

## MODERN TRENDS IN PUBLIC CATERING: FROM TRADITIONAL TO SUSTAINABLE

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**Abstract:** *In the current context, marked by growing interest in health, quality, and environmental protection, the public catering sector is undergoing a major transformation. The paper analyzes the main modern trends in the field, highlighting the transition from traditional models of food preparation and service toward sustainable concepts based on the use of local resources, food waste reduction, and the promotion of organic products. It presents the current development directions of the HoReCa sector, emphasizing the role of culinary innovation, digitalization, and changing consumer preferences. The study focuses on balancing the preservation of gastronomic traditions with modern requirements for nutrition and sustainability, offering an integrated perspective on the future of public catering.*

**Key words:** *public catering, sustainability, innovation, traditional gastronomy, culinary trends*

### INTRODUCTION

The public catering industry represents one of the most dynamic economic sectors, standing at the intersection of tradition, innovation, and social responsibility. In recent decades, economic, cultural, and technological transformations have profoundly reshaped the way culinary products are conceived, produced, and consumed. Along with changing consumer behavior and the growing interest in health and sustainability, public catering has become a strategic sector of the modern economy [12]. The evolution of food preferences has been influenced by a series of interconnected factors: globalization, the development of gastronomic tourism, easier access to information, and an increasing concern for quality of life. Thus, public catering no longer serves merely to provide food, but also to create experiences, to educate, and to promote values related to health, culture, and environmental protection [8]. Currently, modern trends in public catering indicate a clear transition from traditional models—based on classic dishes and mass consumption—towards sustainable models that encourage the use of local products, the reduction of food waste, and the adoption of environmentally friendly practices [14]. These transformations affect not only the structure of menus but also the internal organization of catering units, their relationship with suppliers, resource management, and customer interaction.

Modern public catering is therefore defined by a balance between tradition and innovation, taste and responsibility, profitability and ethics. Operators in this field are challenged to integrate technology, sustainability, and creativity in a way that simultaneously meets both economic and social requirements [7]. In this context, the present paper aims to analyze the main directions of development in contemporary public catering, highlighting the shift from traditional approaches to modern concepts oriented toward health, experience, and sustainability. The study brings together both theoretical and practical aspects related to balanced nutrition, the circular economy, digitalization, the revalorization of culinary traditions, experiential gastronomy, and the impact of these trends on the hospitality industry.

Transformations in this field are driven by several key factors:

- Culinary globalization, which has fostered cultural exchange and gastronomic diversity;
- Technology, through online ordering applications, digital payments, and social media marketing;
- Food education and health awareness, which have increased interest in balanced and natural eating;
- The climate crisis and the orientation toward sustainability, which have led to the adoption of ecological practices in production and service;
- The COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated digitalization and changed consumption behaviors, favoring home delivery and personalized menus.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological approach of this paper is primarily descriptive and analytical, based on the synthesis of specialized literature, international reports, and recent studies concerning the modernization of public catering. The research aims to identify and analyze the main trends, challenges, and transition mechanisms that define the evolution of the industry from traditional practices toward sustainable and innovative models.

The study follows a qualitative research design, employing the bibliographic method as the main instrument for data collection and analysis. Relevant scientific papers, policy documents, and institutional reports published between 2010 and 2024 were reviewed to capture the most recent developments in the field. The methodological orientation is exploratory, focusing on interpreting existing data and conceptual models rather than on empirical measurement.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

The transition from traditional to sustainable food practices does not mean abandoning authentic values, but rather adapting them to contemporary realities. The public catering industry is increasingly becoming a space for innovation, education, and social responsibility.

The future belongs to those who will know how to combine authentic taste with respect for health and the environment. Sustainability is no longer an option but an essential condition for success in modern public catering. Against the backdrop of globalization, tourism development, and technological progress, consumer preferences have diversified significantly. Today's customers are no longer seeking only a high-quality food product but a complete culinary experience—one based on authenticity, aesthetics, and ethics. In this context, modern trends in public catering include a focus on healthy and natural foods, the use of local and seasonal products, the reduction of food waste, and the digitalization of serving and delivery processes. Next, we will analyze the main trends that characterize contemporary public catering.

### ***1. Healthy and Balanced Nutrition***

One of the most evident transformation processes in modern public catering is the shift toward healthy and balanced food, perceived not merely as a physiological necessity but as a component of quality of life. In recent years, a genuine culture of nutrition has developed, based on prevention, transparency, and food education. The concept of “healthy food” is increasingly associated with the idea of a balanced lifestyle, in which nutrition becomes a tool for maintaining both physical and mental well-being [6].

Public catering establishments have had to adapt to these changes by diversifying their menus and introducing dishes with high nutritional value. Thus, more and more

restaurants promote organic, vegetarian, low-carb, or gluten-free menus, and in some cases, detailed nutritional information is provided for the dishes served. This trend reflects not only the growing demand from consumers but also the social responsibility of operators in the sector [13]. The adoption of healthy-eating principles in the public sector also involves strict control of ingredient quality and compliance with hygiene and food-safety standards. International standards and European legislation require full traceability and transparency regarding the origin of products, which imposes a rigorous organization of the supply chain [9].

Another important aspect is nutrition education. Restaurants, schools, and catering units are becoming active partners in forming proper eating habits, especially among young people. Through campaigns, culinary workshops, and themed menus, healthy eating is promoted as part of a broader process of social responsibility and awareness. At the global level, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) encourages the development of sustainable food systems that ensure equitable access to safe and nutritious products while reducing the negative impact on the environment [14]. This approach integrates nutritional, ecological, and economic dimensions, making healthy eating an essential component of sustainable development. Therefore, balanced nutrition is not just a consumer trend but an integrated strategy for public health and corporate responsibility, redefining the way public catering units operate.

## ***2. Sustainability and the Circular Economy in Public Catering***

The concept of sustainability has become one of the fundamental pillars of modern development in the public catering industry. In a world marked by climate change, food waste, and increasing pressure on natural resources, operators in this field are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of adopting a responsible business model. Sustainability implies reducing the negative impact on the environment, using resources efficiently, and protecting consumers' health [7]. In public catering, the application of sustainability principles involves concrete measures: using local and seasonal products, reducing food waste, selecting eco-friendly suppliers, and recycling waste materials. At the same time, modern establishments invest in energy-efficient equipment and biodegradable packaging, thus contributing to the reduction of their carbon footprint [8].

The circular economy model has become increasingly present in the strategies of companies within the public catering sector. Unlike the linear economy—based on consumption and disposal—the circular economy promotes reuse and resource valorization, transforming waste into raw materials for new production cycles [15]. This model offers an integrated approach to sustainability, addressing not only environmental protection but also economic efficiency and social engagement. More and more restaurants are adopting circular solutions such as composting organic waste, donating surplus food to charitable organizations, reusing cooking oils, and employing smart systems to monitor consumption [14]. These initiatives not only reduce operational costs but also strengthen the public image of companies, attracting consumers concerned with ethics and ecology.

Furthermore, sustainability is not limited to the management of material resources; it also involves corporate social responsibility. Many public catering establishments collaborate with local producers, contributing to regional economic development and the preservation of gastronomic traditions. Through such partnerships, the supply chain becomes shorter, more transparent, and more equitable [2]. The integration of sustainability and circular economy principles in public catering is not merely a moral obligation but also a strategy for competitiveness and innovation. In the long term, these practices build consumer trust, reduce costs, and ensure the harmonious development of the entire sector.

**Table 1**

**Comparison of the characteristics of traditional and sustainable food systems**

<b>Analysis Criterion</b>	<b>Traditional Food</b>	<b>Sustainable Food</b>
Origin of ingredients	Local or regional products, sometimes seasonal	Local, certified organic, and seasonal products with clear traceability
Preparation methods	Recipes passed down through generations, classic cooking methods	Modern techniques that reduce nutrient loss and energy consumption
Type of packaging	Conventional materials (plastic, aluminum, simple paper)	Biodegradable, compostable, or reusable packaging
Waste management	Waste is rarely reused or recovered	Waste is recycled, composted, or converted into energy
Environmental impact	May cause pollution and food waste	Minimal, through energy efficiency, waste reduction, and support for the local economy
Strategic orientation	Focused on taste and tradition	Focused on responsibility, transparency, and sustainability
Relationship with the consumer	Passive consumer	Informed, engaged consumer with ethical preferences

These elements show how the circular economy provides an integrated framework for the modernization of public catering, transforming each stage of the culinary process into an opportunity to reduce environmental impact.

The implementation of sustainability in public catering is not without challenges. Nevertheless, international trends and market demands indicate a clear direction: public catering will become increasingly eco-innovative, integrating concepts such as green management, smart biodegradable packaging, and transparent food supply chains.

### **3. Digitalization of Services in Public Catering**

Technological progress has fundamentally changed the way the public catering industry operates. Digitalization has become an essential condition for efficiency, competitiveness, and adaptation to new market requirements. In a context where consumers value speed, comfort, and transparency, technology provides innovative solutions for order management, inventory monitoring, quality control, and customer interaction.

Digital platforms and mobile applications allow customers to view interactive menus, place online orders, and make contactless payments, thereby increasing satisfaction and loyalty. Moreover, digitalization facilitates the personalization of the culinary experience through the collection and analysis of consumer preference data. This type of smart marketing helps restaurants offer deals tailored to each client's needs [5].

Technological innovations also extend to internal processes through the automation of food production and the optimization of workflow. Modern restaurants use computerized management systems that reduce food waste, optimize costs, and improve inventory control. In addition, digitalization facilitates internal communication, staff management, and resource planning, ensuring more efficient operational control [11].

Another important aspect of digitalization is food safety. Technologies such as blockchain, for instance, allow full traceability of ingredients, offering quality assurance

and transparency to consumers [9]. Thus, digitalization becomes a tool of trust and responsibility, essential for building the reputation of a culinary brand.

Innovation in public catering is not limited to technology but also involves gastronomic creativity. Contemporary chefs explore new textures, flavor combinations, and cooking methods, using techniques such as molecular gastronomy or 3D food printing. These innovative forms of presentation transform the meal into an artistic experience designed to stimulate all the senses.

At the same time, technology contributes to promoting sustainable practices through the use of smart equipment that reduces energy and water consumption, monitors waste, and optimizes logistics flows [3]. Therefore, digitalization becomes a pillar of sustainability, providing concrete solutions for economic efficiency and environmental protection [14].

In the medium and long term, digitalization will continue to evolve, influenced by new technological trends. The main development directions include:

- Artificial Intelligence (AI) – used for personalized menu recommendations and inventory optimization;
- Augmented Reality (AR) – allowing customers to view 3D images of dishes before ordering;
- Full process automation, from preparation to delivery;
- Integration of digital sustainability solutions, such as energy consumption monitoring and waste reduction through smart applications.

These innovations will redefine the culinary experience, transforming public catering into an increasingly connected, efficient, and customer-oriented environment.

#### **4. Revalorization of Culinary Traditions**

In the context of globalization and cultural uniformity, the revalorization of culinary traditions represents a natural response of modern society, which seeks authenticity and identity amid the diversity of global gastronomy. Traditional cuisine is being rediscovered not only as a form of nostalgia but also as a source of inspiration and innovation for contemporary gastronomy [1].

Culinary traditions define the cultural identity of each region and contribute to strengthening national identity. In Romania, gastronomic diversity reflects both historical and regional influences – from the Transylvanian cuisine, rich in hearty dishes, to the Moldavian one, renowned for its refinement and balance. By integrating traditional recipes into modern menus, restaurants are able to offer their customers authentic experiences based on local flavors and natural ingredients.

This revalorization does not simply involve reproducing old recipes but rather their creative reinterpretation. Contemporary chefs use modern cooking and presentation techniques to adapt traditional dishes to modern tastes while preserving their cultural essence [10]. For example, traditional dishes such as sarmale (cabbage rolls) or ciorbă (sour soup) can be presented in modern gastronomic forms that combine aesthetics with cultural symbolism.

The revalorization of traditional gastronomy also has a significant economic dimension. Promoting local products and traditional cuisine contributes to the development of gastronomic tourism and supports regional producers. Thus, tradition becomes an instrument of sustainability, stimulating local economies and helping preserve natural resources [2].

At the same time, maintaining culinary traditions is closely linked to cultural and food education. Promoting Romanian gastronomy in schools, local fairs, and culinary festivals fosters greater respect for the national culinary heritage. Moreover, restaurants

that value traditional recipes become ambassadors of local culture, offering tourists an authentic and memorable experience.

In an era dominated by innovation, the revalorization of traditions is not a simple return to the past but a strategy of differentiation and innovation. By combining authenticity with technology, Romanian public catering can successfully compete in the international market while preserving its cultural roots [7].

Thus, the revalorization of culinary traditions becomes a bridge between past and future, between identity and progress, confirming that gastronomy is more than food—it is culture, art, and national expression [4].

## CONCLUSIONS

Sustainability and the circular economy represent central pillars in the modernization of public catering. Their implementation goes beyond symbolic gestures and involves a profound change in mentality and organization. By optimizing resources, reducing waste, and supporting local producers, businesses in this sector contribute to building a fairer and more environmentally friendly food system.

In the long term, the transition toward a sustainable food model will transform the hospitality industry into an active player within the green economy, capable of combining gastronomic tradition with ecological innovation.

Digitalization of services has become a key factor of competitiveness in the public catering industry. By adopting new technologies, restaurants and catering companies not only meet market demands but also strengthen their position in front of a modern, informed, and demanding consumer.

The integration of digital tools contributes to creating an interactive relationship between businesses and customers, reducing environmental impact, and increasing economic efficiency.

Thus, digitalization is not merely a trend but an essential component of sustainability and innovation in twenty-first-century public catering.

The impact of modern trends on public catering is complex, multidimensional, and deeply transformative. The industry has evolved from a rigid and traditional system into an adaptable, digitalized, and sustainability-oriented sector.

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