trying to lead environmental change by teaching restaurants, businesses, and even independent households how to compost their products. "They're going the extra mile," says Murphy. "They realize that their responsibilities are not just to sell a good product, it's also about educating." **Open Water**, which produces 100% recyclable and 100% carbon-neutral aluminum cans of water, has built additional bottling facilities to reduce their number of cross-country shipments. **AKUA** is a company that uses regeneratively farmed kelp as a base for alternative meats and seafood; kelp sequesters carbon, which helps combat ocean acidification.

## THE BALDOR HOT LIST

We've seen significant growth in the past few months in these specialty items:

PRODUCT	% GROWTH
Chanterelle Mushrooms	255%
Pom Pom Mushrooms	283%
King Trumpet Mushrooms	209%
Lemon Plums	188%
Canary Melons	156%
Tree-Ripened Apricots	138%
Buddhist Fresh Duck (with head and feet)	118%
Heirloom Sunchokes	118%
Red Sunset Apricots	64%
Baby Leeks	59%



### ABOUT BALDOR SPECIALTY FOODS

*Baldor Specialty Foods is one of the largest importers and distributors of fresh produce and specialty foods in Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions. With a focus on local, peak season and small farms, Baldor curates a selection of more than 6,000 items—including produce, meat, poultry, fish, dairy and specialty items—and manages more than 13,000 major restaurant, food service, retail and corporate accounts from Portland, ME to Richmond VA. Beginning as Balducci's fruit stand in Greenwich Village in 1946, Baldor maintains its original promise—curate and deliver the best and freshest foods in the world. With quality you can trust and service that delivers, Baldor seeks to provide great specialty foods and logistics that give their customers an edge. To learn more, go to [www.baldorfood.com](http://www.baldorfood.com).*