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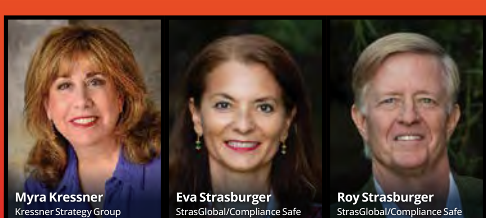


# Menu Vision: Blending Tradition with Trend

CFVG VISION REPORT NO. 2
**JUNE 2025**

FACILITATOR

**Richard Poye**
COO, *Food Trends Think Tank*

FEATURED SPEAKER

**Claire Conaghan**
Trendologist & Associate Director, Publications, Datassential

VISION GROUP NETWORK

sharing **today** to shape **tomorrow**

We are Convenience Foodservice Vision Group (CFVG), a group of invited leaders from across the foodservice sector who have volunteered our time to help our fellow culinary, marketing, operations, technology, sensory, safety, and select solution providers. The only reason we gather is to discuss, debate and share our experiences and ideas. Each of us is offering our personal opinions. We are not looking for "group think." We make our conversations available to everyone in the industry through CFVG Vision Reports.

These reports will help you better understand current challenges, solutions, and opportunities while giving you access to different opinions and perspectives.

Convenience Foodservice Vision Group is part of the Vision Group Network, whose mission is to gather the best minds in the industry, put them in a virtual room, and let the ideas and opinions develop.

This CFVG Vision Report is comprised of multiple parts:

This **CFVG Vision Report** includes **CFVG Views**, a summary of the conversation with additional resources.

NEW!

**In The Room With CFVG** transcript and Claire Conaghan's presentation, "C-Store Menuing," are online and searchable by topics. The full meeting transcript is available, so that you can be "in the room" with us, rather than only having access to selected quotes and paraphrasing.

## The main topics in this CFVG Vision Report:

# CFVG thanks our **Ally Supporters**

Founded in 1894, McLane Company Inc. is one of the largest distributors in America, serving convenience stores, mass merchants, and chain restaurants. As an industry-leading partner to the biggest retail and restaurant businesses, McLane buys, sells, delivers, and serves the world's most beloved brands. With headquarters in Temple, Texas, McLane has more than 80 distribution centers across the country, employs more than 25,000 teammates, and delivers to nearly every zip code in the U.S. McLane is a wholly owned subsidiary of Berkshire Hathaway, Inc.

McLane Fresh, McLane's retail foodservice program, offers unmatched value to convenience store operators by forming strategic partnerships based on tailored insights. The McLane Fresh team provides customized recommendations and seamless execution. Leveraging extensive data, McLane supplies programs and products that drive profitability, focusing on efficiency, transparency, and predictability. Their easy-to-execute packages minimize the need for skilled labor, boost sales with merchandising strategies, and include the right equipment bundles. McLane offers quality products at competitive prices, adhering to top food safety standards, along with fast, fresh and cost-effective deliveries.

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Transform your operation with Upshop's foodservice operating system - the first platform that seamlessly connects all store workflows with an AI-powered replenishment system. From inventory and ordering to food production and waste management, unlock unprecedented efficiency and insights. Imagine the possibilities when your entire foodservice operation speaks the same digital language, driving profitability and growth across every location.

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# CFVG VIEWS

## A CONVENIENCE FOODSERVICE VISION GROUP DISCUSSION

**The May 2025 Convenience Foodservice Vision Group (CFVG) virtual meeting centered on menu development, consumer behavior and retail strategies. The meeting featured a presentation from Datassential, followed by a lively discussion by CFVG members who shared projections on how to adapt their businesses to these trends.**

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# C-Store Menuing and Trends

The CFVG virtual meeting, held on May 5, 2025, was facilitated by **Richard Poye**, COO of Food Trends Think Tank. After a brief round of member introductions, the featured speaker, **Claire Conaghan**, trendologist and associate director for publications for Datassential, delivered her presentation, "C-Store Menuing," examining menuing, key categories, generational and regional differences, and trending offerings.

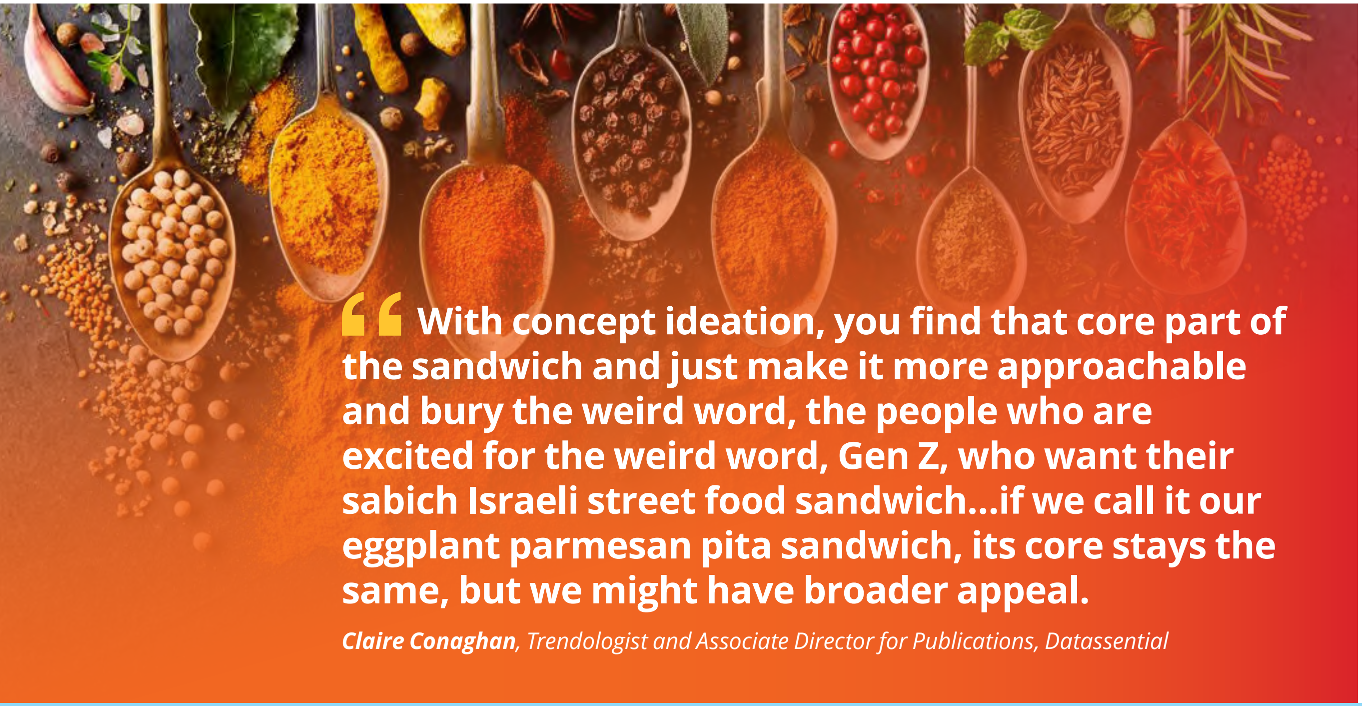
Conaghan began examining consumer price considerations when deciding where and what to eat. She declared that price is "more table stakes than necessarily a differentiator" across all age groups, noting people say, "Once I've decided I'm going to the convenience store and that's where I'm purchasing my food, I have my expectation." She emphasized that while 47% of consumers prefer traditional menus, 19% seek "creative and trendy" options, and 33% fall in between, highlighting the need to balance innovation with familiarity.

Turning to menuing, she explained that the desire for trend-forward items is not limited to younger generations. "We are actually seeing that especially Boomers are catching up. All of the social media, all of the food TV, all of that has meant that we are all actually on a much more even playing field when it comes to those food trends," she said. Conaghan pointed out that both Gen Z and Boomers may be drawn to the same items but for different reasons, particularly when traditional dishes feel new to younger consumers.

In terms of innovation, she introduced the concept of "safe experimentation," where dishes feel familiar but include an unexpected element. An example was the smoked brisket egg rolls from Famous Dave's: "It's got this Korean sweet heat sauce, which makes it a little bit outside of Famous Dave's wheelhouse and makes it a little bit more unique which lets us get that 56% of people saying it's extremely or very new and different." She concluded that, "The takeaway here is that you can see that the combination, offers strong appeal, but it's not actually that rare of a concept in general…they pair okay, they're not the most rare ingredients, but somehow that slight addition of the Korean barbecue sauce bumped it up to that high uniqueness."

Conaghan also emphasized that consumers are more open to trying new items later in the day, especially at lunch, and innovation should be tailored to those dayparts. Pizza and sandwiches offered opportunities for experimentation through flavor profiles or regional trends, while breakfast should remain mostly traditional. Pizza toppings like dill pickle ranch and Nashville hot were trending in some regions but absent from others. On beverages, she highlighted the rapid growth of cold brew coffee in convenience stores: "When we asked this question in 2019, 15% of consumers said they were purchasing it from a convenience store and now it's up to 32%."

She concluded by recommending that c-store operators focus on smart, data-driven menu innovation that appeals across demographics and leverages both generational preferences and regional trends without straying too far from the familiar.



**"With concept ideation, you find that core part of the sandwich and just make it more approachable and bury the weird word, the people who are excited for the weird word, Gen Z, who want their sabich Israeli street food sandwich…if we call it our eggplant parmesan pita sandwich, its core stays the same, but we might have broader appeal.**

***Claire Conaghan**, Trendologist and Associate Director for Publications, Datassential*

# Trends and Innovation in **Menu Development**

After the presentation, participants reflected on the practicality of introducing innovative menu items while balancing familiarity. Poye initially questioned the extremity of some menu ideas but reconsidered after evaluating how small adjustments, like including familiar flavors such as "sweet heat," can help ease consumers into trend-forward offerings. He emphasized the value of keeping a recognizable base, such as pizza or spring rolls, and adding just "one weird thing" to strike the right balance. This thoughtful approach to menu building, he noted, could appeal to both Gen Z and Boomers, who may view the same item through different lenses.

## Trendy Surprises: Flat Croissants and Dirty Sodas

Poye mentioned the flat croissant trend as an example of how something seemingly trivial can have practical merit both as a savory and sweet item and reflected on how younger consumers are rediscovering things older generations grew up with, like "dirty sodas." Conaghan's earlier point that "what's old is new again" resonated here, prompting others to chime in.

**Ryan Blevins**, Weigel's director of food and beverage innovation, shared that his team plans to roll out both a butter Belgian croissant and dirty sodas. Their approach to the latter includes providing flavored syrups and creamers at the fountain station along with posted recipes to guide customers. The goal is to make the experience fun and accessible, hoping to attract new traffic.

Cliffs Local Market Director of Foodservice **Derek Thurston** added that his team is also jumping into the dirty soda trend. They've developed recipe cards, visual displays, and digital marketing to support the effort. He said the excitement wasn't just among customers, the staff was energized as well. He expressed optimism about the campaign's potential to both engage consumers and distinguish their stores this summer.

## Pizza Reigns Supreme, but Hawaiian Tops The Charts

Pizza is a ubiquitous c-store favorite and Conaghan noted that consumers surveyed reported pizza as the last prepared food they purchased at a convenience store. **Sarah Jenks**, senior director of solutions consulting for CFVG Ally Supporter member Upshop and guest of **Mike Weber**, Upshop's CMO, asked whether there are trends Conaghan is tired of seeing, particularly on pizza menus, given how central and profitable pizza is in foodservice. Conaghan admitted she personally feels hot honey should have peaked by now, but Datassential's data shows it's still on the rise with much room to grow.

Despite her own preferences, she emphasized that pineapple, especially when paired with upscale cured meats like prosciutto, is actually growing in popularity, joking about the potential of a "hot honey pepperoni pineapple pizza" making its way to convenience stores. From a broader industry view, Conaghan noted that pizza is thriving, topping the list in menu innovation and penetration growth, which means restaurants are continuously leaning into it and may pose competitive pressure on convenience stores.

Claire Conaghan shared several charts with rankings for the popularity of pizza, beverages, and more in her presentation. The complete presentation and video are located online, alongside the full transcript. You can find that here at the Vision Group Network Vision Report Library: **vgnsharing.com/vision-report-library**.

**Jon Cox**, vice president of retail foodservice at Ally Supporter member McLane, pointed out how resilient some classic flavors are, like buffalo, which persists in popularity despite predictions it would fade. Conaghan agreed, saying that while some niche items like mortadella appear to have had their moment, nothing significant is falling off pizza menus.

Curby's Express Market COO **Richard Cashion** added a regional insight, explaining that dill pickle pizza is the third-highest performer at his store in Texas sharing: "We took it off the menu and got threatened by some customers if we didn't bring it back . We had to bring dill back and thought the Nashville hot had to go off the menu, so I would say in this part of Texas, they took dill pickle pretty seriously."

Building on the discussion, Poye shared an observation from a recent visit to an Indian restaurant where he encountered Indian-spiced popcorn. He used this example to illustrate how familiar carriers, like popcorn, pizza, or sandwiches can be platforms for introducing bold new flavors. He pointed out that regional innovations, like Nashville hot or hot honey, often start small and then expand nationally. The lesson, he suggested, is to explore how new flavor profiles can be gradually introduced in recognizable formats.

Poye also emphasized the importance of customer trust. Some stores may already have the consumer's permission to experiment with bold offerings, while others may need to take a more gradual, strategic approach to innovation. Trust, he concluded, is key to successfully expanding a menu's creativity.

## Cold Brew Coffee Energizes Sales

Iced coffee and cold brew coffee trends also evolved into a broader discussion on beverage strategy and execution. **Jasmine Struble**, senior category manager for Yesway, asked a clarification question whether the prominent figures Conaghan presented were based on cups sold, regardless what was inside the cup. Conaghan clarified that the data referenced was consumer-reported behavior, not register data.

Thurston inquired about customer preferences for cold brew flavors and equipment, citing his own experience with nitro cold brew, which failed to take off at his company. He found more success with flavored varieties like salted caramel. Cox shared a past experience in retail where a major investment in bean-to-cup machines failed because of a lack of complementary offerings, such as flavor options and syrups. Through trial and error, they learned that simply offering syrups and allowing customers to personalize their drinks was more effective. Global Partners' Vice President of Food, Innovation and Strategy **Jac Moskalik** is introducing cold brew in all of their

**"Before I came to McLane, I ran retail stores and one of the mistakes we made was we rolled out bean to cup in every store and we're like, man, we're going to sell iced coffee...**

What we found through a bunch of trial and error was we could just put the syrups out there and let customers make it themselves...

It's just the way it happened, but we saw more adoption that way of just saying, 'Hey, come in and make it yourself iced coffee, cold brew the way you want it.' And the mistake we made was actually spending all the money to do bean to cup and not putting those things out with it.

***Jon Cox**, Vice President Retail Foodservice, McLane* stores. With one out of five consumers interested, she speculates, “They spend a lot more in our store, which was what I used to sell the investment to our executives. Look what else they buy in the store, which was a home run for us.”

Cashion shared that beverage is a central part of Curby’s Express Market, with loyalty customers visiting an average of 8.5 times per week, one person even exceeding 40 visits. To capitalize on that engagement, his team runs frequent LTOs across teas, coffees, and cold brews, using baristas and customer feedback to develop flavor trends. Seasonal rotation and customization drive their beverage program, and they’re revamping finishing bars to enhance the made-to-order experience while still enabling self-serve flexibility.

Director of Fresh Food for Loop & Poppy **Brandon Frampton** outlined an ambitious initiative in California to elevate their cold beverage offerings. With 150 stores and access to strong local talent, his plan is to build out a full-scale, made-to-order craft beverage program in ten high-performing Bay Area stores. He expressed confidence that capturing overflow from local competitors would yield major success, citing high regional demand and the strong margins and appeal of well-executed cold beverages.

# Customer Demographics

## Regional Differences

Moskalik shared that her team at Global Partners segments customers into core daily “ritualists” and more adventurous “seekers.” She emphasized a focus on regionalism and local sourcing, as well as incorporating ethnic flavors that align with national trends and appeal to the experimental tendencies of seeker consumers. While the ritualists drive volume, catering to seekers with trend-forward, limited-time offers are essential for keeping the brand relevant.

**Joe Brumfield**, senior category manager for beverages at La Lomita Inc, added to the conversation discussing his experience with truck stop menus versus traditional convenience. Brumfield noted that across all their locations, the menu is “taco-centric.” Their offerings, including tacos, chicken sandwiches, burgers, and pizza, appeal universally across demographics. In their South Texas market, tacos are the common denominator across customer segments, offering versatility and broad appeal through variety in fillings and salsas.

Cox noted that for his McLane team, a trend doesn’t feel viable for Midwest operations until it has already proven itself in markets like New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago. To mitigate risk, he emphasized relying on unique carriers and sauces instead of introducing unfamiliar proteins, which are harder to unwind if a concept fails. He used the example of a Portuguese roll, explaining that while the term may resonate in one region, it means nothing to customers in South Texas. Flexibility, he noted, is easier to manage through toppings or sauces than it is through custom proteins, which require significant volume and lead time.

> **“The way we approach food here at Global is we use customer segmentation, so we have our daily ritualist who’s our core business, but we have to be speaking to what we call a seeker. That’s the innovation and the fun stuff that comes with our categories.**
>
> ***Jac Moskalik,*** *Vice President of Food, Innovation and Strategy, Global Partners, LP*

## Generational Alignment

**Eva Strasburger**, president of StrasGlobal, CEO of Compliance Safe and Vision Group Network co-founder raised a concern about the pace of Gen Z trends, noting that "by the time they had accommodated them or added them to the menu, they had moved on to something else." Conaghan confirmed this challenge, emphasizing that unless an operator catches a trend early or captures its core essence, like offering a tangy beverage rather than replicating a viral "pickles-in-Coke" fad, it may already be too late to act.

**Bonnie Zaring**, Executive Director, Food Programs and Offers at RaceTrac Inc, asked about the potential for alienating other demographics when chasing trends. Conaghan explained that while a trendy item might not appeal to everyone, it rarely drives customers away entirely. Datassential tracks generational preferences and "hate it" scores to help avoid overly polarizing items.

Offering a unique perspective as an operator of college campus foodservice, Boston University's VP Auxiliary Services **Kris Klinger** offered insight into serving a Gen Z–heavy campus population.

His team focuses on handheld, portable foods with bold, authentic flavors, and leverages student preferences to test concepts across retail and dining locations. He stressed the power of brand recognition, noting that homegrown concepts often struggle to compete with established names like Raising Cane's. He noted that they offered cold brew coffee in the all-you-can-eat dining halls, yet students still purchased from name brands at other sites on campus. To meet demand for accessibility, they're also expanding into automated, hot and cold vending solutions for 24/7 convenience, all while maintaining a focus on flavor and portability.

**"At the end of the day, our primary customer is the student, and they are looking for authentic, they're looking for bold flavors, and if it's spicy, as long as they like spice, they love the spice, they love the uniqueness.**

***Kris Klinger,*** *VP Auxiliary Services, Boston University*

## Operational Challenges and Menu Simplification

Balancing innovation with inventory management and operational efficiency struck a chord with several members. Jenks raised the challenge of managing inventory costs when experimenting with LTOs (limited time offers). Senior Director, Food & Beverage for The Wills Group (Dash In) **Barbara Kessler** answered, sharing that Dash In's scratch kitchens allow for flexibility, especially when new ideas use existing ingredients. They test new items in high-volume locations before scaling to avoid inventory losses, learning from past experiences where promising trends didn't sell.

**"When our chef comes up with something new and unique, as long as it's what I call "out of the same box of Legos that we already have" and it's just creating a new something, that we can move on very quickly.**

***Barbara Kessler**, Senior Director, Food & Beverage for The Wills Group (Dash In)*

**Heather Davis**, senior director of food service for Parker's Kitchen, echoed the importance of sticking to core items, using existing ingredients in new ways, such as combining bacon and sausage for a premium breakfast item. Her focus is on enhancing quality and marketing existing offerings rather than expanding the menu unnecessarily. She noted that limited, high-quality menus, like those at Wingstop and Raising Cane's, can be more effective than chasing every trend. She said, "The smaller your menu is, the more effective your team is going to be." Cox supported this idea, citing a successful Orlando concept offering a simple menu centered on sauces. The volume and efficiency of operations proved the model's appeal, especially for younger consumers and third-party delivery.

**Stephanie Galentine**, COO for Lassus Bros. Oil, Inc acknowledged that her stores struggle with menu complexity. She stressed the need to streamline operations and simplify offers for consistency and efficiency, noting that expansion without refinement had made execution more difficult.

## GLP-1 Drugs and Health Trends

**Myra Kressner**, president of Kressner Strategy Group and Vision Group Network co-founder, mentioned that VGN Vision Groups have discussed the topic of GLP-1 drugs and health at several recent meetings and asked Conaghan if recent trends, especially related to protein, were being shaped by the use of these drugs. Conaghan confirmed that Datassential has research in the area and the most visible impact so far is increased interest in protein-forward items, particularly those labeled by protein type or that offer a protein choice. However, she noted there hasn't yet been a significant shift in specific menu items directly tied to GLP-1 usage. Eva Strasburger added that operators have observed a consumer move away from fatty or fried foods, such as fried chicken, among those on GLP-1s, with rotisserie chicken gaining traction as a leaner, more appealing alternative.

> **"About a-week-and-a-half ago, we had an opportunity in a separate Vision Group to really do a deep dive into the GLP-1 or the Ozempic type of drugs and how that was impacting purchases, both from a household point of view, but also restaurants and to-go types of foods. And I'd have to say, I entered the meeting, not skeptical, but just not taking the idea that it was going to have that big of an impact on convenience.**
>
> **But I think that these types of drugs could have a significant impact to convenience, not just in the menu development and the types of menus that we have in it from a foodservice perspective, but the central store component as well.**
>
> ***Richard Poye**, COO of Food Trends Think Tank and CFVG Facilitator*

Poye emphasized the broader implications of GLP-1 usage, suggesting it could significantly influence not just foodservice menus but also center store offerings in convenience. He proposed a dedicated deep dive into GLP-1 impacts for a future meeting, noting that the pace and breadth of the trend appear to warrant close attention. Group members expressed strong interest in continuing the conversation and learning more about its effects on consumer behavior and product strategy.

# Final Reflection

The CFVG discussion focused on menu innovation in convenience stores, emphasizing the balance between trend-forward offerings and familiar core items to appeal across generations. Operators highlighted strategies like safe experimentation, localized testing, simplified menus, and agile use of existing ingredients to manage risk and inventory. Emerging trends like cold brew expansion and the influence of GLP-1 drugs on consumer preferences were identified as key areas for further exploration.

Several VGN Vision Groups have discussed the effects of GLP-1 medications on convenience retail.

***CLVG Expecting the Unexpected: Foreseeing Potential Disruptions,*** November 2024

***CLVG The Skinny on GLP-1s and Their Impact on the Convenience Industry***, May 2025

***GCVG Adapting to Changing Palates and Production,*** June 2025

# NOTABLE AND QUOTABLE

"We've got great assets, and what I'm doing is going to take some of our top 10 in the Bay Area, 10 of those locations, and I'm going to blow out made to order craft beverages, so primarily cold. So we're going to take that to full bright, and I really feel like we can compete pretty good, really good. I know we can get the flavors and all the taste there right if we market it well.

***Brandon Frampton,*** *Director of Fresh Food, Loop & Poppy*

"We're going to go after the dirty soda trend from the angle like, 'Hey, you don't have to pay six, seven bucks at a specialty shop. Come on into Cliff's and make up your own soda.'

***Derek Thurston,*** *Director of Foodservice, Cliffs Local Market*

"They found that they followed influencers initially and had their pulse of the Gen Z, but they found that by the time they had accommodated them or added them to the menu, they had moved on to something else.

***Eva Strasburger,*** *President, StrasGlobal, CEO Compliance Safe, and Vision Group Network Co-Founder*

"As the day continues, people are more interested in trying something new. The area where you're probably going to have the best luck is going to be that lunch daypart. That's the takeaways. If you're thinking of doing something truly innovative, I would lean towards lunch, and then there's a little more support in a bit as to which parts of lunch might be the best options.

***Claire Conaghan****, Trendologist and Associate Director for Publications, Datassential*

"The reality is a lot of times you're all faced with the inventory challenge. So it's fun to experiment, however, inventory can be very expensive and that can eat into your profit. So I'm curious if any of you have tips or best practices for each other on at what point does that experimentation stop for you? How do you manage the inventory so you can still play and get these things out there, but you also don't cannibalize all those great sales that you had?

***Sarah Jenk****, Senior Director of Solutions Consulting, Upshop*

"So I think it's just understanding what to call things in your market, understanding what's there, experimenting through sauces and different carriers versus going to a protein purveyor and saying, "Hey, could you make me 10,000 cases of spicy Korean chicken?" That's going to be really hard if it bombs to get through, but if you go to the sauce manufacturer and say, can you make me a sweet heat Korean sauce that you're going to top the chicken with, it's a little easier to get in and out of the sauce than it is to get out of the protein. So just for the group, just some things that we had done with the Datassential data to be able to say, "Hey, here's how we can play in this and here's how we can minimize our risk.

***Jon Cox,*** *Vice President Retail Foodservice, McLane*

"For us, we will test some of the newer concepts and new flavor trends in some of our key locations, our super, super busy locations where we know we can pull it off easily just to see, get some initial key reaction and then if it's worth it, then we'll turn around and figure out how to get it into the rest of the stores.

***Barbara Kessler,*** *Senior Director, Food & Beverage, The Wills Group (Dash In)*

"The percentage of people who always consider pricing when it is available on menus. And it's the majority of people. But what's key here is I think less that people check price, of course they check price on menus, but more that there's not a big difference between the generations.

***Claire Conaghan,*** *Trendologist and Associate Director for Publications, Datassential*

"There are ethnic pockets that we have to address. What's really cool is a lot of those ethnic items are seen as what's trending in the seeker, which is the one out of five. They're willing to try something new.

***Jac Moskalik,*** *Vice President of Food, Innovation and Strategy, Global Partners, LP*

# TRANSCRIPT AND PRESENTATIONS

## In The Room Transcript

The full meeting transcript is online and can be searched by keyword so that you can be "in the room" with us, rather than only having access to selected quotes and paraphrasing

## Meeting Presentations and Demonstration Videos

**Richard Poye**
*CFVG Facilitator/COO, Food Trends Think Tank*

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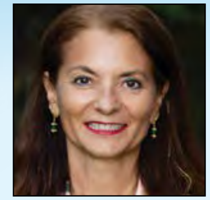

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**Roy Strasburger**
*CEO, StrasGlobal; President, Compliance Safe*

**Ryan Blevins**
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**Joe Brumfield**
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**Richard Cashion**
*COO, Curby's Express Market*

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**Brandon Frampton**
*Director of Fresh Food, Loop & Poppy*

**Stephanie Galentine**
*COO, Lassus Bros. Oil, Inc*

**Barbara Kessler**
*Senior Director, Food & Beverage, The Wills Group (Dash In)*

**Kris Klinger**
*VP, Auxiliary Services, Boston University*

**Jac Moskalik**
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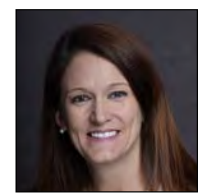
*Senior Category Manager, Yesway*

**Derek Thurston**
*Director of Foodservice, Cliffs Local Market*

**Mike Weber**
*CMO, Upshop*



**Bonnie Zaring**
*Executive Director, Food Programs and Offers, RaceTrac Inc*

The Convenience Foodservice Vision Group (CFVG) brings together a diverse range of industry leaders across culinary, marketing, operations, technology, sensory, safety, and select solution providers. The group addresses menu development, product innovation, operational efficiency, foodservice profitability, technology integration, customer experience, consumer trends, health and wellness, FSQA, supply chain management and more. The group is committed to sharing its views and perspectives to advance convenience retailing. CFVG operates under the Vision Group Network, which gathers the collective knowledge and ideas of its members to create a legacy of sharing within the retail community. For more information and to sign up for future Vision Reports, visit our website: **vgnsharing.com/vision-report-library**

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# VGN Vision Report Library

The VGN Vision Reports will not only provide you with insight into the issues that leading retailers are concerned about but will give you a vantage point to "listen" to their conversations.

Learn about the specific solutions or programs that VGN members are utilizing – and the ones that didn't work. VGN wants to provide real world solutions for real world issues.

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