

While fried mozzarella may be old hat, new fried-cheese ideas, such as the manchego tempura served at Terrance Brennan's Bar Artisanal, are piquing interest in indulgences from the deep-fryer.



# DEEP-FRIED FOODS *with New Finesse*

**Diners' love affair with the deep-fryer grows hotter as more creative ingredients and flavors hit the fat**

BY RITA NEGRETE

**T**here's no purer indulgence than deep-fried food; consumers know perfectly well this isn't health food, but the craving is insatiable.

That's excellent news for the foodservice industry, because crispy, deep-fried fare is so difficult to pull off at home that most Americans don't even attempt it, preferring to get their fix exclusively from restaurants. With the possible exception of barbecue, deep-fried foods are more closely associated with restaurant outings than any other food Americans eat regularly.

Joining consumers' desire for rich, comforting, relatively inexpensive fare is a new appreciation for health and wellness; however, diners' interest in and consumption of fried food remains high, Technomic research shows. The billions of fried-food servings ordered each year by U.S. consumers are driven by value, craveability and broad appeal.

Despite the 47 percent of consumers who claim to have cut back on fried-food orders in restaurants, Technomic projects that the category will continue to track overall restaurant sales for the foreseeable future. Bundling, combos and value promotions will fuel the category's growth.

Waffle-cut, skin-on fries like these served at Burgerville offer subtle differences that bring new attention to an old favorite.

But there are some very interesting changes occurring on the fried-foods menu, and operators who stay one step ahead of the trends have an excellent chance for building bigger sales than their less-innovative competitors.

## WINNING THE VEGGIE VOTE

The American public's relationship with deep-fried foods is complicated and rapidly changing. Traditional fried appetizers like mozzarella sticks remain popular, but restaurants are also introducing a wide variety of fried dishes that appear "healthier" to consumers because they feature vegetables.

These may be particularly appealing to diners who say they have cut down on fried foods in the past year but are simultaneously looking to increase their consumption of vegetables in line with the "5-a-Day" nutrition recommendation.



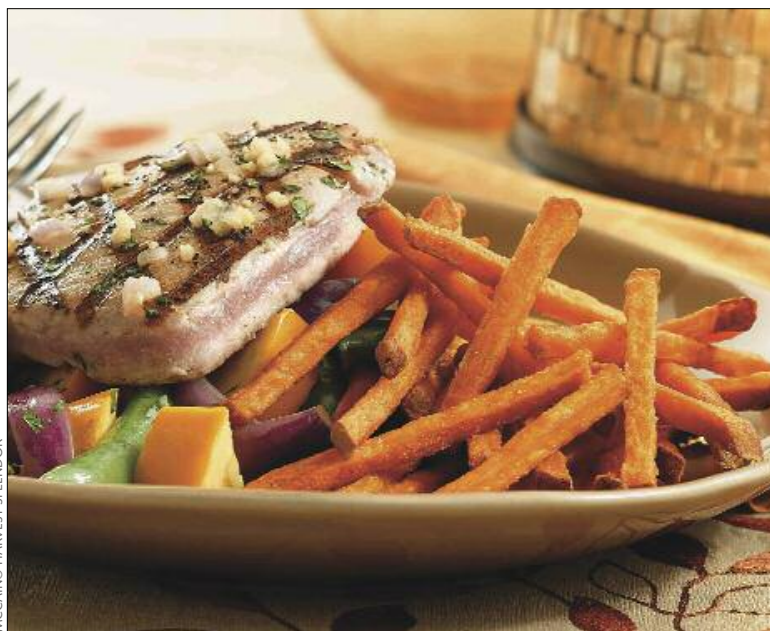
Recent instances of fried-veggie appetizers:

- ▶ Fried Green Beans, served with cool ranch sauce — *Razzoo's Cajun Café*
- ▶ Crispy Green Beans — *T.G.I. Friday's*
- ▶ Crispy Artichoke Hearts — *The Cheesecake Factory*
- ▶ Fried Okra — *Piccadilly*
- ▶ Fried Cauliflower Parmesan — *Café Fiorello, New York City*
- ▶ Fried Zucchini, lightly breaded and served with ranch dressing — *The Cheesecake Factory*

Onion rings are a classic fried food, but recently the deep-fried onion has blossomed, so to speak, into a variety of shapes and textures. These range from thin and crispy onion “strings” or “straws” topping burgers, salads and entrées to whole-onion extravaganzas. Some examples:

- ▶ Onion Range Dippers: A mountainous stack of crisp, hand-dipped, golden-fried onions served with our signature robust dipping sauce — *Bugaboo Creek Steak House*
- ▶ Crispy Onion String and Jalapeño Stack — *Chili's Grill & Bar*
- ▶ Onion Six-Strings: Thinly sliced onions, breaded and fried, then lightly seasoned, served with our Asian dipping sauce — *Cheeseburger in Paradise*

The craveable combo of crispy-salty-sweetness is a driving factor in the growing popularity of sweet-potato fries.



MCCAIN® HARVEST SPLENDOR

- ▶ Colossal Bloom: Colossal onion seasoned, battered and deep-fried (also available as a smaller version, Baby Bloom) — *Whiskey Creek Wood Fire Grill*

Even more surprising, the rich, creamy avocado — variously classified as a vegetable or fruit — is also getting the deep-fryer treatment nowadays:

- ▶ Fried Guacamole: Fresh avocado filled with sour cream and pico de gallo, hand battered and fried to a crispy brown — *Black-eyed Pea*
- ▶ Fried California Avocado: Served with corn nuts, citrus-cabbage salad and spicy aioli — *George's California Modern, La Jolla, Calif.*
- ▶ Fried Avocado: Hand-battered fresh avocado, fried and served with pico de gallo, lettuce and cheese; served with poblano sauce on a corn tortilla — *Torchy's Tacos, Austin, Texas*

#### POTATOES: SWEET!

Another hot trend is the proliferation of sweet-potato fries as an alternative to “ordinary” french fries. Seasonings and dips further enhance their memorable flavor to create sweet, salty, subtle or fiery effects. Bob Evans’ summer Bob-B-Q menu promotion lists sweet-potato fries dusted with barbecue seasoning and accompanied by the chain’s signature Wildfire sauce.

Olga’s Kitchen, on the other hand, serves its version with maple-yogurt dipping sauce. And, when White Castle offered sweet-potato fries as a special last winter, they came with cinnamon dipping sauce. Other interpretations include:

- ▶ Sweet Potato Smashfries: Made with garlic, olive oil and rosemary — *Smashburger*
- ▶ Sweet Potato Fries: Dusted with a blend of Cajun spices and served with a choice of lemon-garlic mayonnaise or ranch dressing — *Lucille's Smokehouse*
- ▶ Sweet Potato Stix: Lightly seasoned and served with three sauces: brown sugar BBQ, garlic mayo and spicy ketchup — *Smokey Bones Bar & Fire Grill*

# The FLAVOR PAYOFF

Frying is Made Easy with Fryer-Friendly Innovations

BY CHARLIE BAGGS

Every cooking technique has its limitations, but frying is among the simplest and most versatile. It's a quick process, and the color of the food serves as a cooking guideline, making it easy to monitor quality.

Some kitchens have advanced Frymasters with built-in filtration systems. Others rely simply on a pot of oil and a thermometer. High-tech fryers boast the accuracy of a 1-degree action thermostat. They also prolong the life of the oil and are safer to use than a pot of oil. However, with either, options for frying foods are endless, whether prepared in-house or ready-made.

The growing availability of ready-to-fry items makes it convenient for operators to customize their menus with value-added items like onion petals, green beans, sweet potatoes in various forms, jalapeño poppers and strips, flavored fries, ethnic-flavored items, cheese curds and stuffed spuds in multiple flavors. These can be rotated through the menu to drive consumer interest.

Signature fried items can be created relatively simply in-house as well. For example, use pancake batter as the breading on an Oreo cookie and fry it to create an indulgent sweet treat. Or fry a sausage link using the same batter to make a tasty, portable breakfast option.

Innovative oils also enhance frying. The neutral flavors of Bunge Oils' trans-fat-free Pour 'n Fry and Nutra-Clear NT oils make them ideal for frying as well as other menu applications like vinaigrettes, emulsions, dressings, dipping sauces and baked goods.

Fried items deliver flavors and textures that consumers crave, and today's product innovations ensure that frying remains a simple solution to on-trend menu development.

**CHARLIE BAGGS**

is Executive Chef and President of Charlie Baggs, Inc., a foodservice consulting company.  
[www.charliebaggsinc.com](http://www.charliebaggsinc.com)

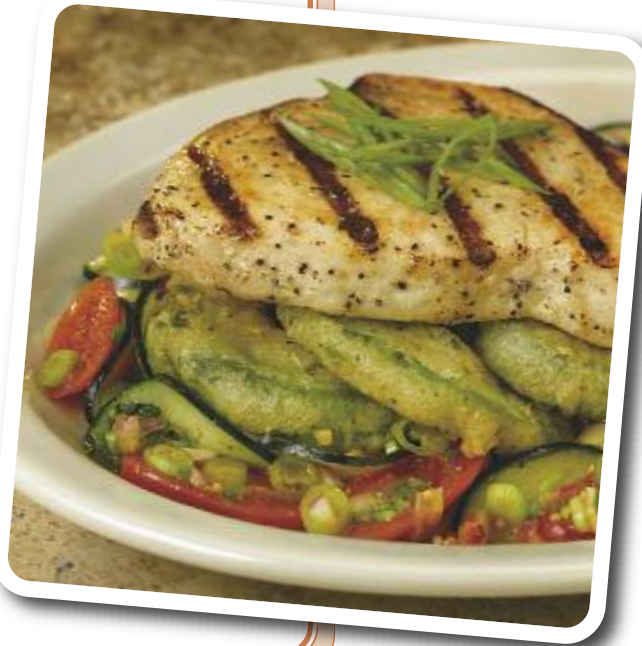
## POTATOES: REPOSITIONED

Meanwhile, traditional fries are also getting new attention. Some restaurants extol the virtues of simplicity. Good Times Burgers & Frozen Custard, for instance, rolled out its new Fresh-Cut Fries, made from whole Idaho russet potatoes that are hand cut in each store every morning, then cooked to order and seasoned with sea salt. Similarly, Wendy's upgraded to Natural-Cut Fries — thick-cut, skin-on fries sprinkled with sea salt.

In other operations, the treatment of fries couldn't be more different. Fries, wedges and potato skins are all used as the bases of elaborate constructions involving cheeses and proteins. Tumbleweeds Southwest Grill, for instance, tops its signature waffle-cut fries with cheese sauce, taco meat, jalapeño slices and chopped tomato and onion, transforming the simple side dish into Loaded Queso Fries, a potato-based version of nachos.

Chili's interpretation, Texas Cheese Fries with Chili, is topped with chili, jalapeños, green onions and applewood-smoked bacon and served with jalapeño-ranch dressing.

A newer influence, especially on menus at independent operations and gastropubs, is Canadian poutine, which piles fries with cheese curds, gravy and sometimes other ingredients. While those dishes may be extreme, other potato constructions listed on recent menus are also quite hearty:



Tempura-fried avocado formed the base for a recent regional limited-time fish offering at Rock Bottom Restaurants.

- ▶ **Bacon Cheddar Fries:** Natural-cut french fries topped with cheddar cheese sauce and bacon bits — *Hardee's*
- ▶ **Waffle Cheese Fries:** Seasoned waffle fries topped with melted cheese, bacon, sour cream and green onions — *Garfield's Restaurant & Pub*
- ▶ **Aussie Cheese Fries:** Aussie fries topped with melted Monterey Jack, cheddar and bits of fresh chopped bacon, served with a spicy ranch dressing — *Outback Steakhouse*

House-made potato chips are also showing up on more menus as an attention-getting alternative to fries. These, too, come in both “pure” and “loaded” versions. Among the latter are:

- ▶ **Garlic Parmesan Kettle-Style Chips:** A platter of freshly made, hot kettle-style potato chips sprinkled with garlic and Parmesan cheese, served with caramelized onion dip and Buffalo sour cream for dipping — *BJ's Restaurant & Brewhouse*
- ▶ **Bacon Cheeseburger Chips:** Thin and crispy house-cooked potato chips topped with fire-grilled 100 percent choice beef, peppered bacon bits, cheddar cheese

sauce, shredded lettuce, diced tomatoes, onions and pickles with ketchup-and-mustard-drizzle garnish — *Bennigan's Grill & Tavern*

- ▶ **Cajun Bleu Cheese Chips:** Crispy, house-made “lube” chips topped with a tangy Cajun bleu cheese sauce and melted bleu cheese crumbles — *Quaker Steak & Lube*
- ▶ **Potachos:** Kettle chips topped with bacon and cheddar sauce, green onions and diced tomatoes — *Mimi's Café*

**IN A PICKLE**

Pickles have become something of a national fried craze, driven by a growing interest in down-home Southern cuisine. Fried pickle chips (or, less often, spears) are showing up in all sorts of restaurants, from LSRs like Arby's and Wing Zone to casual-dining spots like Grand Lux Café. Some examples:

- ▶ **Fried Pickles:** Lightly dusted with our signature cornmeal breading, served with ranch dressing — *Buffalo Wild Wings Grill & Bar*
- ▶ **Golden Rule Sampler:** Three fried pickles, three onion rings and three green tomatoes — *Golden Rule Bar-B-Q & Grill*

**FRIED Fills the Bill**

Consumers' top associations with fried foods

“Tasty” . . . . .	89%
“Satisfying” . . . . .	86%
“Filling” . . . . .	83%
“Something I crave” . . . . .	80%
“Comforting” . . . . .	77%
“A good value” . . . . .	71%

SOURCE: TECHNOMIC FUTURE OF FRIED FOODS CONSUMER TREND REPORT, 2009



Loaded fries — even at breakfast — are a new way to pile more appeal onto the fried category.

- ▶ **Panko-Crusted Fried Green Tomato with Fried Pickles:** With field greens, crabmeat rémoulade and spicy tomato glaze — *Emeril's Restaurants*

#### ALSO FIT FOR FRYING...

Vegetables aren't the only newsmakers emerging from the nation's deep fryer. While fried mozzarella sticks may be old hat, the variety of cheeses going into the fryer is expanding. Culver's rolled out battered and fried chipotle cheese curds for the summer. Six-unit, North Reading, Mass.-based Burton's Grill introduced a small-plates menu late last year that included fried panko-crusted Alouette goat cheese, served over spinach salad, as well as an appetizer of buttermilk-battered and fried feta cheese, served with a tomato-cream sauce.

Another deep-fryer staple — chicken — is also being rethought. "Crispy" chicken sandwiches and fried-chicken-topped salads have been popular for awhile now. Chicken strips and nuggets are still being added to menus, in part because they're the perfect foil for on-trend sauces.

Hardee's new Hand-Breaded Chicken Tenders, for instance, come with honey mustard, creamy Buffalo or buttermilk-ranch dipping sauce. Adding the novelty factor of an odd shape, Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen menued a summer limited-time offer of Wicked Chicken — thin strips of all-white-meat chicken that is marinated, breaded and fried into uneven, curly shapes, then served with cool ranch dipping sauce and a mini bottle of Tabasco sauce.

Deep-fried fish and seafood items are also starting to appear more frequently outside of

the seafood restaurants where they are menu standards. Here again, sauces are often emphasized. Examples include:

- ▶ **Sweetwater Catfish Fingers:** Tender strips lightly breaded with Cajun-seasoned cornmeal and flash-fried, served with house-made rémoulade and Sweet Soul Jalapeño sauces — *Famous Dave's*
- ▶ **Crab Fritters:** Crispy, fried fritters filled with crab, spinach and artichoke hearts, served with citrus rémoulade — *Mimi's Café*
- ▶ **Fish Supreme:** A crispy breaded fish fillet topped with lettuce, American cheese and finished off with some tartar, all on a wheat bun — *Hardee's*
- ▶ **Fish and Chips:** Crispy fish fillets with french fries, served with a side of tartar sauce and malt vinegar — *Jack in the Box*

#### FRIED FINALES

And, for throwing dietary caution to the winds, what better menu category could there be to fry than dessert? Late last year, Manchu Wok added Fried Cheesecake Bites, a sweet take on traditional Chinese egg rolls composed of warm cheesecake wrapped in a flaky pastry crust. At about the same time, Burger King recalled circus and carnival fare with its introduction of Funnel Cake Sticks, crispy-fried strips of funnel-cake batter dusted with powdered sugar and served with icing for dipping.

Another version of the old-fashioned treat, powdered sugar-dusted Mini Funnel Cakes, popped up at Jack in the Box this summer, joining Mini Churros on its menu of deep-fried desserts.

Consumer's cravings for all things fried has swept the menu, from apps to salads to sandwiches, entrées and sides and onto the dessert course. Possibilities for frying are clearly limitless, and operators who explore them can count on building sales. ☺

RITA NEGRETE is Senior Editor at Chicago-based Technomic Inc., the leading foodservice research and consulting firm. For further information regarding the research for this article or other Technomic services, call (312) 876-0004.

#### TAKE-AWAY TIPS

**INDULGE WITH HEALTH:** What more delightful way to help meet the "5-a-Day" goal than with deep-fried produce, including green beans, okra, zukes, mushrooms, green tomatoes — even avocados

**HAVE FUN WITH FRIES:** Sweet-potato fries and customized white-potato varieties and cuts deliver new textures and flavors with creative dustings, dips and seasoned salts

**HOW SWEET IT IS:** Combine two craveables — sugary sweetness and the crunch of frying — for irresistible desserts; think sugar-dusted fried wontons with luscious, creamy fillings