

FOOD

TRENDS

2026

***HOW CULTURE, COMFORT & CREATIVITY
ARE SHAPING WHAT WE SERVE***

POWERED BY THE AUDIENCE PLAYBOOK™

CHEERFUL
FIRST
TWENTY

FRICY. NONNASTALGIA. ADAPTOGENIC EATING. CABBAGE.



The food trends of 2026 may sound eclectic, but together they tell a clear story: audiences are craving food that is thoughtful, sensory and emotionally resonant. We unpack the flavours, formats and feelings shaping how people want to eat and what this means for live events in the year ahead.

SWEET HEAT – FLAVOUR FINDS ITS BALANCE

2025 belonged to hot honey and chilli crisp. In 2026, flavour evolves, becoming more layered, more considered. We'll see a rise in fruity-spicy ('fricy') combinations and sweet-savoury ('swavory') pairings that prioritise the fine balance of flavours.

Hot honey quietly exits. In its place: Mexican lime and chilli salt over mango, fiery Thai salads lifted by citrus, miso caramel, tahini ice cream. These are flavour profiles that know how to hold tension - sweetness softening heat, umami grounding sugar.

Online retailer Sous Chef reports soaring demand for fricy condiments.

Mexican chamoy (pickled fruit, lime and chilli) is up 64% in three months, while Japanese yuzu kosho (a fermented chilli-citrus paste) has risen 28%.

“PAIRINGS THAT PRIORITISE THE FINE BALANCE OF FLAVOURS.”

These combinations feel adventurous yet familiar; like a roadtrip somewhere new with a familiar soundtrack. It also speaks to a shift towards sensory eating: *flavour as experience, not just fuel.*

CONSIDER:

Fruit platters dusted with chilli-lime seasoning, mango chilli dips, pineapple with black pepper, tamarind-infused desserts, cocktails with Tajín rims, Mexican chilli-lime seasonings on the table.



MINI PORTIONS, SMALLER PLATES, BIG NUTRITION.



As GLP-1 medications such as Ozempic and Mounjaro become more widely used, appetites are shrinking and portions are following suit. These injections aren't just reshaping bodies; they're quietly rewriting food culture, prioritising smaller, more-nutrient dense offerings.

Marks & Spencer is already ahead of the curve, introducing bite-sized meals designed to deliver high nutritional value per calorie.

**“THE FOCUS IS ON VARIETY,
FLEXIBILITY AND EASE.”**

At the same time, mini formats are evolving. Gimmicky scaled-down classics such as mini fish & chips are losing appeal, replaced by pintxos-style spreads that allow guests to sample a range of flavours without overcommitment. The focus is on variety, flexibility and ease. It's less “one big moment” and more “many small delights”.

CONSIDER:

Mini Magnum ice creams, tapas-style spreads, baby Buddha bowls, bento boxes for one. Playful, light-touch and well-considered.



ADAPTOGENIC EATING, FORGOTTEN VEGETABLES & FIBRE-MAXXING



FOOD THAT SUPPORTS OVERALL HEALTH

Matcha lattes are waning. In 2026, mushroom coffee and adaptogenic blends take centre stage, reflecting a desire for calm, balance and sustained energy rather than spikes and crashes.

Alongside this, cabbage, once overlooked, is enjoying a quiet resurgence. Pinterest reports a sharp rise in searches during 2025: cabbage dumplings up 110%, Polish gołąbki and cabbage soup up 95%, fermented cabbage up 35%.

Probiotics remain popular as understanding of gut health deepens. Kefir, kimchi and sauerkraut continue to feature — but the expectation is clear: functional food must also be pleasurable.

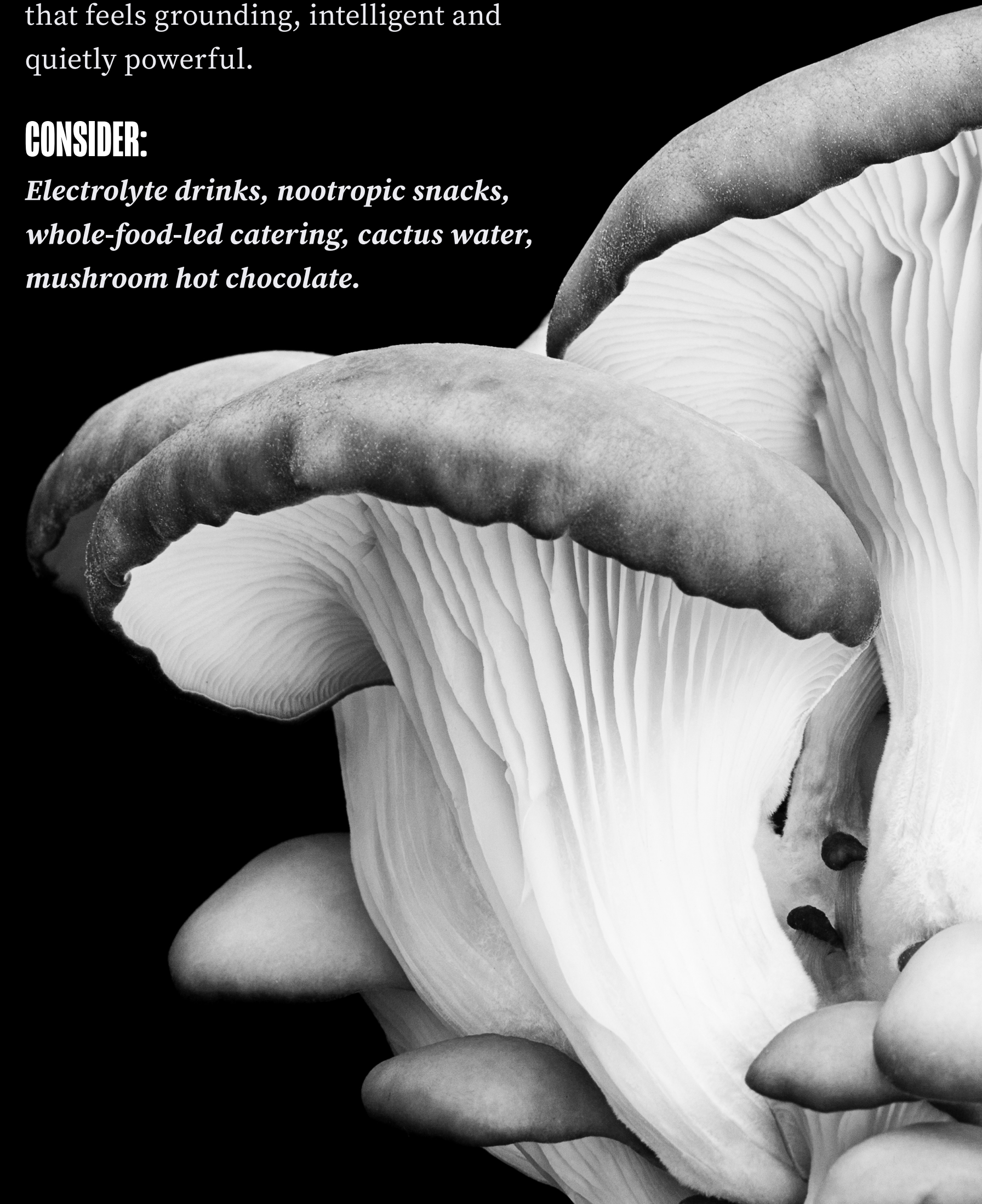
Protein's long reign is beginning to give way to fibre-maxxing, a trend gaining traction across social platforms. As ever, where social media leads, live events follow. Expect to see more forgotten vegetables — parsnip, salsify, Jerusalem artichoke,

horseradish, black radish, turnip and chard — reintroduced with care and creativity.

This is nourishment with depth; food that feels grounding, intelligent and quietly powerful.

CONSIDER:

Electrolyte drinks, nootropic snacks, whole-food-led catering, cactus water, mushroom hot chocolate.



NONNASTALGIA COMFORT, REIMAGINED

In a world that feels permanently beta-tested, comfort has become a powerful driver. Enter nonnastalgia; food that draws on the warmth of home cooking: familiar ingredients, simple techniques and a sense of generosity.

This is not about retro for retro's sake, but reassurance. Straightforward food served in a welcoming atmosphere creates emotional safety and, more importantly, connection. We're seeing a renewed focus on authenticity, where you can expect to see chefs stepping forward to share personal stories and cultural context behind their dishes.

Authenticity matters more than perfection. Food becomes a bridge between people, not a performance to be judged.

CONSIDER:

Soups, family-style platters, roast chicken and giving chefs the space to share the stories behind what they serve.

**“AUTHENTICITY
MATTERS MORE
THAN PERFECTION.”**



EXPERIENCE

Audiences still want unforgettable moments but not at the expense of meaning. Large-scale displays give way to experiences built on care, consistency and shared values. Food must feel aligned with the ethos of the event, not bolted on.

Hyper-personalisation continues to rise, particularly among Gen Z, who expect to shape their own dining experience around dietary needs, preferences and principles. Alcohol is no longer assumed; creative low- and no-alcohol options are now essential.

FROM SPECTACLE TO SUBSTANCE

Food has become part of the experience design and narrative architecture, not a footnote.

CONSIDER:

Customisable catering stations, low-alcohol craft wines, modern meads, thoughtfully designed alcohol-free pairings.



CONCLUSION



Food and drink are no longer supporting players in live experiences. They are one of the clearest expressions of cultural intent and brand relevance. What we choose to serve reflects how we see our audiences, what we value, and how deeply we understand the landscape in which we operate.

Today's food trends don't begin in restaurant kitchens. They take shape in search behaviour, social feeds, shifting health priorities and a collective desire for comfort, agency and meaning. The line between digital culture and physical experience has blurred and food sits squarely at that intersection.

As we move through 2026, the most successful events will treat food not as logistics, but as strategy. Designed with the same care as content, space

and storytelling, it becomes a powerful tool for connection, grounding audiences, inviting participation and creating moments that linger long after the plates are cleared.

In a world that moves fast, what we eat together matters more than ever. Every touchpoint within an event shapes brand perception. To your audience, what you serve matters as much as what you say.

**“TO YOUR AUDIENCE,
WHAT YOU SERVE MATTERS
AS MUCH AS WHAT YOU SAY.”**

GLOSSARY

THE LANGUAGE OF FOOD

- **Tajín** - a popular Mexican seasoning blend made from mild chili peppers, lime, and salt, known for its tangy, savoury, and slightly spicy flavour.
- **Pintxos** - small, savoury snacks from Spain's Basque Country, similar to tapas but often more elaborate.
- **Buddha bowls** - vibrant, healthy, one-bowl meals featuring a base of whole grains, topped with proteins and vegetables and a flavourful sauce or dressing.
- **Bento boxes** - single-portion meals from Japan, traditionally featuring rice or noodles, protein, and vegetables, packed in a compartmentalised box for balance, portability, and artistic presentation.
- **Mushroom coffee** - a blend of regular coffee beans with extracts from medicinal mushrooms, creating a “functional coffee” with added wellness benefits.
- **Adaptogenic** - natural substances such as herbs or mushrooms that help the body adapt to and resist stress, normalising bodily functions and strengthening systems.
- **Fibre-maxxing** - a popular social media nutrition trend focused on significantly increasing both the quantity and variety of fibre-rich, whole plant foods in your diet to boost gut health, digestion and overall wellness.
- **Nootropic** - cognitive enhancers (natural or synthetic) that are claimed to improve mental functions and overall cognitive performance.



AUTHORED BY:
GEORGINA BURROWS
HEAD OF STRATEGY,
CHEERFUL TWENTYFIRST



**“I THINK FOOD, CULTURE,
PEOPLE AND LANDSCAPE
ARE ALL ABSOLUTELY
INSEPARABLE.”**

ANTHONY BOURDAIN



FIND MORE LIKE THIS AT

CHEERFULTWENTYFIRST.COM