

One-Bite Food Is In

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Corey Schuster, 27, of Washington, is a busy lawyer at Dickstein Shapiro Morin & Oshinsky with little time to cook. He eats dinner out with clients three or four times a week. Steakhouses are a favorite for dinner, but he also likes Kinkead's and Clyde's. He buys lunch every day. Chains such as Panera, Potbelly and Subway are the choice for lunch at his desk.

The percentage of Americans like Schuster who dine out frequently is expected to grow in 2006, according to the National Restaurant Association. Some of the trends they'll be seeing on menus this year:

- **Little is big.** Baby burgers, teeny panini, little lobster rolls -- one-bite food is a trend, says Robin Uler, senior vice president for food and beverage for the 2,700 Marriott International properties. Expect to see the smaller bites on lounge menus, at catered affairs, as appetizers. The "small plates" craze will also continue. "We've finally learned how to share," Uler says.
- **Butterscotch is back.** Pastry chefs are rediscovering this old-time fave and turning it into pot de creme, bourbon-spiked sauce and the ultimate American classic -- butterscotch chiffon pie.
- **Eastern European comfort food.** Sauerkraut, Hungarian goulash, stuffed cabbage -- those long-ago dishes are making a trendy comeback, especially after a study touted sauerkraut's health properties in fighting off avian flu.
- **Free samples.** Just like the food samples at Costco and Whole Foods, chefs will be sending out bite-size tastes of items on their menus to help you decide what to order.
- **Fancier food in casual places.** Bolder flavors such as lemon grass and coconut, artisanal goat cheese and blue cheese, different kinds of pestos -- in other words, ingredients that were upscale a few years ago -- are trickling down to the quick-serve and casual menus, says Maria Caranfa, an analyst with Mintel Menu Insights, which surveyed 550 restaurants including 350 chains and 50 of the country's top chefs for upcoming trends.
- **Nutrition information on all wrappers of McDonald's food.** More than you might want to know.

-- Candy Sagon