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THE FUTURE OF FOODSERVICE 2036

SESSION TAKE-AWAY



YES AND...
THE POWER OF POSSIBILITY

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PALMER HOUSE



The Future of Food Isn't Something We Wait For. *It's Something We Create.*

What will foodservice look like in 2036? How will changing consumer behaviors, emerging technologies, sustainability priorities, and increasingly personalized diets reshape the way we feed people?

In *The Future of Foodservice 2036*, food futurist Mike Lee challenged hospitality professionals to look beyond today's operational demands and imagine the industry they want to build over the next decade. Through emerging trends, speculative storytelling, and examples of culinary innovation, Lee explored how the choices organizations make today could influence how people produce, serve, experience, and connect through food tomorrow. The future of foodservice is not predetermined. Hospitality professionals have an opportunity, and a responsibility, to help shape it.

1. Understanding the Forces That Shape Food

Before exploring future trends, Lee identified three enduring tensions that influence how food businesses operate and how consumers make decisions.

These tensions are important because even as technologies, markets, and dietary habits change, the underlying relationships between food, business, and human behavior remain.

Big vs. Small: Scale Meets Individual Experience

The food industry depends on enormous supply chains, complex infrastructure, and large-scale operations. Yet every dining experience ultimately happens at an individual level.

A guest may know nothing about the logistics, procurement, or production systems behind a meal. Their experience is shaped by something much more personal: how the food tastes, how it makes them feel, and whether it meets their needs. For foodservice organizations, the challenge is balancing operational efficiency with the expectations of individual guests.

Present vs. Future: Immediate Needs and Long-Term Consequences

Food businesses must respond to immediate pressures, including budgets, labor, service requirements, and customer expectations.

At the same time, today's decisions influence what will be possible years from now.

Lee encouraged attendees to develop the ability to think beyond quarterly results and consider how current strategies might perform in a changing food landscape.

Logic vs. Emotion: The Human Side of Food

Operating a successful foodservice program requires significant planning, analysis, and technical expertise. But consumers do not choose food based on logic alone.

Personal preferences, memories, culture, comfort, and emotion influence what people want to eat.

Lee emphasized that this is not a weakness in the food industry. It is a defining characteristic of food itself.

Key Takeaway: Future-ready foodservice operations must combine business discipline with an understanding of the emotional and cultural experiences that make food meaningful.

2. Four Trends That Could Define Foodservice in 2036

Lee outlined four major trends he believes could shape hospitality over the next decade. Each presents opportunities to rethink how foodservice organizations create value for the people they serve.

Trend 1: Less, But Better

Moving from a volume-first model to a value-first model

For decades, much of the food industry has emphasized producing and selling greater quantities of food.

Lee suggested that this approach may face new challenges as consumer eating habits evolve.

He highlighted the growing use of GLP-1 medications, which can affect appetite and food consumption, alongside broader changes in consumer behavior.

If more consumers begin eating less, foodservice businesses may need to reconsider how they define value.

Rather than relying primarily on generous portions or high transaction volume, operators may need to place greater emphasis on the quality and satisfaction delivered by each serving.

The opportunity is not simply to shrink portions. It is to create food experiences that remain satisfying and worthwhile at different portion sizes.

What This Could Mean for Hospitality

- Greater demand for flexible portion sizes.
- Increased emphasis on ingredient quality, preparation, and flavor.
- Opportunities for smaller, thoughtfully composed meals.
- A need to communicate value beyond quantity.

Putting It Into Practice: Evaluate whether your menu offers meaningful choices for guests who want smaller portions without feeling that they are receiving a lesser experience.

Consider whether tasting portions, curated combinations, or more flexible serving formats could provide satisfying alternatives.

The guiding question: If guests eat less, how will you make every bite count?

Trend 2: The End of One-Size-Fits-All Food

Serving increasingly individualized preferences without losing the experience of eating together

Historically, much of the food industry's business model has depended on producing a relatively limited selection of products for large groups of consumers.

Today, people are increasingly connected to communities built around specific dietary preferences, nutritional philosophies, cultural identities, and lifestyle choices.

Lee suggested that technology may accelerate this fragmentation.

Emerging developments in personalized nutrition could eventually make it possible to tailor food recommendations to an individual's health information, metabolism, activities, and goals.

While this could provide meaningful benefits, it also creates challenges for hospitality.

If every guest follows a highly individualized eating plan, what happens to shared dining experiences?

Lee explored this tension through a fictional future in which family members use advanced nutritional technology to determine exactly what they should eat. Each person receives a customized meal, but the family gradually loses the experience of sharing food together.

The story raises an important question: Could greater nutritional precision come at the expense of human connection?

What This Could Mean for Hospitality

- Increasing expectations for dietary flexibility and personalization.
- More complexity in menu planning and foodservice operations.
- Opportunities for technology-supported customization.
- Greater importance placed on preserving shared dining experiences.

Putting It Into Practice: Consider how your operation can accommodate diverse dietary needs while maintaining opportunities for communal dining.

Rather than developing entirely separate dining experiences for every preference, explore flexible menu components, customizable dishes, and approaches that allow guests with different needs to participate in a shared meal.

Key Takeaway: Personalization should help more people feel included, not make dining an increasingly isolated experience.

Trend 3: Values by Desire

Making sustainable food something people want, not something they feel obligated to choose

Sustainability continues to influence conversations about the future of food, but Lee argued that the industry often struggles with how it communicates sustainable choices.

Environmental benefits, reduced emissions, and responsible sourcing are important. However, those qualities alone may not persuade consumers to choose a particular meal.

Taste, affordability, convenience, and emotional satisfaction remain powerful influences on food decisions.

Rather than presenting sustainability as a sacrifice consumers should make, Lee encouraged the industry to connect sustainable practices with experiences people genuinely desire.

He described this approach as sustainable hedonism: creating experiences that are both pleasurable and environmentally responsible.

Delicious Because It's Sustainable

Lee shared an example involving chef Dan Barber's work with flavorful potato varieties.

During a tasting, Lee experienced a potato that delivered exceptional flavor and texture with minimal preparation. The example illustrated how agricultural practices and ingredient selection can create opportunities for better culinary experiences alongside environmental benefits.

He also discussed the potential of greater ingredient diversity, underutilized foods, and alternative approaches to sourcing.

The broader lesson is that sustainability does not have to be positioned as a competing priority to culinary excellence.

It can become part of what makes the food desirable.

What This Could Mean for Hospitality

- Greater opportunities to explore diverse ingredients and varieties.
- Increased emphasis on reducing waste through creative culinary practices.
- More compelling storytelling around sourcing and production.
- Sustainability initiatives that lead with flavor and guest satisfaction.

Putting It Into Practice: Identify one opportunity to connect a sustainability objective directly to a more appealing dining experience.

This might involve using an underutilized ingredient, developing a flavorful application for food that would otherwise be discarded, or highlighting seasonal ingredients chosen for their culinary qualities.

Lead with what makes the dish delicious. Then explain how its production or preparation also supports broader sustainability goals.

Key Takeaway: Sustainable choices may become more appealing when guests experience their benefits through flavor, quality, and enjoyment rather than being asked to make a sacrifice.

Trend 4: Humans First

Using technology to strengthen hospitality rather than replace it

Artificial intelligence and automation are likely to influence how foodservice organizations plan menus, manage operations, communicate with customers, and perform everyday tasks.

Lee encouraged attendees to consider these technologies as tools that can expand human capabilities.

He compared emerging automation with established kitchen equipment such as blenders and dishwashers.

These technologies changed how foodservice professionals worked, but they also allowed people to accomplish tasks more efficiently and devote attention to other responsibilities.

AI may create similar opportunities.

Lee also discussed AI-assisted software development, including the emerging practice of creating digital tools through natural-language instructions.

This could allow hospitality professionals to develop simple applications tailored to problems they understand firsthand, rather than waiting for a software provider to create a commercial solution.

Potential applications include customized workflow tools, recipe-costing resources, and operational planning systems.

However, Lee argued that technology should not become the defining purpose of hospitality.

The goal is to use technology to support the people who create meaningful guest experiences.

What This Could Mean for Hospitality

- More opportunities to automate repetitive administrative work.
- Greater flexibility to develop tools for specific operational needs.
- Increased use of technology to support individualized service.
- More time for employees to focus on care, creativity, and connection.

Putting It Into Practice: Identify a recurring administrative or operational task that technology could simplify.

Consider how the time saved might be redirected toward improving the guest experience, supporting employees, or developing more thoughtful service.

The guiding question: How can technology help your team provide more hospitality, rather than simply perform more tasks?

3. Imagining Hospitality in 2036

To bring these themes together, Lee shared a fictional story about a café operating in the year 2036.

In this imagined future, automated systems manage preparation, reservations, ordering, and much of the kitchen's routine work.

Guests arrive with highly individualized nutritional preferences, and the café's technology coordinates their meals accordingly.

The owner, Marisol, spends less time managing back-office tasks and more time engaging with guests.

One regular customer, Ruth, is living with dementia and has increasingly struggled to eat. While an automated care system can recommend food that meets her dietary requirements, it cannot fully understand the emotional significance of the meals she remembers.

With access to a collection of family recipes and memories, Marisol prepares a small serving of a familiar dish.

The moment creates a meaningful connection that the automated systems, despite their capabilities, could not have created independently.

The story is deliberately speculative, not a prediction of how restaurants will operate in 2036.

It illustrates Lee's central argument: As technology becomes increasingly capable of managing routine tasks, the distinctive value of hospitality may lie even more deeply in human understanding, emotional connection, and personal care.

4. Putting the Future Into Practice Today

Preparing for 2036 does not require predicting exactly which technologies or consumer trends will succeed.

Instead, Lee encouraged attendees to think more expansively about what could be possible and to recognize their own ability to influence the direction of the industry.

He compared this approach to the automotive industry's concept cars: experimental visions that allow organizations to explore ideas beyond the constraints of current products and business models.

Foodservice professionals can apply similar thinking to their own operations.

A Future-Focused Planning Exercise

Use the following questions to begin exploring how your organization might evolve.

Future Consideration	Question to Explore
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Consumption	How would our program adapt if guests regularly wanted smaller portions or fewer meals?
Personalization	How could we serve more individualized dietary needs without making operations unmanageable?
Sustainability	What sustainable changes could also make our food more desirable?
Technology	Which tasks could we simplify to create more time for meaningful guest interactions?
Human Connection	What makes our dining experience memorable that technology alone cannot replicate?

From Imagination to Experimentation

Choose one future scenario that could meaningfully affect your operation.

Imagine: Describe what your dining program might look like if that scenario became common.

Evaluate: Identify which current practices might no longer meet guest expectations.

Experiment: Select one small, manageable idea that could help your team explore the opportunity today.

Learn: Gather feedback, understand the challenges, and use what you discover to inform future decisions.

This exercise translates Lee's concept-car approach into a practical way to explore possibilities without committing immediately to large-scale operational changes.

5. The Opportunity to Shape What Comes Next

The future of foodservice will be influenced by many forces: evolving appetites, individualized nutrition, sustainability pressures, technological advancement, and changing consumer expectations.

But Lee's presentation emphasized that these forces do not eliminate the industry's ability to make choices.

Foodservice professionals can decide how to respond to emerging trends, which technologies deserve investment, and what kind of experiences they want to create.

They can choose to prioritize quality over quantity, make room for diverse dietary needs, connect sustainable practices with enjoyment, and use automation to strengthen the human side of hospitality.

The future will still require operational expertise, creativity, adaptability, and business discipline.

Most importantly, it will require people who understand that food is more than a product. It is a source of identity, culture, memory, community, and care.

Final Reflection: The Future Is Yours to Build

The most important question raised by The Future of Foodservice 2036 is not whether every prediction will come true.

It is whether hospitality professionals are willing to imagine better possibilities and take an active role in creating them.

As you consider the next decade, reflect on three questions:

1. Which emerging trend could most significantly change the needs of the people we serve?
2. What part of our dining experience should remain distinctly human, regardless of technological advancement?
3. What could we begin experimenting with today that might improve hospitality ten years from now?

The future of foodservice is not a spectator sport. The decisions we make today will help determine what hospitality becomes tomorrow.

This resource was developed with AI assistance using a transcript of the original conference session. Content has been condensed and organized for clarity and ease of reference.