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Ingredient Versatility & Menu Innovation

Insights from a Leading Foodservice Sales & Marketing Agency



What's Inside

01 Who is Connections? **03**

02 Ingredient Versatility & Menu Innovation **06**

03 Connections Chef Spotlight **14**

04 Three ways manufacturers can support versatility **17**

05 Let's connect **21**





01

**Who is
Connections?**

 Connections

Who is Connections?

Connections is a results-driven foodservice marketing agency with deep industry insights and extensive capabilities. We're the foodservice industry's only fully integrated agency, combining research, culinary, marketing, and sales into one cohesive whole. **What we offer:**



End-to-end solutions including national account sales strategies, branding and marketing communication execution and digital optimization



14 full-time chefs
delivering innovative
culinary concepts



2 content studios
supporting
creative needs

Our core commitment

- Leading the foodservice industry with continuous improvement and innovation
- Helping operators simplify and strengthen their menus through smart ingredient utilization
- Providing actionable recommendations to help foodservice operators optimize their go-to-market strategies

In this whitepaper:

We'll explore how chefs can turn existing pantry items into powerful tools for creativity, cost control, and consumer appeal—and how suppliers can support these endeavors.

A close-up photograph of a hand garnishing a dish with a fresh rosemary sprig. The dish appears to be a piece of seared fish or meat, accompanied by a side of green salad and some yellow garnishes, possibly citrus segments. The background is slightly blurred, focusing attention on the garnishing action.

02

Ingredient Versatility & Menu Innovation

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Doing more with less

In today's foodservice landscape, doing more with less isn't just a short-term necessity—it's a long-term advantage. Ingredient versatility remains a core strategy as operators navigate rising costs, labor shortages, and shifting dining habits.

At Connections, we help foodservice professionals reimagine their pantry through the lens of efficiency and creativity. With insights from our culinary and strategy teams, we provide actionable recommendations that empower operators and support supplier success.

Making the most of every ingredient

Ingredient versatility became a priority during the COVID era, when labor and supply chain disruptions forced menu contractions. Operators relied on flexible ingredients that minimized prep, reduced waste, and helped their kitchens do more with less.

Today, menus have rebounded—surpassing pre-pandemic sizes across most segments.¹ Still, the pressure to simplify and streamline remains, making ingredient cross-utilization more relevant than ever.

Why versatility still matters

Even as menus expand, operators are prioritizing innovation within familiar categories rather than branching into new ones.¹ In this environment, cross-utilization is not just a smart practice; it's a critical lever for both creativity and cost control.

► **Maximizing ingredients is the #1 cost-cutting method used by operators²**

With rising labor costs and persistent staffing challenges—54% of operators still report having fewer employees than in 2019³—efficiency in the kitchen is more valuable than ever. Using fewer ingredients not only helps reduce food waste but also saves on labor costs.

Labor costs account for roughly **one-third** of operator expenses³

88% of operators say their labor costs increased in the past year³

80% expect labor costs to rise again³

54% still operate with fewer staff than in 2019³

SMART MENUS START WITH SMART SKUS

“A best practice is making sure any ingredient can be used in at least two applications. If you’re bringing a product for one dish because it’s essential, ask yourself: can it work elsewhere on the menu?”

That said, it’s not just about SKUs—but also about prepped items. For example, a shelf-stable product won’t spoil quickly, but once something is prepped, if it’s not used in time, you’re wasting food and the labor it took to prepare it.”

~ **Steve Madonna,**
VP of Culinary
Connections

40%
of operators

say ingredient versatility
holds strong appeal³



Versatility drives purchasing decisions

When evaluating new ingredients:

89%

of operators

prioritize minimizing food waste when building menus⁶

89%

of operators

say cross-utilization affects purchasing decisions⁵

Operators continue to lean on the ingredients they already have:

- Nearly all added new menu items in the past year, but only **35% required new SKUs⁴**
- Top operator needs remain consistent: **versatility, customization, and craveability⁴**

Cross-utilization doesn't mean creative compromise

Versatile ingredients can serve as the base for exciting, differentiated LTOs that drive traffic without overburdening the kitchen.

According to Datassential:

- LTO purchase intent remains steady⁷
- Perceived uniqueness is on the rise⁷

This suggests consumers are moving beyond the comfort and nostalgia that defined the post-pandemic period. Though some operators fear that uniqueness might lower appeal, the data shows no strong negative correlation.⁴ In fact, when a trusted brand leads the way, consumers are more open to trying something new.

Operators are leaning into innovation:

- **LTOs and new item launches are up 67%** from pre-pandemic levels⁴
- **Takeaway:** Efficiency and creativity can—and should—coexist.

Menu engineering & gap analysis

At Connections, we support operators looking for simplification and smarter cross-utilization.

1

We begin with a menu audit that allows us to identify opportunities to simplify SKUs while preserving quality, flavor and flexibility.



2

We then pair this with a Gap Analysis, evaluating your category coverage to ensure you're meeting key archetypes that resonate with your target consumer base.



3

From there, we help you innovate from within your existing pantry, developing new menu ideas that fill whitespace, strengthen brand relevance, and drive reach, without adding unnecessary back-of-house burden.

► **It's not about doing more with less. It's about doing better with what you already have.**

03

Connections Chef Spotlight





Beans bring unexpected versatility



Chef Quinton shows us how beans are a secret weapon for smart, versatile cooking. From smoothies to cocktails to craveable dips, beans bring surprising functionality while meeting today's operational demands. **Use beans to:**

Replace eggs with aquafaba (the liquid from canned beans). Aquafaba is a cost-effective swap for egg whites in cocktails and baking.

*Example // **Black Lotus Cocktail:*** Shake blackberry vodka, chickpea aquafaba, and ice until frothy. Top with cherry soda and fresh blackberries.

Boost smoothies with protein and fiber, without changing flavor.

*Example // **Bean Berry Good Smoothie:*** Blend cannellini beans, coconut milk, banana, berries, honey, vanilla, salt, ice. Top with whipped aquafaba “bean whip” flavored with honey + vanilla for added texture and versatility.

Create creamy, dairy-free dips that flex across dayparts or party platters.

*Example // **Nashville Hot Dip:*** Blend cannellini beans, Frank's RedHot® Nashville Hot Seasoning, olive oil, and lemon juice for a spicy, ultra-creamy base. Serve with chicken bites, chips, or crudité.



Avocados offer cross-utilization magic

Connections' own Chef Madi shows how avocados go beyond toast and guac to deliver creamy richness, plant-based functionality, and cross-utilization magic. From pickles to brownies, avocados offer surprising versatility for menus looking to balance wellness and indulgence. **Use avocados to:**

Reimagine classic sauces with plant-based appeal.

Example // **Avocado Tzatziki:** Blended avocado replaces yogurt for a dairy-free, ultra-smooth Mediterranean dip. Use with wraps, mezze, or spicy proteins.

Replace eggs and dairy in baked foods for better-for-you indulgence.

Example // **Dark Chocolate Avocado Brownies:** Avocado's natural fats create a moist, fudgy texture without the need for dairy. These rich, functional treats satisfy cravings while supporting wellness-forward dessert options.

Add bright, unexpected flavor and color to savory applications.

Example // **Avocado Pickles:** Quick-pickle underripe avocados in leftover brine to reduce waste and boost flavor. Their tangy, buttery bite introduces new textures and flavors to menus. Use their vibrant green pop to elevate tacos, burgers, charcuterie boards, and bowls.



04

Three ways manufacturers can support versatility



Three ways manufacturers can support versatility

1

Promote All-Day Flexibility

As dayparts blur and consumers shift when and how they dine, manufacturers must think beyond traditional categories like breakfast or lunch. Today's consumers are driven more by behavioral motivations than fixed mealtimes—a concept we explore in depth in our [Occasion-Based Culinary report](#).

- **61% of operators change menus throughout the day⁸**—even higher for noncommercial operators (78%)⁸
- **Highlight SKUs that flex easily across dayparts**, and back them with ideas for craveable, occasion-based applications.
- **For Example**
Promote using one protein base to anchor a breakfast wrap, lunch bowl, and dinner flatbread or showcase a sauce that can work hot, cold, or as a dip.

Three ways manufacturers can support versatility

2

Offer Culinary & Promotional Support

Operators cite time and budget constraints as barriers to menu updates.⁹ Manufacturers can provide culinary support in developing new menu items to gain additional placement on menus and provide promotional support for new items.

Don't have a culinary team?

At Connections, we specialize in culinary sales enablement—helping manufacturers develop relevant, operationally sound menu applications. With over 100 operator engagements annually and an average 8-year client relationship, we help manufacturers gain meaningful menu placements, fueled by versatility and grounded in culinary strategy.

3

Design for On- and Off-Premise Success

Today's menus must do it all: dine-in, takeout, delivery, and catering. Manufacturers must lead with how their products reduce operational complexity while supporting omnichannel service.¹⁰ This means re-evaluating product formats, optimizing for performance across service modes, and communicating versatility clearly in sales conversations.



A close-up photograph of several cinnamon rolls resting on a black metal cooling rack. The rolls are covered in a thick, white icing that is drizzled over the top. The background is dark and slightly blurred.

05

Let's Connect

 Connections

Let's Connect

Efficiency and excitement can coexist

With smart, flexible ingredients and the right strategic, partner support, new dishes can come to life without overburdening the pantry or the kitchen. With menus finally expanding again, the opportunity is ripe for suppliers to help operators do more with what they already have, and spark innovation through strategic cross-utilization.

Connections can help you transform one ingredient into multiple ideas—and multiple ideas into lasting menu wins.

¹Datassential State of the Menu (February 2025)

²Datassential 2025 PULSE Industry Overview

³Datassential Labor Keynote Report (December 2024)

⁴Technomic Whitepaper: Are Menus Shrinking? (November 2024)

⁵Datassential MidYear Trends 2024 (August 2024)

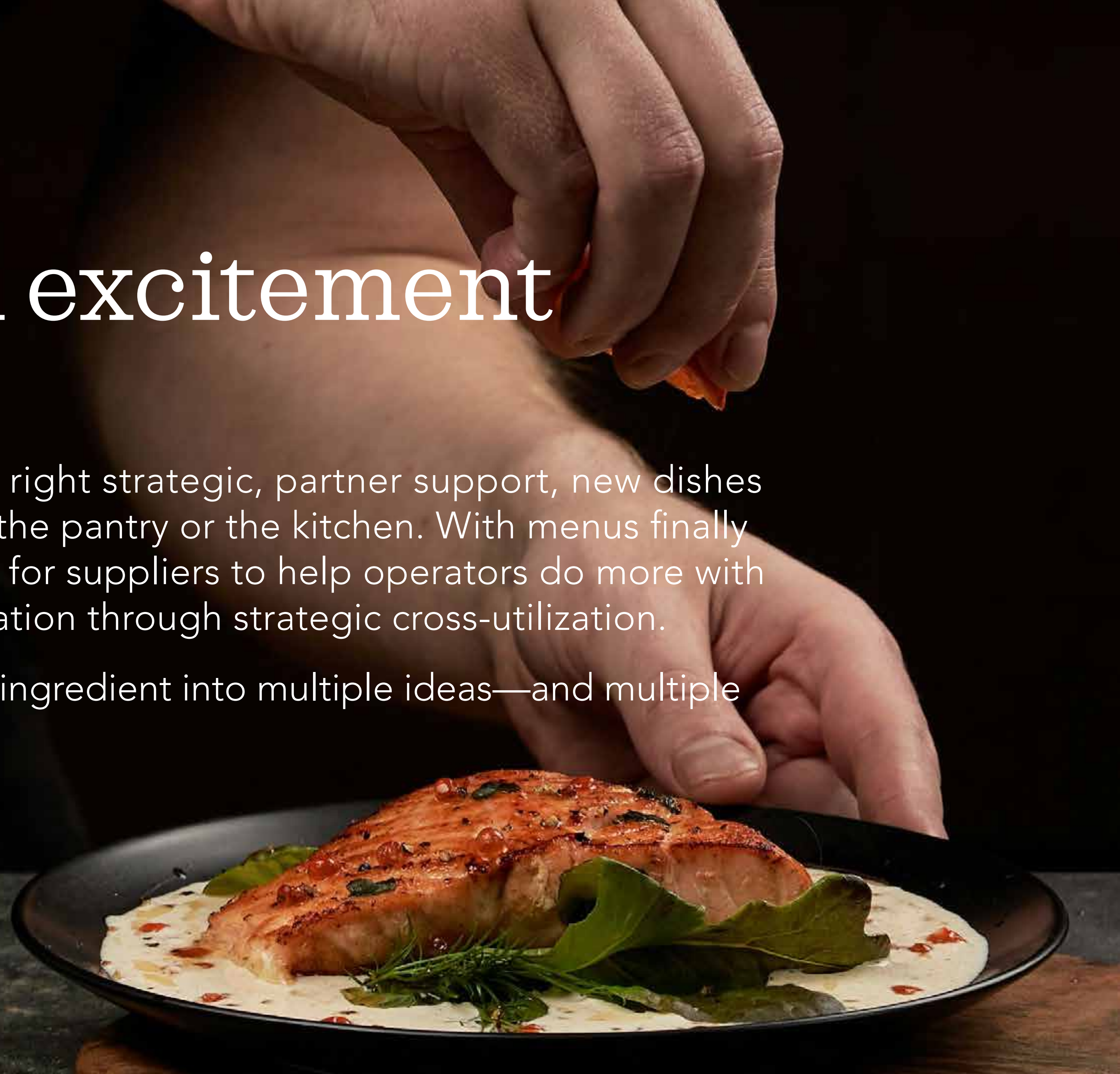
⁶Datassential 2025 Operator Check-In: Healthy Menuing (May 2025)

⁷Datassential State of LTO (February 2025)

⁸Technomic Daypart Dynamics (January 2025)

⁹Technomic Omnichannel and Beyond (January 2025)

¹⁰Technomic Omnichannel and Beyond: The Future of On-Premise and Off-Premise, January 2025



Thank you!

Reach out for more information
on getting started today!

 **Connections**
marlinconnections.net

