THE Consumer Curiosity REPORT™

2026 EDITION

WHAT CONSUMER FOOD CURIOSITY IS REALLY TELLING US

A study of America's most curious food adopters

Curious Plot

CURIOSITY IS JUST THE BEGINNING

The 2026 edition marks the fourth annual Consumer Curiosity Report™ produced by Curious Plot. Each year, we survey “early food adopters” - Americans who interact with food content online at least once a week, consider it important to try new things, and are deeply interested in cooking, restaurants, health foods and food festivals.

1,147
RESPONDENTS

APRIL 2026
FIELDED

OUR OBJECTIVE

Track and prioritize food topics about which consumers are most curious to identify, understand and nurture trends in the making.

Here’s what we learned — and what we’re still asking.

WHO WE TALKED TO

MEET THE 2026 EARLY FOOD ADOPTER

45%
MILLENNIALS

59%
ARE WOMEN

~2/3
DON'T HAVE KIDS

55%
INTERACT WITH FOOD CONTENT DAILY

94%
SAY FOOD INFLATION CHANGED HOW THEY SHOP

91%
ACTIVELY TRYING TO EAT HEALTHIER

74%
ARE NOW USING AI FOR FOOD-RELATED ACTIVITIES — MEAL PLANNING, RECIPES, GROCERY LISTS AND MORE. UP FROM 55% JUST ONE YEAR AGO.

Curious. Overwhelmed. Budget-conscious. Quietly using the kitchen to manage something deeper than hunger.

INSIDE THE 2026 REPORT

FIVE CONVERGENCE STORIES

Moments where multiple data signals crash into a single human truth.

1. **The Depleted Consumer**
   Is this a baking trend — or a burnout response?
2. **The GLP-1 Watershed Moment**
   A medication is reshaping what hunger means.
3. **The Credibility Vacuum**
   Who is telling your brand's story right now?
4. **The Informed Appetite**
   Sophisticated decisions, unsophisticated information.
5. **The Inflation Paradox**
   Cutting premium in one aisle to pay more in another.

THE DEPLETED CONSUMER

87% of Millennials and Gen Z are **interested in baking tips.**

~60% of all respondents are **actively seeking mental energy, memory support and focus from their food.**

Is this a baking trend — or a burnout response?

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

One curiosity. Four entirely different stories. Four different marketing briefs.

Baking tips ranked as the single most sought-after cooking topic across all respondents, with more than four out of five people expressing interest.

But the generational lean is what makes this data startling: **younger generations — Millennials and Gen Zers — are more curious about baking than Baby Boomers and Gen X**. These are the same generations reporting the highest levels of cost stress, cognitive overload and demand for mental energy from their food.

The cognitive health picture reinforces this story.
Consumers ranked foods with cognitive health benefits as their #1 nutrition curiosity, ahead of protein, gut health and immunity.
But the generational breakdown reveals three completely different emotional briefs underneath that single data point.

GENERATION	GEN Z	MILLENNIALS	GEN X	BABY BOOMERS
COGNITIVE DESIRES	Mental energy	Mental energy + memory support	Memory support + dementia prevention	Mental alertness + memory support
EMOTIONAL BRIEF	**Performance** — they're running on empty	**Anxiety** — protecting a brain under pressure from all sides	**Fear** — preventive, not just performative	**Maintenance** — holding onto what they have

THE HUMAN TRUTH

What if this isn't a baking trend? What if this is a burnout response?

The kitchen has become the one place where a digitally saturated, financially pressured generation is seeking control, competence and calm. And food has become the daily prescription for a brain that won't slow down, unwind or disconnect from the screen.

Research confirms what the data implies: the repetitive, sensory actions of baking — stirring, kneading, measuring — activate the same neurological pathways as mindfulness practice. They reduce cortisol. They release dopamine. For many, particularly those managing anxiety or ADHD, following a recipe is the most grounding thing they do all day.[1,2]

The brands serving this consumer are selling more than flour or chocolate chips. They're selling relief. The question is: whether brands know that's what they are selling.

THE UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTION

If your brand lives in the baking aisle, are you marketing a product — or are you marketing relief?

And if it's relief — do you have any idea what you're actually relieving?

[1]Guchait, A. (2025, October 13). Baking lifts more than dough. Learn how it nourishes emotional health, too. Psychology Today. https://www.psychologytoday.com/za/blog/the-realities-of-refugee-screening/202510/why-baking-makes-us-feel-better

[2]Olraun, H. (2025, December 15). Kneading your stress away: how baking can calm your brain. Donders Wonders | Over Hersenen En Wetenschap - on Brains and Science. https://blog.donders.ru.nl/kneading-your-stress-away-how-baking-can-calm-your-brain/?lang=en

THE GLP-1 WATERSHED MOMENT

GLP-1s are having an impact on what consumers **put in their grocery carts, with or without a prescription.**

56% of early adopters **have used or are considering GLP-1 medications**, up from 40% last year.

31% of people NOT on GLP-1s say **just hearing about them has already changed how they eat.**

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

It is a mainstream behavior reformation story — and it's happening faster than most food brands have acknowledged.

GLP-1 awareness has gone from 81% to 93% in a single year. The share of consumers using or actively considering these medications jumped 16 percentage points in 12 months. This is no longer a niche pharmaceutical story.

Among those currently using GLP-1 medications, the behavioral shifts are significant.

37% emphasize more **protein-centric meals.**

41% put more focus on **nourishment and functional benefits.**

37% make more **conscious, intentional food choices.**

36% actively **avoid ultra-processed foods.**

30% say their **food preferences and taste have fundamentally changed.**

Nearly one-third of consumers who have never taken a GLP-1 say **simply hearing about these medications has affected their eating habits in various ways,** such as making them more aware of portion sizes, more focused on protein and more intentional about what they put in their bodies.

This is a consumer who eats less but demands more from every bite: More protein. More function. More intentionality. The implicit challenge for food brands: How do you pack maximum nutritional density into a smaller portion without sacrificing the experience?

But the most overlooked finding in this entire dataset is the spillover effect.

The behavioral norms established by GLP-1 users are spreading through social networks, dinner-table conversations and social media — far beyond the prescription pad.

> ***"Hearing about GLP-1 medications has made me more aware of portion sizes and healthier food choices, even though I'm not using the medication myself."***
>
> — Survey respondent not currently on a GLP-1

THE HUMAN TRUTH

34% percent of people who stopped taking GLP-1 medications did so because of cost.

These are consumers who want the outcomes — the smaller portions, the protein focus, the intentional eating — but can't afford or sustain the medication.

They are the GLP-1 generation's largest underserved segment. And no food brand is talking directly to them yet.

THE UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTION

Are you formulating and marketing for the consumer who existed in 2022 — or for the consumer who is being fundamentally reshaped right now?

And what does your product line say to the person who wants GLP-1 outcomes but can't afford the prescription?

THE CREDIBILITY VACUUM

YouTube — not doctors, not registered dietitians, not food brands — is the #1 trusted source of credible food information.

43% of early food adopters — people who interact with food content daily — **incorrectly believe olive oil is a seed oil.**

74% **are using AI tools to make food decisions,** up from 55% last year.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

The seed-oil finding isn't a consumer failure. It's a content vacuum that misinformation has filled. Early food adopters are by definition engaged, curious and the most food-forward segment of the population, yet they get it wrong nearly half the time.

While some might conclude consumers are uninformed, perhaps instead it's that the sources they trust most aren't providing them with accurate, accessible information.

Those sources, ranked by trust, are revealing.

SOURCE	GENERATION	TRUST RANK
YOUTUBE	Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z	#1
SOCIAL MEDIA	Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z	#2
FRIENDS & FAMILY	Baby Boomers	#1
NUTRITIONISTS/ DIETITIANS	Baby Boomers	#2

Brands that invest in clear, honest, educational YouTube content now are feeding a social media presence and building AI discoverability for the next five years.

The AI escalation makes this more urgent. The jump from 55% to 74% AI usage for food purposes in a single year is a steep change. In fact, it's the biggest one-year change we've documented in the four years of creating this report. Nearly half of respondents (49%) use AI specifically for product and ingredient research.

This means before a consumer ever reaches your website, your packaging or your social feed, they may have already formed a belief about your product — sourced from an AI that synthesized YouTube videos, Reddit threads and health blogs. Has your brand's story ever been more out of your control than it is today?

+19 Points in 12 Months

That's how fast the use of AI for food-related queries grew according to respondents. The first touchpoint in a food purchase journey is increasingly happening outside of a brand's owned channel. Rather, it's being offered up by a machine that learned from content your brand may have never even produced.

YouTube is a feeder for AI-powered food discovery. The platforms are integrated: YouTube content is increasingly surfaced in AI-generated answers to food and health questions.

THE HUMAN TRUTH

Your most curious consumers are forming health beliefs at the intersection of algorithm and anxiety, and most food brands are nowhere in that conversation mix.

THE UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTION

Who is educating your consumer right now — you or whatever surfaces first when they ask ChatGPT or their "For You" page?

And if a consumer asks AI whether your product is healthy, what does it say? Who is telling YOUR story right now — are they the ones you want to be telling it? And, more importantly, are they anywhere close to getting it right?

THE INFORMED APPETITE

53%

of early adopters are more likely to purchase a food or beverage item with “high protein” on the label.

34%

of those same people are confusing olive oils with seed oil.

Consumers are making increasingly sophisticated health decisions using increasingly unsophisticated information sources. **And the gap between what they want from food and what they understand about food is one of the most commercially significant blind spots in this entire dataset.**

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

Research consistently shows consumers who lack clarity on what a functional ingredient does or why it matters are far less likely to purchase, even when the product would genuinely benefit them.[3,4,5,6]

Functional foods, the products that deliver health benefits beyond basic nutrition, are the fastest-growing segment in the food market. The demand, as we learned from this survey, is what you would expect: Consumers are seeking protein for satiety and muscle, fiber for gut health, probiotics for immunity, and cognitive ingredients for focus and memory. The desire is real, validated and accelerating across every generation.

Yet, the understanding hasn't kept pace with the desire.

The most trusted functional ingredients remain the familiar ones: protein, fiber, vitamins and omega-3s. More novel ingredients — adaptogens, lion's mane, citicoline, postbiotics — are gaining awareness but remain niche precisely because consumers don't yet have a framework for trusting them.

CONSUMER KNOWLEDGE OF FUNCTIONAL INGREDIENTS

FUNCTIONAL INGREDIENT	PERCEPTION OF WHAT IT DOES
Protein	satiety and muscle
Fiber	gut health
Probiotics	immunity
Cognitive ingredients	focus and memory
Adaptogens	unknown
Lion's mane	unknown
Citicoline	unknown
Postbiotics	unknown

[3]Nazzaro C, Uliano A, Lerro M, Stanco M. (2025, February 18). From Claims to Choices: How Health Information Shapes Consumer Decisions in the Functional Food Market. Foods. 14(4):699. doi: 10.3390/foods14040699. PMID: 40002141; PMCID: PMC11854803.
[4]Drenik, G. (2024, July 19). Beyond the label – consumers want the truth about product ingredients. Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/garydrenik/2024/07/18/beyond-the-label--consumers-want-the-truth-about-product-ingredients/
[5]Baker MT, Lu P, Parrella JA, Leggette HR. (2022, January 22). Consumer Acceptance toward Functional Foods: A Scoping Review. Int J Environ Res Public Health. 19(3):1217. doi: 10.3390/ijerph19031217. PMID: 35162240; PMCID: PMC8835010.
[6]Nazzaro C, Uliano A, Lerro M, Stanco M. (2025, February 18). From Claims to Choices: How Health Information Shapes Consumer Decisions in the Functional Food Market. Foods. 14(4):699. doi: 10.3390/foods14040699. PMID: 40002141; PMCID: PMC11854803.

The generational picture adds urgency:

GENERATION	GEN Z	MILLENNIALS	GEN X	BABY BOOMERS
THE KNOWLEDGE GAP	High desire, low ingredient literacy	Motivated but misinformed on sources	Skeptical of claims without proof	Trust-driven; brand and doctor loyalty

THE HUMAN TRUTH

A functional claim is only as valuable as the consumer's ability to understand it.

The brands winning right now are the ones doing the best job of **explaining themselves**. Brands that invest in education through YouTube, AI-surfaced content and clear on-pack language aren't just doing good marketing, they're protecting themselves and creating future demand.

In addition to other famous quotes about "speaking simply" from Albert Einstein, he also shared: **"Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler."**

"Functional" has become one of the most powerful words in food — and one of the most misunderstood.

Consumers will pay more for functional benefits; 52% of early adopters say so directly. But research shows willingness to pay collapses when the claim isn't clear or credible.

The ingredients consumers trust most are the ones they already know: protein, fiber, probiotics and omega-3s. The ingredients attempting to gain ground —adaptogens, nootropics, functional mushrooms — are still fighting a familiarity deficit.

These are four common claims in the food industry. None of them are reliably defined. None of them consistently predict nutritional quality. And consumers — **58% of whom are now actively reading labels** — are starting to figure that out.[7]

Research published in 2025 found the number of health claims on a package has no correlation with how nutritious the food actually is.[8] A new FDA policy change is making labels like "no artificial colors" potentially misleading, with Consumer Reports actively warning shoppers.[9] And U.S. consumers already report some of the lowest trust in health-related food claims in the developed world.[10,11]

The regulatory floor is rising.

The FDA updated its definition of "healthy" in 2025. Mandatory front-of-pack nutrition labeling is coming. Brands that have built their identities on legacy claims — natural, clean, wholesome — without the substance to back them up are being exposed to skepticism and face the potential of irrelevance.

The more consumers read labels, the less they trust them.

That's a brand problem.

The consumer is reading the back of your package with more attention and less patience than ever before. What are they finding?

[7]thuggins@acosta.com (2026, May 29). Half of U.S. Shoppers Worried About Artificial Ingredients. Acosta Group. https://www.acosta.group/half-of-u-s-shoppers-worried-about-artificial-ingredients/
[8]Venkatesh S, Steinberg J, Ryan C. (2025, August 26). Do Food Packaging Health Claims Depict Healthiness or Mislead Patients? PRiMER. 9:41. doi: 10.22454/PRiMER.2025.586640. PMID: 41089083; PMCID: PMC12517392.
[9]Martineau, P. (2026, February 9). 'No Artificial Colors' May Not Mean What You Think Under New FDA Policy. Consumer Reports. https://www.consumerreports.org/health/food-additives/no-artificial-colors-new-fda-policy-a1010392178/
[10]Katherine Fuller, Julia Reedy Sharib, Bingbing Fan, Jennifer L. Pomeranz, Dariush Mozaffarian, Sean B. Cash, U.S. consumer preferences for FDA healthy vs. generic healthy food labels: the influence of trust, Food Quality and Preference, Volume 144, 2026, 105898, ISSN 0950-3293, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2026.105898.
[11](2026, January 21). What 'healthy' means to Americans is changing, and so should marketing. FoodNavigator-USA.com. https://www.foodnavigator-usa.com/Article/2026/01/21/ific-survey-how-americans-view-health-and-food-choices/

THE HUMAN TRUTH

It's not enough to make food that functions — **you have to help consumers understand function,** which is a very different business challenge than most organizations and brands are currently solving for.

THE UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTION

Consumers want the benefits your food brings to their tables. Do they understand it well enough to buy it – and trust it enough to buy it again and again?

THE INFLATION PARADOX

94% of consumers have changed their grocery shopping habits due to food inflation.

54% say they will pay more for locally grown food.

52% will pay more for functional health benefits.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

The conventional wisdom about inflation and food is that consumers trade down when prices go up — they buy less, they buy cheaper, they cut premium products. The data here tells a more nuanced and more strategically important story.

Yes, consumers are cutting. The foods they've stopped buying tell a clear story about where the perceived value of certain items have eroded:

32%
stopped buying specialty cheeses.

31%
stopped buying organic foods.

30%
stopped buying seafood.

29%
stopped buying deli-prepared meals.

28%
stopped buying international ingredients.

But simultaneously, they are actively willing to pay more — for the right reasons.

This is a consumer who is **deliberate and intentional.**

They are making active trade-offs: cutting indulgences and convenience items to preserve budgets for products that deliver on a clear promise, whether that promise is provenance, function or values alignment.

What does perceived value actually look like at-shelf right now?

The gourmet food market is forecasted to **grow at 6% annually through 2030** — during an inflation cycle — because premium is being redefined by proof instead of price.

Consumers are paying more for products in categories where the value is tangible and the claim is credible: locally sourced proteins, functional beverages with cognitive or gut health benefits, high-protein packaged foods bearing clear nutritional labeling.

Meanwhile, the categories losing ground — premium confectionery, specialty packaged snacks, organic products without a clear functional story — share one thing in common: their premium pricing is built on **aesthetics or aspiration**.

The line between "worth it" and "not worth it" has never been clearer. And consumers are drawing it with remarkable precision.

THE HUMAN TRUTH

Consumers stopped buying premium products in some categories to save money for something that matters more in others.

THE UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTION

If your premium product doesn't have a clear, defensible reason to exist in a constrained budget, what exactly are you asking people to sacrifice to buy it?

And does your marketing reflect the reality that for many of your consumers, every grocery decision is a genuine trade-off?

THE HUNGER BENEATH THE DATA

A generation is using baking to manage burnout. A medication is reshaping what hunger means. An algorithm has replaced the nutritionist. A budget constraint is forcing people to cook their ways back to something that feels like control. And a gap between desire and understanding — widened by decades of claims that promised more than they delivered — is leaving the most motivated health consumers stranded between wanting more from food and not knowing who to believe.

Food has become a personal infrastructure — the daily system people use to manage energy, emotion, cognition and cost, all at once. The kitchen is no longer where meals are made; it's a sanctuary where people feel like themselves again.

The food brands with the biggest media budgets or the most viral social content won't be the ones that win in this environment. The winners will understand what their products actually do for a person beyond just nutrition and more how they serve people emotionally, cognitively and practically — and then have the drive and ability to say so clearly. The brands who can do the deep dive to understand this will go beyond selling more product. They will build trust. And right now, trust is the most important ingredient in the food industry.

CURIOUS WHAT THESE FINDINGS MEAN FOR YOUR BRAND?

Ready to explore what the data means for your brand, your category or your audience? Reach out to:

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Curious Plot

2026 Consumer Curiosity Report produced by Curious Plot. Fourth annual edition. Survey conducted April 2026, n=1,147 early food adopters, margin of error ±2.9%.

Curious Plot is a marketing, communications and consulting agency serving clients at the intersection of food, agriculture and animal care markets.