

# Industry Insights

A roundup of noteworthy foodservice findings  
for the week of April 20, 2026



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# Competition continues to intensify among chicken chains

The footprint of chicken concepts ranked among Technomic’s top 1,500 chain restaurants has expanded by approximately 6,300 units over the last decade, reaching a total of nearly 21,000 U.S. restaurants as of year-end 2025. Leading players Chick-fil-A, Popeyes and Wingstop have each added more than 1,000 locations during the same timeframe.

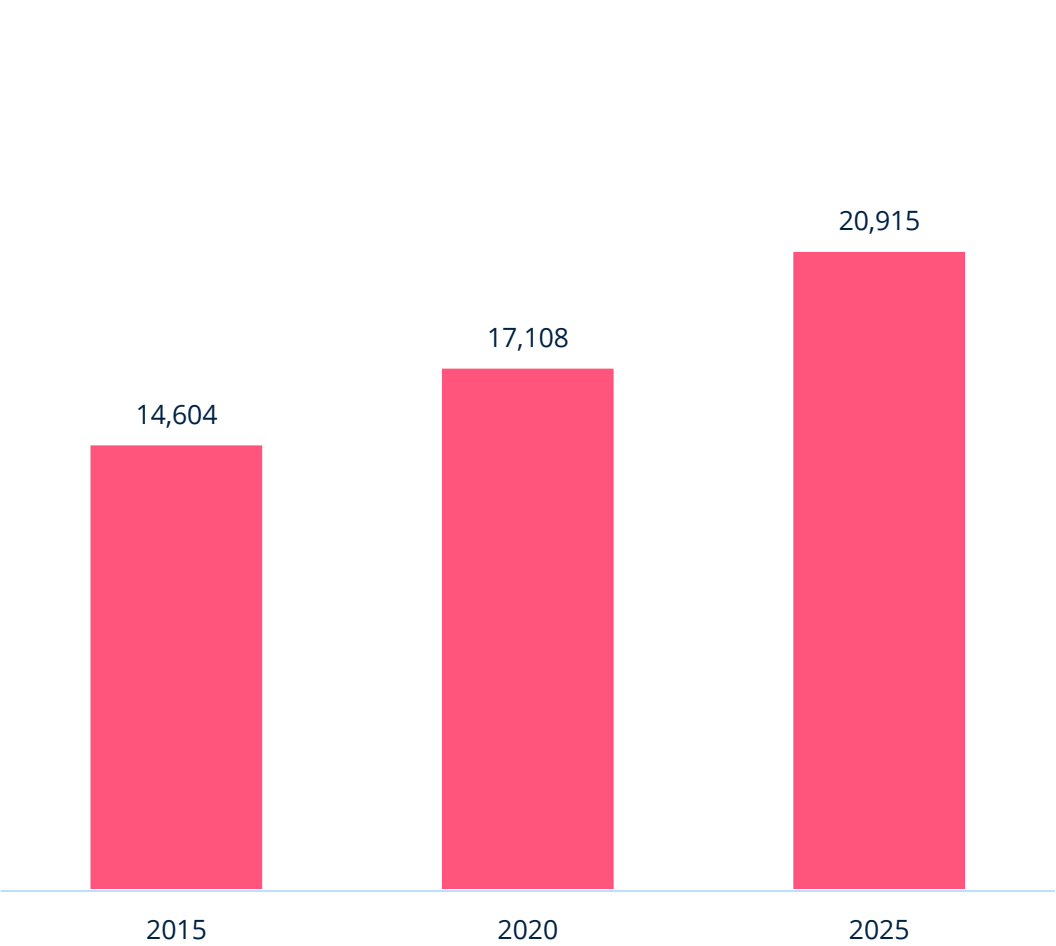
Chicken chain locations have expanded by an average rate of nearly 4% annually since 2015,

contributing to a rapid increase in competition within the category. Evaluate more location development trends across thousands of foodservice companies with Ignite Company.

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Source: Technomic Ignite Company

CHICKEN CHAIN LOCATIONS  
TOTAL U.S. LOCATIONS BY YEAR



# First quarter menu trends to know

Technomic recently updated its Ignite Menu dashboard with Q1 2026 data. Here are a few key takeaways on the current state of menus.

Overall menu change is relatively flat year over year (-0.6%). Slight dips in entrees (-1.3%), appetizers (-1.6%) and desserts (-0.9%) were offset by upticks in sides (+1.2%), nonalcohol beverages (+0.7%) and add-ons (+3.2%).

Indulgent items particularly trended on menus. The fastest-growing dish year over year was chicken Alfredo (+79.2%), with kids potato/other chips (+27.0%) and cake doughnuts (+26.2%) also within the top-five fastest growers. Further, indulgent Dubai chocolate was the fastest-growing ingredient on menus (+380.0%).

**Ignite Menu clients: [Click here for more](#)**

Source: Technomic Ignite Menu, Q1 2025-Q1 2026  
Image Source: Shutterstock

At the same time, functional fare also found momentum. Collagen mentions grew 34.3% (which benefits hair, skin and nail health), nutrient-dense coho salmon saw a 33.3% uptick and antioxidant-rich bergamot citrus rose 24.5% on menus year over year.

Protein also continues to trend; kids protein sides and pea protein saw growth year over year (+35.6% and +18.8%, respectively). Additionally, numerous nuts or nut-based products that are protein-rich grew. For example, black walnut—which rose 38.1% over the past year on menus—contains the highest protein content of any tree nut, and even Dubai chocolate contains protein-rich pistachios.

## ITEM COUNT GROWTH IN THE LAST YEAR Q1 2025-Q1 2026

**-1.3%**  
ENTREE

**-1.5%**  
APPETIZER

**+1.2%**  
SIDE

**+0.7%**  
NONALCOHOL BEVERAGE

**-0.9%**  
DESSERT

**+3.2%**  
ADD-ON

**+2.3%**  
KIDS MENU

**OVERALL**  
**-0.6%**



# Nearly one in four restaurant occasions are considered special; what do diners say about them?

Technomic's Ignite Consumer captures more than 110,000 restaurant occasions annually, with 23% of these being considered special among diners. A new *Occasion Snapshot* report took a closer look at these visits, so let's learn about what diners had to say about their recent special occasion.

Dining out for special occasions is about more than just food—it's about creating unforgettable experiences. A restaurant's atmosphere and ambiance are key, with 82% of consumers prioritizing these factors in their decision-making process. Whether it's a romantic dinner, a family celebration or treating yourself, these moments are

designed to be memorable. Experiential dining plays a significant role, driving 30% of special occasions—far above the 19% average for all dining visits.

Most special occasions are dine-in experiences, with 63% of guests eating inside the restaurant compared to 52% overall. Fridays and Saturdays are the most popular days for celebrations, making up 56% of visits, while weekdays account for 34%. Dining with a spouse or significant other is common, accounting for 42% of special occasion visits compared to 37% overall.

Top restaurant chains including Fogo de Chao, Ruth's Chris Steak House and Fleming's Prime Steakhouse excel in delivering the perfect mix of ambiance and quality dining, making them popular choices for celebratory moments.

Additionally, 29% of consumers describe their special occasion as a treat, whether for themselves or someone else. These occasions are about indulgence and making someone feel special. From Sunday brunches to Saturday night outings, people seek restaurants that offer a unique and memorable experience tailored to their celebratory needs.

**Ignite Consumer clients: [Click here for more](#)**

Base: 115,325 consumers ages 18+  
Source: Technomic Ignite Consumer, Q2 2025-Q1 2026



# Where has pasta consumption grown?

Over the last four years, the number of consumers ordering pasta at least occasionally has increased by 5%. This figure shows strong regional and local variation.

At 14%, Middle East consumers saw the highest growth in ordering pasta at least occasionally. Saudi Arabia and the UAE made up two of the top three markets in growth over the last four years.

North America consumers saw the second-highest growth (+8%) in ordering pasta at least occasionally. Although Canadian consumers saw a below-global average increase, U.S. consumers tied for the third-highest increase across all global markets.

At 4%, Asia-Pacific consumers saw the third highest growth in ordering pasta at least occasionally. While many markets in this region saw a below-global average increase, or even a negative change, Singapore consumers saw the second-largest overall growth in ordering pasta.

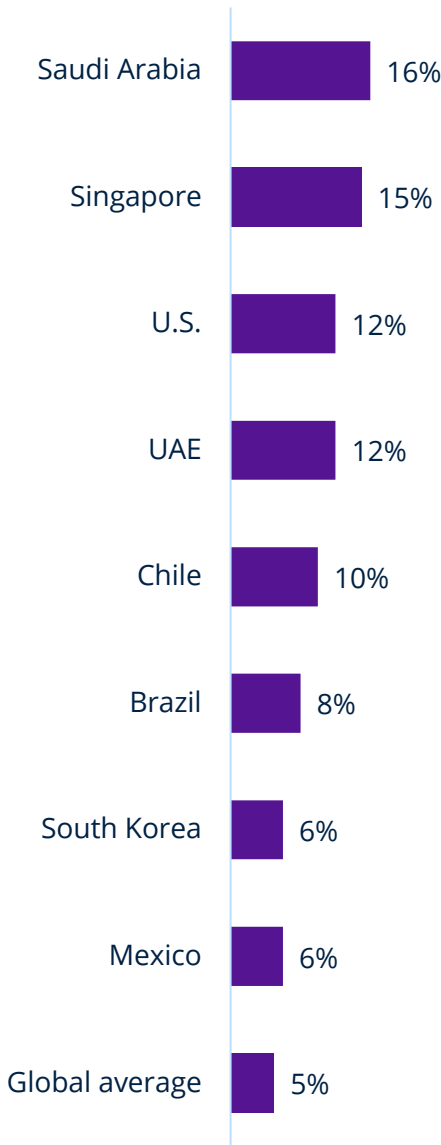
Europe consumers saw the smallest growth in ordering pasta at least occasionally, landing at 2%.

Countries that saw near-average increases include consumers in France and the U.K.

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Source: Technomic Global Pasta Category Report

% CONSUMERS ORDERING CHICKEN WITH PASTA



## Consumer Trend Reports

# Meal kits gain positive momentum

Consumers are embracing meal kits for their convenience and ability to deliver meals without the hassle of traditional cooking. Ready-to-heat options requiring minimal preparation are particularly favored.

While meal kits are seen as affordable alternatives to dining out and many consumers are ordering them due to health reasons, cost remains a barrier, with 39% of consumers reducing usage due to expense. In fact, meal kits are the only emerging channel where value is more important to consumers than quality.

Grocery stores and wholesale clubs remain the dominant sourcing channels, but restaurants show the highest expected growth in usage,

signaling opportunities for expansion into branded, ready-to-heat meal kits.

Get more data-driven insights on the retail foodservice space, including consumer attitudes, behaviors and perspectives with the Technomic 2026 U.S. Emerging Channels Consumer Trend Report.



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Source: Technomic 2026 U.S. Emerging Channels  
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