

# THE FUTURE OF DINNER

10 battlegrounds for  
innovation in 2026



HIGH PROTEIN +27%

30 MINUTE MEALS +24%

CLEAN INGREDIENTS +35%



# "What's for *dinner*?"

Dinner isn't just a meal. It's where Americans talk to each other. A moment for families to connect and friends to reconnect. It's the grand finale for the everyday.

It's also a fierce battlefield for innovation.

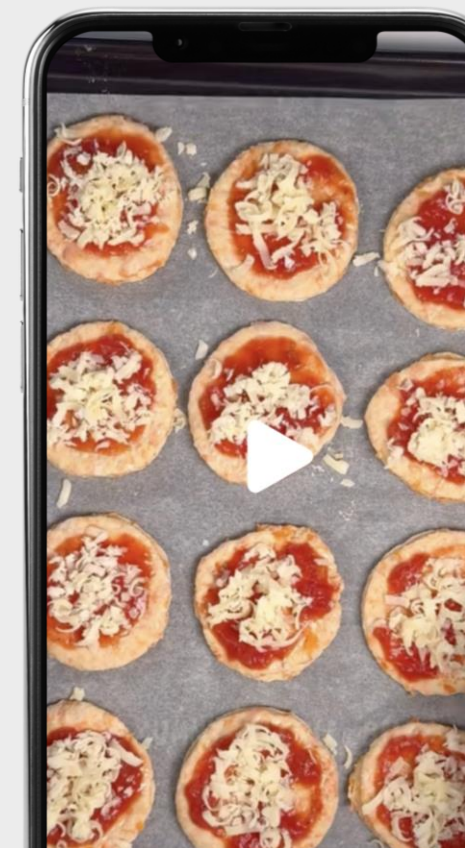
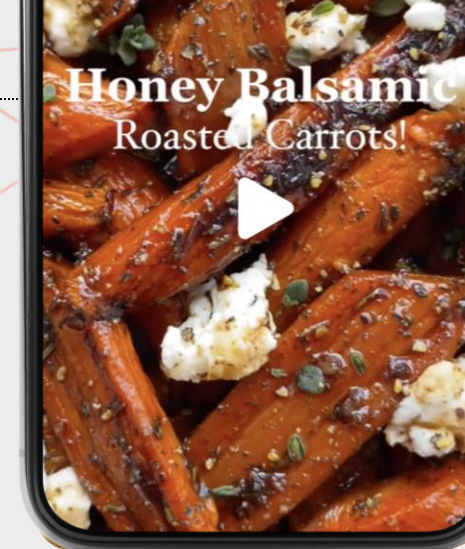
The dinner landscape in the USA is *always* changing.

Consumers' needs evolve. New technologies and global influences alter what people eat and how they eat it.

Wellness collides with indulgence. Sustainability with convenience. While the costs of eating in and eating out skyrocket.

In this report, we will explore the ten battlegrounds for dinner in America - with a focus on two areas: **Children's Meals** and **Homemade Dinners**.

We will analyze the *emerging trends* and *new opportunities* for food brands in 2026 and beyond.



# We are Black Swan Data

We offer a **predictive** view of consumers using unprompted, behavioral data.

The insights inside this report do not come from surveys, panels or focus groups.

Our technology applies AI and predictive analytics to millions of social and online posts (from TikTok, Instagram, X and more) to understand what's *really* driving consumer behavior.

It identifies, connects and predicts future consumer behavior with **89%** accuracy.

Leading CPG brands are leveraging this data to make faster, more confident, evidence-driven decisions along each stage of the innovation process.





# Our **data** explained

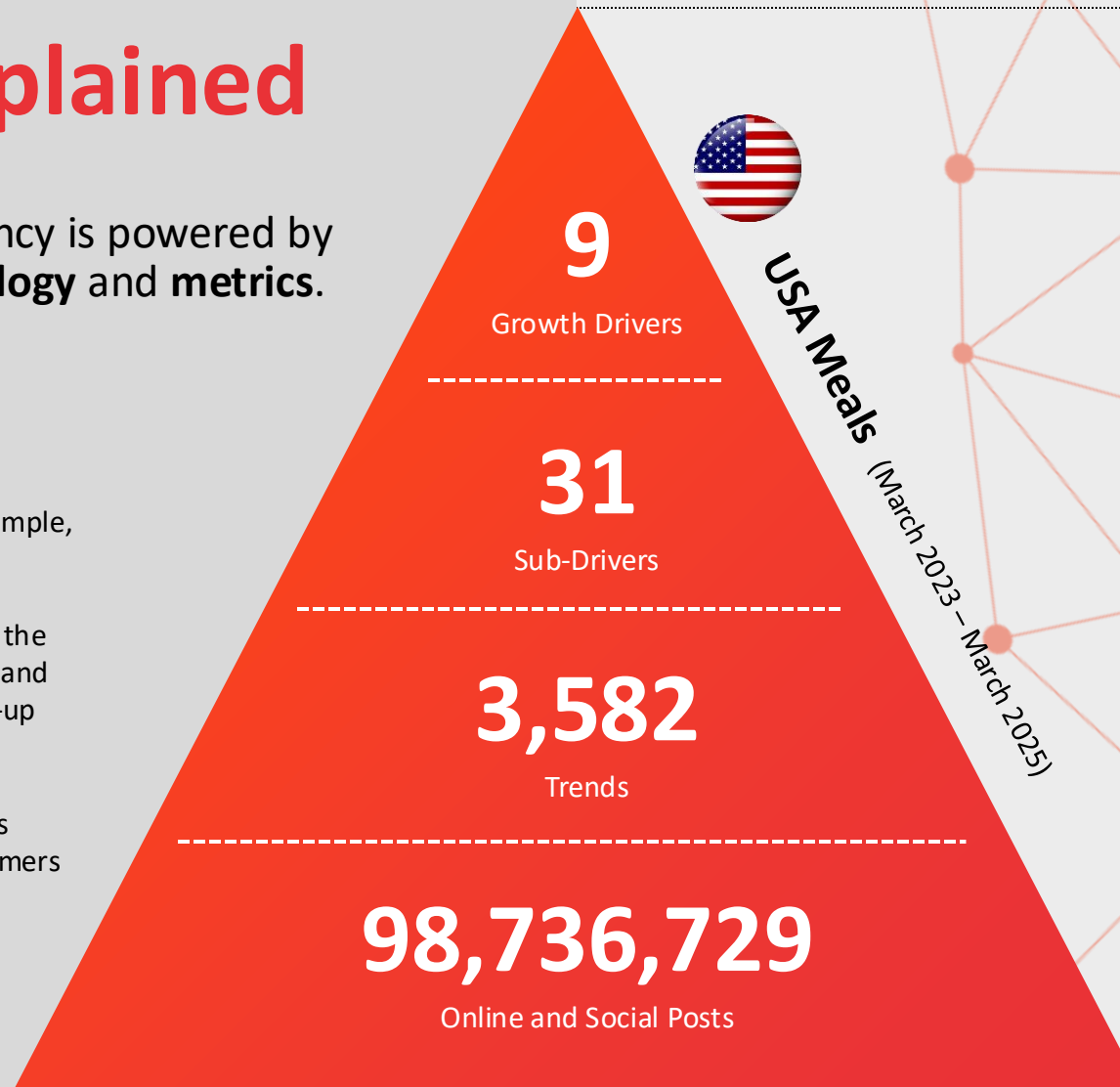
Our platform and consultancy is powered by our unique **data**, **methodology** and **metrics**.

## How does it work?

Our platform retrieves all the relevant consumer posts in a category; in this example, **98M** posts related to **Meals** in the USA.

We use AI and data science to isolate all the individual trending topics and behaviors and understand how they cluster and ladder-up into category growth drivers.

This dynamic segmentation framework is refreshed monthly and evolves as consumers and the category evolves.



## METRICS

### Trend Prediction Value (TPV)

Ranks every trend based on its future growth potential.

### Volume

Total number of unique posts over a two-year timeframe.

### Growth

The year-on-year increase or decrease in conversation volume around a trend.





#1

## Children's Meals

Choosy children and  
picky parents



#2

## Convenience Meals

Ready meals, meal prep and  
frozen



#3

## Dietary Requirements

Free-from, allergies and  
intolerances



#4

## Eating-Out

Restaurants and fast food



#5

## Food Delivery

Convenience vs price vs  
indulgence

# Battlegrounds for Dinner

#10

## Vegetarian and Vegan

Why are meat-replacements  
in decline?



#9

## Healthy Food

MAHA, health-washing and  
protein



#8

## GLP-1s and Diets

The impact of Ozempic



#7

## Global Influences

New cuisines and  
ingredients



#6

## Eating-In

Homemade, recipes and cooking





01

BATTLEGROUND

# CHILDREN'S MEALS

Choosy children and picky parents



# Choosy kids and picky parents

Just over 80% of parents of children under age 12 are Millennials – the original **clean eaters**.

Millennials grew up in the golden age of the golden arches – the happy meal. Where toy was the first thought and nutrition the afterthought.

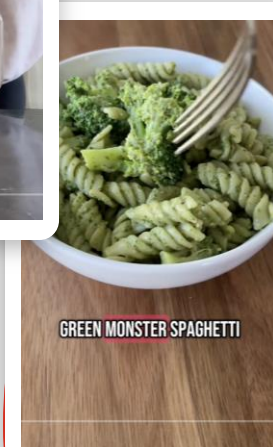
In reaction to **unhealthy, ultra-processed childhoods**, Millennials embraced health and wellness.

They prefer organic, natural foods. Significant segments describe their diets as **vegan, vegetarian** or **flexitarian**.

This creates a problem when feeding their children. Parents are still **time-poor** (despite changing working habits) and **dollar-poor** due to rising prices.

So how to feed children healthy meals that align with dietary requirements that are cheap and convenient *and* that everyone in the family wants to eat?

Meeting all these needs is a challenge parents face every day. But an opportunity for brands ready to offer solutions.



## Trends associated with Children's Meals

### Childhood Nutrition

TPV #119  
Vol: 2,874  
Growth: +4%

### Kid's Meals

TPV #243  
Vol: 220  
Growth: -9%

### Child-Friendly

TPV #306  
Vol: 143,437  
Growth: +8%

### Affordable

TPV #341  
Vol: 276,795  
Growth: +7%

### Vegetarian

TPV #491  
Vol: 789,052  
Growth: +2%





## RECOMMENDATION

# Rich textures and **hidden macros**

Brands must make healthy eating **easy for parents** and **fun for their children**.

Children have **different tastebuds** and **sensory needs** to adults. Kids crave **crunch, color, fun** and **familiar** tastes. Parents want **fewer artificial** and **added nutrition**. Brands need to speak to both.

More and more parents are introducing **plant-based** foods to avoid intolerances and allergies. But they are now realizing the **ultra-processed** nature of these products.

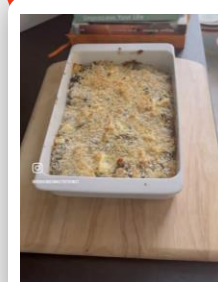
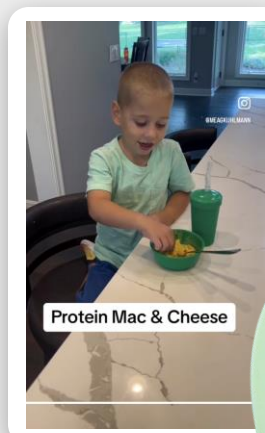
Interest is also growing in **probiotic-rich** and **microbiome-supporting** foods. Fermented foods like kimchi and sauerkraut are becoming popular. But these flavors are often too bold and unfamiliar for under 5s.

**Blended sauces** with protein-rich bases like **lentil, chickpea** and **cottage cheese** are a means of upping the macros in dinner.

While parents have been 'hiding' vegetables in children's dinners for generations. Now they want to hide macros to boost nutrition.

Parents want to educate their kids about healthy eating. So hiding vegetables is counterproductive.

Real vegetables with recognizable names bring color, texture and familiarity to kids' meals. Sauces and dips are key to sneaking in unfamiliar foods that deliver wider health benefits.



### Clean Ingredients

TPV #2  
Vol: 4,791  
Growth: +35%

### Probiotic

TPV #157  
Vol: 26,122  
Growth: +13%

### High Protein

TPV #253  
Vol: 194,112  
Growth: +27%

### Crunchy Texture

TPV #398  
Vol: 510,528  
Growth: +3%

### Plant-Based

TPV #499  
Vol: 237,337  
Growth: -17%

Trends associated with  
**Children's Meals**



# Goodles

"We reimagined your favorite comfort food to be preposterously delicious and **nutrient-packed**."

Their mac and cheese range ticks all the boxes for parents.

They are **easy to make**, **clean-label certified** with **no artificials**.

There are products on offer for different dietary requirements – including **vegan** and **gluten-free** options.

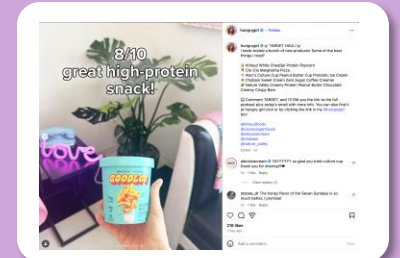
Goodles are praised for being a healthier alternative to other ready-meal pastas on the market.

## What can other brands learn?

Goodles target parents while being popular with children.

Beyond the clean label, their products display clear nutritional info. Hitting all the macros health-conscious parents look out for: such as high protein and high fiber with prebiotics.

All packed into mac and cheese, a tasty comfort food that children know and love. Goodles are successfully catering for choosy children *and* picky parents by innovating something **familiar**.





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BATTLEGROUND

# EATING-IN

Homemade, recipes  
and cooking





# Quick, easy and **gourmet**

Consumers want to elevate home-cooked and ready meals to **replicate the restaurant experience**.

For most adults in the USA, dinner is the main meal they prepare and eat at home.

Consumers' priorities when eating-in revolve around **value for money, health and taste**. These priorities are not new.

But as people eat-out less due to financial stress, they are now looking to capture the experience of eating at a restaurant – just at home.

They want to add **gourmet touches** to meals to elevate home-cooked food into chef-cooked food.

Consumers are also dissatisfied with ready meals. While a large proportion of the population still rely on ready meals for quick, easy meals – they feel their options are **bland** and overly **processed**.

Beyond replicating the dining out experience, they want ready meals that **feel homemade** – and can be upgraded into a gourmet dinner.

## Trends associated with Dinner



### 30 Minute Meals

TPV #7  
Vol: 11,727  
Growth: +24%

### Ready Meals

TPV #55  
Vol: 4,785  
Growth: -3%

### Quick and Easy

TPV #321  
Vol: 272,202  
Growth: +2%

### Culinary Experience

TPV #436  
Vol: 83,543  
Growth: -21%

### Gourmet

TPV #447  
Vol: 146,881  
Growth: -6%



## RECOMMENDATION

# Gourmet upgrades

Consumers are turning to **specialty condiments** and **fresh produce** to elevate home-cooked dinners.

**Premium add-ons** help turn a ready meal or homemade meal into a gourmet dinner.

This includes premium ingredients like shitake mushrooms, aged cheeses and truffle oils.

**Specialty condiments** like restaurant-branded sauces also replace standard sauces with a gourmet twist.

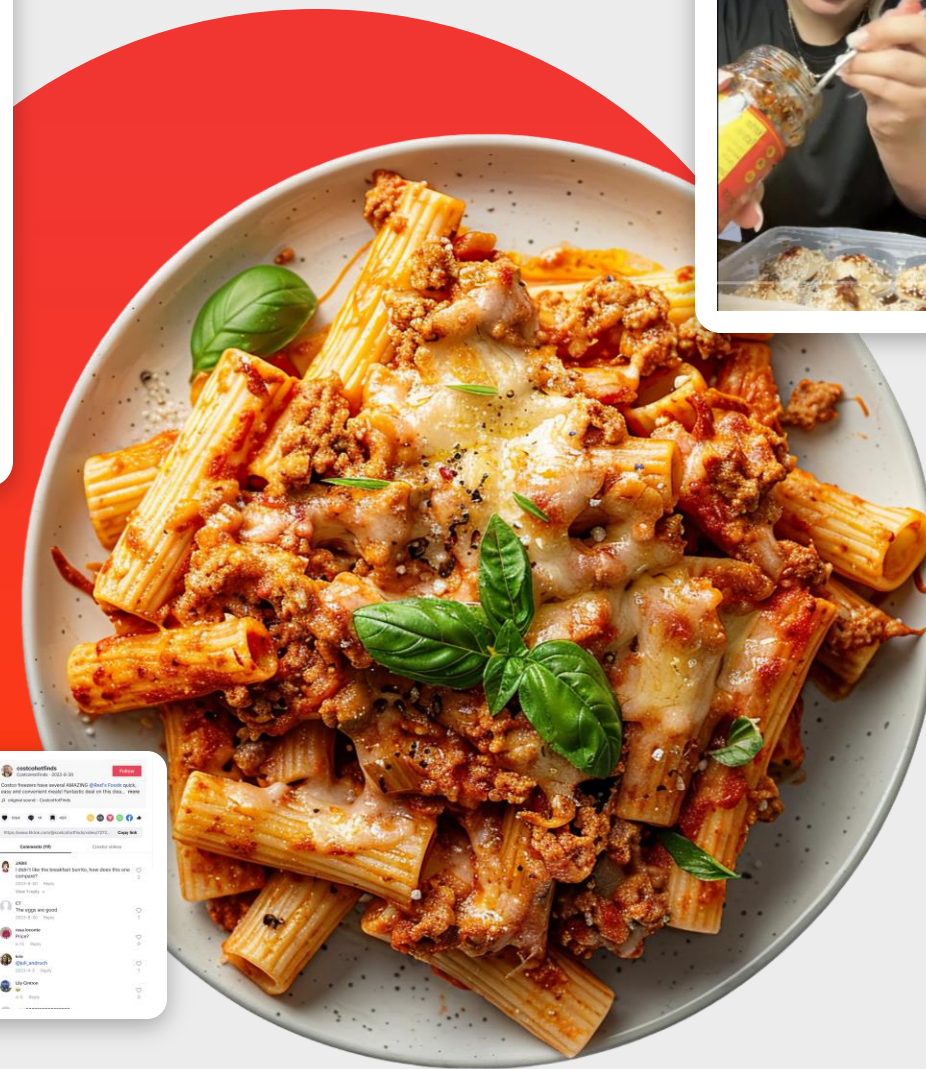
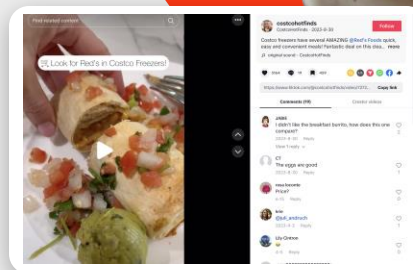
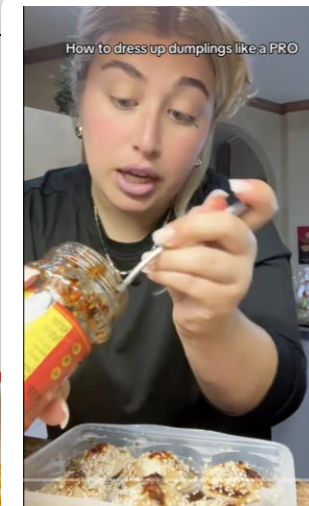
Fresh herbs like cilantro, basil, mint or scallions add **color** and **aroma** to bland dinners.

Consumers are also using **international spices** and **finishing oils** (like chili oil) to bring heat and authentic global flavors.

Crispy toppings (like sesame seeds or fried onions) enhance texture.

While fresh vegetables and salads up the **crunch** and **healthiness** of frozen meals.

Consumers are using premium add-ons on their own. Brands should consider how to leverage this behavior when marketing ready meals or condiments.





# Rao's Meat Lasagna

Consumers love this frozen meal because it *"genuinely tastes homemade"*.

Rao's Meat Lasagna is growing in popularity because it's **easy to make** but tastes like it's been **made by Nonna**.

It's made without preservatives and zero artificial colors or flavors.

Consumers think it's better than typical frozen meals. They also say it's "easy to customize" - pairing it with fresh herbs, olive oils and parmesan to enrich the flavor.

## What can other brands learn?

Rao's commitment to high-quality ingredients helps to flip consumers' low opinion of frozen food.

The data reveals just one complaint about this product – it's price. It being more expensive than mainstream frozen products.

There is a market for higher-quality but reasonably priced frozen meals that make quick, easy and gourmet dinners more accessible.



WestboundPachyderm OP ·

This was incredible! Just perfect. The sauce, cheese, and pasta is beautiful. I will definitely buy this again BUT this was the small serving. I will only buy the large from now on. I did the last two minutes with the broiler on and then dusted with Parmesan and red pepper flakes. 10/10.



30



Reply



Award



Share



Marissa

★★★★★ So Good It Skips the "Frozen Food" Apology + Tastes Like Home

Reviewed in the United States on May 16, 2025

Verified Purchase

PROS:

- ✓ Genuinely tastes homemade
- ✓ Perfectly cooked pasta and meat layers
- ✓ Easy to customize—but doesn't need it
- ✓ Great portion size for a satisfying dinner

# Want the full picture?

In this report we've briefly explored just **2 of 10** battlegrounds for dinner in the USA.

From **new global flavors** to the impact of **Ozempic** and other **cross-category trends** - we can help answer your burning insight questions.

If you would like to explore the emerging trends and opportunities in your product category, please get in touch.

We can also map your brand, portfolio or demand spaces onto this framework to determine 'where to play' and 'how to win' in 2026+.





# Black Swan Data has joined forces with **Mintel**.

Our new partnership delivers the most **complete** and **predictive** view of consumer behavior.

Mintel understands markets and categories, how they are evolving and why. Black Swan predicts what consumers want next.

Together, we turn early trend signals into opportunity spaces and opportunity spaces into winning products on shelf.

**Innovation starts here.**

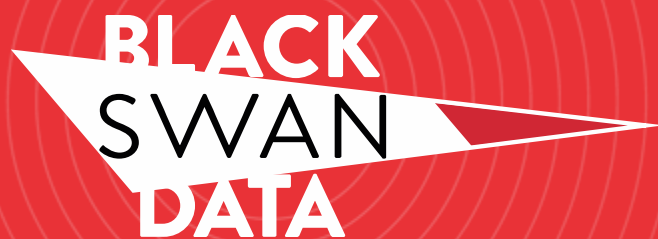
Whether it's quick turnaround projects or future growth strategy, *our experts are ready for your brief!*

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