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CONSUMERS CHANGE BUYING HABITS, MAKE TRADEOFFS TO MANAGE HIGH FOOD COSTS

New research reveals U.S. consumers are cooking more at home, reducing non-essential purchases, and relying on store brand or bulk items to reduce costs

COLUMBUS, OH – While increasing food costs continue to make headlines, food buying behavior now reflects tradeoffs, with consumers reporting food affordability now is in a dead heat with taste as the two most important factors when purchasing food. More than half of respondents to a newly released national food attitudes survey agree strongly that increases in food prices have affected how they buy food, either at grocery stores or restaurants. Nearly 40% of those surveyed are eating more meals at home, while about one in three are relying on store brand or bulk items to reduce grocery costs.

The new research, conducted in partnership by nationally recognized agriculture insights and research firm Stratovation Group and top-ranked U.S. food and agriculture communications agency Inspire, provides insight into how consumers currently are navigating food purchasing, changing eating habits, and managing household food budgeting.

While survey respondents are evenly split about whether access to affordable, nutritious food is moving in the right or wrong direction, it is clear consumers are making tradeoffs to address rising food costs.

Leading Grocery Insights

Consumers report that they are adjusting shopping and eating habits in response to rising food costs, but grocery convenience and choice still are critically important. Key findings include:

- Nearly half of respondents try to make food last longer by stretching food into multiple meals
- About three-quarters of those surveyed have used their local grocery store's food pickup and food delivery services
- About 7 in 10 say they have used a third-party grocery app

Leading Restaurant Insights

Despite shifting toward more at-home meals to combat rising food costs, respondents indicated they are still dining out and using restaurant delivery. Additional findings include:

- About half of those surveyed eat at a restaurant once a week or twice a month

- About 8 in 10 say they order restaurant delivery at least once each month
- DoorDash (64%) and UberEATS (47%) are the most frequently used restaurant delivery services

“Understanding the food value chain from farm to fork is essential in today’s food economy,” said Hinda Mitchell, president of Inspire. “Our research with Stratovation illuminates an important distinction – it’s no longer just about concerns related to rising food prices, it’s about how those concerns translate into decision making at retail and restaurants. Stratovation’s deep insights and Inspire’s expertise in applying those findings to consumer communication provide critical signals and opportunities for those producing food in the U.S.”

“Partnering with Inspire allows us to connect the dots across the entire food and agriculture value chain—from what’s happening on the farm to what’s ending up in consumers’ carts and on their plates,” said Cam Camfield, CEO of Stratovation Group. “This research makes it clear that today’s consumer is navigating a constant balancing act between cost, convenience and nutrition. By combining our ag insights with Inspire’s expertise in consumer communications, we’re able to deliver a more complete picture of how food and consumption trends are actually playing out in real time.”

Grocery Buying Changes

Half of survey respondents indicated that increases in food pricing have affected their grocery buying habits. Grocery shopper households are making strategic decisions to address rising food costs, led by more at-home eating, purchasing store brand and generic grocery items, and buying in bulk.

As prices rise, shoppers also are giving up perceived luxury items on their shopping lists. Nearly half of those surveyed would cut alcohol purchases, followed closely by higher-priced gourmet foods and sweets. Of note, beef was the highest ranked (36%) specific food to be named as a top target of budget cuts.

Approximately 7 in 10 respondents are commonly shopping in a traditional supermarket, while 6 in 10 also report shopping at big box retailers that stock grocery items. About one-third of those surveyed also shop at wholesale clubs or discount grocery stores. An overwhelming majority of respondents (84%) do not use a food subscription service.

Restaurant Habits Shifting

Consumers also are changing decision making when it comes to restaurants. Well over half of respondents strongly agree that increases in food pricing have caused them to dine out less often.

Access to restaurant choices likely affects dining out, as those in suburban and urban communities are more likely to eat at a restaurant more than three times per week.

Men are more likely to eat food prepared by a restaurant and to order restaurant delivery, and households with three or four members also were more likely to order food delivery.

Fresh Foods Cut from Lists

As food prices rise, shoppers are making specific decisions to cut fresh food purchases from their normal grocery list. Products that survey respondents say they would remove from the list are all recommended as part of a healthy diet in the USDA's recently released Dietary Guidelines including:

- Beef (35%)
- Pork (23%)
- Chicken (21%) and turkey (17%)
- Eggs, cheeses, fresh produce and dairy foods (11%-13%)

The MAHA Influence

While the Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) commission was announced just one year ago, awareness of MAHA is high among survey respondents. Approximately 30% are “highly aware” of MAHA, while only 8% are unaware. There is strong support for the MAHA movement among respondents *with more than half believing MAHA work being done is with their “family’s best interest at heart.”*

“Farmers and agricultural companies are not operating in a vacuum,” said Camfield. “They are fully aware of the broader consumer narratives, and MAHA is clearly on their radar. When you see nearly a third of respondents highly aware and a majority expressing trust in the movement’s intent, that tells us this has moved past the fringe to being a real influence in how agriculture thinks about its role in health conversations. The opportunity now is making sure that awareness translates into practical, science-based policy decisions on the ground, which MAHA sometimes lacks.”

Mitchell agrees. “The survey results on MAHA reflect how swiftly the movement has gained momentum, and the likely volatility it will have going forward,” she said. “Especially in the context of potential shifts away from fresh, nutritious and perishable foods, consumers are making tradeoffs for affordability that may not fully align with trends away from processed foods and toward real food and quality proteins. This will require new thinking and messaging by food marketers to demonstrate value through bulk purchasing and meal strategies that maximize food spending.”

Survey Demographics

The research was conducted in January 2026 and surveyed 823 U.S. consumers. Respondents were between the ages of 21-60 years old and identified as the primary grocery shopper. Approximately 53% of respondents were male, 45% female and 2% non-binary. An overwhelming majority (88%) of participants have four or less people in their households. The survey also included a strong cross-section of those living in suburban areas (43%), urban (36%) and rural (21%).

To learn more about the study and methodology, visit AboutInspire.com/Research.

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About Inspire

Inspire is a national integrated communications agency recognized for its work to facilitate change, create connection and accelerate progress through inspired communication. Based in Columbus, Ohio, Inspire was founded in 2014 by its president and founder, Hinda Mitchell. Inspire has wide-ranging experience across industries, including food production, agriculture, foodservice, restaurant and hospitality, pet care, trade association, corporate and nonprofit. Inspire is ranked among the top five agriculture firms in the U.S. by O'Dwyers PR News and was recently named to Ragan PR Daily's Top Agencies of the Year list. For more information, visit AboutInspire.com and follow Inspire on [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#).

About Stratovation Group

Stratovation Group is a full-service research, market consulting and strategic communications firm serving a unique mix of the agri-food value chain. Stratovation specializes in strategic initiatives in areas such as advocacy communications, media outreach and stakeholder engagement. Stratovation has launched award-winning campaigns and content for farmer-led organizations, agribusiness groups and innovative agricultural companies to drive growth, innovation and impact.