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HATCH

2026 food & drink trends report



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The food and drink industry is evolving at a rapid pace. Economic pressures, health consciousness, changing lifestyles and even new packaging legislation are forcing businesses to rethink how they connect with their audiences.

In this year's report, we explore the key shifts and emerging themes that are set to dominate the UK food and drink landscape heading into 2026 – highlighting what they mean for brands and operators alike. As marketing, brand, PR and social media professionals, it's vital to get under the skin of these trends, as understanding how they align with consumer behaviour is key to shaping successful strategies.

Therefore, this report focuses not only on what consumers are doing, but on why – offering actionable insights and marketing considerations designed to help brands remain relevant, competitive, and ahead of the curve in a landscape defined by change, choice, and conscious consumption.



Fibre fever

The buzz around fibre in health and wellness, and more specifically the food and drink space, has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. This is mostly down to a growing awareness of its crucial role in contributing to good gut health and its link to overall metabolic health.

In the UK, adults are well below the recommended average intake of dietary fibre, with levels reported to be somewhere between 18–20 g/day, whereas guidelines suggest it should be closer to 30 g/day¹.

In fact, some sources suggest that as much as 90% of UK adults do not get their recommended daily fibre intake², and only 7% of the adult population in the UK actually know what the correct amount of daily fibre intake is³. This has led to the coining of the phrase “fibre gap” – a term for the state of the UK’s nutritional health – and has provided the food and drink sector with an opportunity to innovate and capitalise on the growing demand for quick fixes and increased fibre consumption.

What does this mean for 2026?

The last year has seen a growth in the practice of “fibremaxxing” – a trend that has gained popularity on TikTok and in the media which involves intentionally increasing your daily fibre intake to promote better gut health – and we see this continuing throughout 2026, not only through content and recipes but also with emerging products. Here are a few predictions:

Fibre ranges on the rise:

Akin to the protein revolution where everything from cheese to donuts came with added protein, we predict the same trend emerging with fibre. Expect categories not traditionally associated with fibre like desserts, crisps and snack bars to start offering fibre-fortified versions, as well as in the functional drinks space. Food and drink manufacturers will also look to respond to the growing awareness and demand by launching new products with higher fibre content and ‘fibre stacked’ products combining multiple types of fibre to deliver health benefits.

Fibre front and centre:

Brands with products naturally high in fibre will start to pull this out on packaging to appeal to consumers – and likewise retailers will look to highlight products for a high fibre diet with POS and marketing in store as consumer demand increases. We may even see specific fibre ranges being launched by retailers similar to the various protein ranges that dominate fridges and freezers in supermarkets.

In short, 2026 is when fibre will really get its moment. As consumers look to close the “fibre gap,” brands that make fibre aspirational and delicious, not just functional, will be the ones that succeed in this growing wellness wave.

Consumers are still processing “UPFs”

The discussion around ultra-processed foods (UPFs) is one that has been gathering momentum over recent years. Mounting media coverage, combined with health influencers such as Tonic Health, and even a best-selling book Ultra-Processed People by Chris van Tulleken, have all sparked public debate – and led to the term UPFs becoming a part of everyday language.

But...

78%
of Brits are now aware of UPFs.

57%
say they actually know what a “UPF” is.⁴

Despite the lack of understanding, research shows it's already changing shopping habits, with 19m shoppers saying they've already abandoned UPFs, and a further 9m shoppers planning to do so.⁵ So while there is still plenty of confusion over what actually constitutes a UPF, it's undeniable that the debate is nonetheless changing the way people shop, cook and eat – and this will only continue into next year.

What does this mean for 2026?

The shift away from UPFs is sure to accelerate throughout 2026 as consumer literacy around ingredients improves. This will influence everything from NPD to marketing narratives for food and beverage brands as consumers turn their backs on products that feature long and unfamiliar ingredients lists. As a result, expect to see the following in 2026 and beyond:

A move towards home cooking:

Last year, soup brand Campbell's released data showing that the number of people cooking at home has hit the highest level since the Covid-19 pandemic⁶. Further YouGov data shows that over

23%
of UK residents now cook from scratch most days⁷.

It's easy to see why this has come about; cooking from scratch is one of the very few ways for consumers to take back control of knowing exactly what goes into their food. Therefore, this rise in home cooking is likely to

be more than just a passing trend - it's a response to the growing distrust around what's in our food. For brands, this marks a clear opportunity to bolster not only sales, but long-term trust, either through NPD, considered brand partnerships, or simply creating useful, inspiring content for shoppers.

A need for storytelling and education:

In the midst of anxiety and confusion around UPFs, consumers are hungry for guidance. The opportunity for brands lies not in stoking fear, but in providing calm, credible education that empowers consumers with the knowledge to make better choices, rather than simply pushing a product. Storytelling will also play a key role, allowing brands to effectively communicate about their manufacturing process, ingredient provenance, and brand philosophy in a way that builds trust with consumers.

⁷ Get in touch with us at hello@hatch.group



Genuine innovation:

As consumer's expectations of brands increases, it won't be enough to simply remove the "bad" stuff" – brands will need to actively prove the value of what is included. Those leading the way will be those rethinking not just ingredients, but the entire production process. One example is SuperNutrio – a new high-protein, high-calcium milk, but made with only 100% cow's milk. The product is the result of a technological innovation; rather than adding whey into the milk to increase the protein value (and by default, a number of other additives which are then needed to mask the whey's flavour), the brand has developed a technology which filters two litres of cow's milk into one. The result is a one-ingredient, zero-additives milk, providing double the nutritional value.

A new non-UPF certification?

As consumers try to navigate the minefield that is UPFs, brands that succeed will be ones that showcase their non-UPF products quickly and clearly to shoppers. Last year saw the launch of the first ever awards to champion food and drinks which are free from artificial ingredients and ultra-processing – the NatureMade Food & Drink Awards. With recognised awards and certifications such as the Great Taste Awards and the MTick, perhaps it's only a matter of time before we begin to see non-UPF foods featuring a new certification on their packaging.

While there is still plenty of confusion around UPFs, it's undeniable that the debate is already changing consumer behaviour. For brands, the path forward will be one of transparency, meaningful innovation, and brand communication that empowers rather than overwhelms.



Is Gen Z back on the Booze?

Gen Z has often been characterised as not as interested in drinking and a more “sober-curious” generation compared with Millennials, Gen X and Boomers.

Some of the reasons given for this have been; higher abstention rates (people choosing to be completely sober), lower consumption per capita (drinking less in one session than previous generations), a sharper focus on health, wellness and mental wellbeing and economic factors like the current cost of living crisis making it too expensive to drink regularly.

However, recent data suggests it's not so black and white, with new research showing an increase in alcohol consumption among UK Gen Z in 2025, with the proportion of legal-drinking-age individuals consuming alcohol rising from 66% in 2023 to 76% in 2025⁸. This puts Gen Z basically on par with other generations when it comes to alcohol consumption. In fact, the same data noted that Gen Z actually tend to consume a wider range of drinks, averaging over five different kinds, when compared to other generations.

However, although participation has increased overall, many Gen Z drinkers still favour moderation, mindful drinking, and alternating with non-alcoholic drinks when out⁹, which creates an interesting proposition for marketers.

What does this mean for 2026?

With a previously untapped market now seemingly open to drinking more, what does it mean for brands who want to appeal to Gen Z? And how are drinking habits changing across the board?

Flavour and format are hugely important:

With Gen Z drinking a wider range of drinks, and a few years behind when it comes to their exploration of alcoholic beverages, it's no surprise that alcopops have seen a huge resurgence in the last couple of years.

Typically reserved for 18-year-olds and uni students, alcopops are back as the flavour of the day – with drinks like Hooch, VK, Smirnoff Ice and Bacardi Breezers all proving popular,

36%

rise in pre-mixed cocktails and RTDs annually in the UK.

as well as fruity and sour beers and low ABV beers – what is clear is that flavour exploration and entry-level fruitiness is a huge pull for Gen Z.





A big opportunity for non-alc:

Moderation is the word on everyone's lips, Gen Z are clearly in favour of moderation with practices like zebra striping more popular with this generation than others. However, the opportunity doesn't stop with that cohort alone. While Gen Z led the way for moderation, other generations are following suit. According to the No/Low Alcohol Strategic Study, 75% of Gen Z consumers of no- and low-alcohol products reported moderating their alcohol intake in the past six months, compared to 74% of Millennials, 66% of Gen X, and 55% of Boomers¹¹ and globally, 78% of people who drink no/low-alcohol products also drink full-strength alcohol.

We see this trend continuing, resulting in steady growth across the non-alc category and more of the bigger, more established brands following in the footsteps of Guinness and

offering alcohol versions of their classics, or even launching their own AF ranges to challenge the more established alcohol free brands like Botivo, Mash Gang and Lucky Saint. Where non-alc can win in 2026 is by targeting all generations, leading with parity in experience, leaning into drinking culture and offering a softer alternative to moderation. They should promise the same ritual, serves and flavour promises, as well as introducing functionality to their beverages for added benefits, and they should also look to own daytime and midweek occasions, which traditional alcoholic drinks are losing.

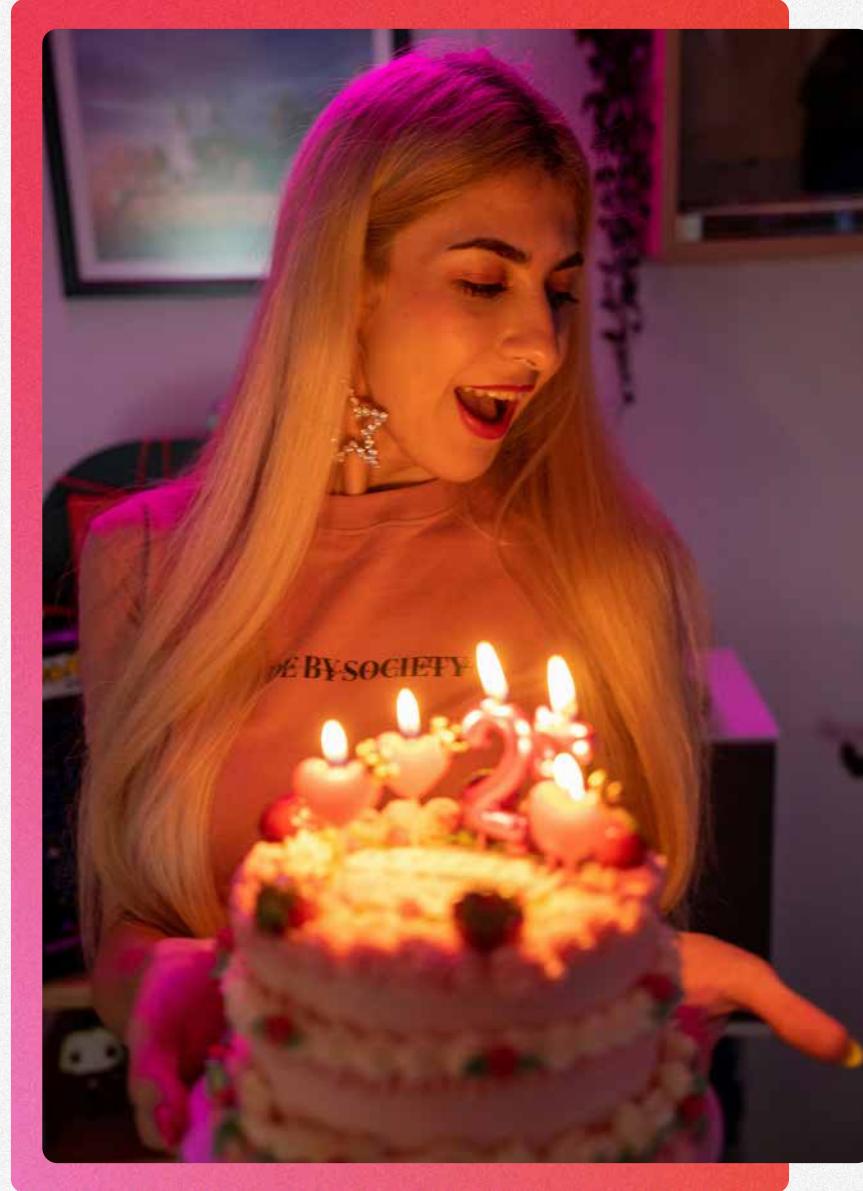
Gen Z aren't rejecting alcohol, they're redefining it. For brands, this means that success in 2026 won't come from preaching abstinence, but from offering choice, flavour, and flexibility.

A liking for low pressure socialising

As Brits continue to navigate the cost of living crisis, 2025 saw the rise of “friendflation” – a Gen Z-coined term to describe the financial burden of keeping up with social activities, from birthdays to bottomless brunches.

Eating out, drinking out, and even casual meet-ups are becoming less affordable, with younger consumers especially feeling the pinch.

The result is a renewed demand for brands that cater to the “Big Night In” occasion - cost-effective, low-pressure socialising at home that allows people to get together with friends without the premium price tag. From swapping restaurant dining for “fakeaway” kits, cinema trips for streaming marathons, or cocktail bars for canned cocktails, consumers are finding ways to recreate experiences more affordably.



What does this mean for 2026?

For food and drink brands, this low-pressure socialising trend poses an opportunity to reframe “staying in” as an aspirational occasion worth planning and spending on (even within tighter budgets).

Following the growth this year of “fakeaway” ranges, “dine in” meal deals, and partnerships between restaurants and retailers, developments we expect to see in 2026 include:

Entertainment marketing:

The brands that will win in this trend in 2026 will be those that position themselves as experience creators rather than just products.

Mixology made easy:

Canned cocktails are already popular, but as low-pressure socialising continues into 2026, consumers may well explore how they can introduce a level of cocktail theatre at home. Therefore, brands that bundle mixers, garnishes, or glassware can market themselves not just as drinks, but as experiences. The key here will be in the positioning – brands need to strike the balance of both ease and premiumisation, helping consumers feel confident, rather than intimidated, in taking on the role of bartender.

Upgraded snack culture:

Following on from the “bring a board” trend, shareable grazing boxes, charcuterie, and street-food-inspired snacks are still firmly in the spotlight. For marketers, the opportunity lies in packaging and comms that emphasise hosting – making the buyer feel like the host with the most, not just the shopper.

Experience-driven retailing:

As fakeaway ranges become more competitive, brands that stand out will be ones that pair their products with digital touchpoints – think Spotify playlists, QR-linked recipes, streaming platform vouchers, which blur the line between F&B and entertainment marketing.

The brands that will win in this trend in 2026 will be those that position themselves as experience creators rather than just products.

A soft spot for functional drinks

The functional drinks category has undergone one of the most interesting evolutions in the wider wellness space over recent years. What began with a wave of CBD-infused beverages from brands like TRIP and Goodrays has since expanded into a multifaceted market spanning energy, calm, focus, gut health, recovery, and even aphrodisia with Gillian Anderson's brand G Spot.

Now, we're seeing another iteration of this phase with functional water. Once the simplest beverage imaginable, water has become a new frontier for innovation, with brands amplifying its natural benefits through added vitamins, electrolytes, and minerals. From Actiph to OHMG, "hydration-plus" formats are becoming an everyday wellness staple, signalling just how deeply the functional mindset has embedded itself into mainstream consumption.

What does this mean for 2026?

As the pandemic wellness hype begins to mature almost five years on, the functional drinks market is adapting to meet growing consumer demands. Products must now be rooted in evidence to avoid “wellness washing” and gain the trust and attention of customers in an increasingly crowded space. Expected trends for 2026 include:

Non-CBD mood enhancers: *Mushrooms go mainstream:*

Once the hero of the wellness drinks space, CBD has faced regulatory uncertainty and consumer fatigue, prompting brands such as TRIP to diversify with non-CBD “Mindful Blends” containing magnesium, lion’s mane and ashwagandha instead. This means we can expect to see a surge in “mood-balancing” drinks without cannabinoids, which have greater appeal to mainstream retail and on-the-go wellness segments.

Thanks to a combination of improved research, more effective flavour masking techniques, and greater mainstream acceptance of natural adaptogens, mushrooms such as lion’s mane, reishi and cordyceps are entering RTD coffees and sparkling tonics for cognitive, immunity and energy support. So don’t be surprised as functional fungi move from niche cafés to supermarket shelves throughout 2026.

Botanicals:

The prominence of functional drinks and the alcohol moderation trend go hand in hand. With consumers more aware of the effects of what they put in their body, cross-pollination from craft mixology and low and no spirits has caused people to be drawn to complex, "grown-up" flavours such as rosemary, basil, chamomile, yuzu, and elderflower, which reinforce naturalness and premium cues.

Interestingly, this means we could see functional drinks increasingly double as mindful social beverages, offering flavour depth and ritual value.

Relaxation, recovery, & daily rituals:

Throughout 2025, we saw increased crossover between fitness recovery and mental wellness categories. With increased perceptions that health and fitness are a way of life and must be at the core of a productive daily routine, interest in "natural" electrolyte replacements has grown. These products often contain magnesium, potassium and trace minerals which are becoming hero ingredients for muscle recovery, stress reduction and sleep support. For this reason, night-time and post-exercise relaxation drinks are expected to gain ground, bridging the gap between energy and sleep beverages. This is part of a wider trend of functional drinks evolving from occasional boosts to

everyday rituals, whether the goal is morning focus, mid-afternoon calm, or evening unwind.

Transparency will prove key to the functional drinks category as we move into 2026, as increased scrutiny of 'wellness washing' has prompted consumers to become better educated about the ingredients listed on their favourite functional products. In response, brands will need to offer greater clarity around the benefits of their products, while also getting creative with inventive flavours and distinctive USPs to capture attention and stand out in a crowded market.



A rise in early dining

New data released in 2025 shows a clear and sustained shift towards early dining across the country. OpenTable reported an 11% increase in 6pm bookings in London and a 6% rise nationally year-on-year, while at the same time, traditional 8pm bookings declined by 3% across the UK.

Hospitality tech firm Zonal noted a similar trend, reporting that the UK's average dining time has shifted to 6:12pm, with almost half of all reservations now taking place between midday and 6pm.

While the trend is often attributed to Gen Z – who are known for prioritising their wellbeing, routine and quality sleep – the data suggests it spans generations. In fact, the most significant increase in early dining is actually from 35-54 year olds, where there has been an 11% increase. Flexible working hours, family routines, and wellness-led lifestyles are all reinforcing the shift.

With earlier sittings typically generating lower alcohol spend and shorter dwell times, operators are now faced with the question of how to adapt their offering to cater to, and profit from, this new trend.



What does this mean for 2026?

The early eating trend is one that will surely continue throughout 2026, and therefore, both restaurants and F&B brands must rethink how they serve and market themselves to consumers whose evenings now start, and end, earlier. This could mean trends such as:

The 5-9:

As the post-work “early evening” becomes the new prime social window, expect to see more early-bird menus, aperitivo hours, and “wind-down” experiences tailored to this time of day. The key to success for marketers will be to reframe this “early” period as aspirational – aligning the early eating trend with mindfulness, balance, and self-care rather than frugality.

Late night offers:

Earlier sittings tend to generate a lower spend for venues, therefore expect to see more offers and later “happy hours” from bars in a bid to incentivise customers to stay out.

Cross-sector collabs with wellness brands:

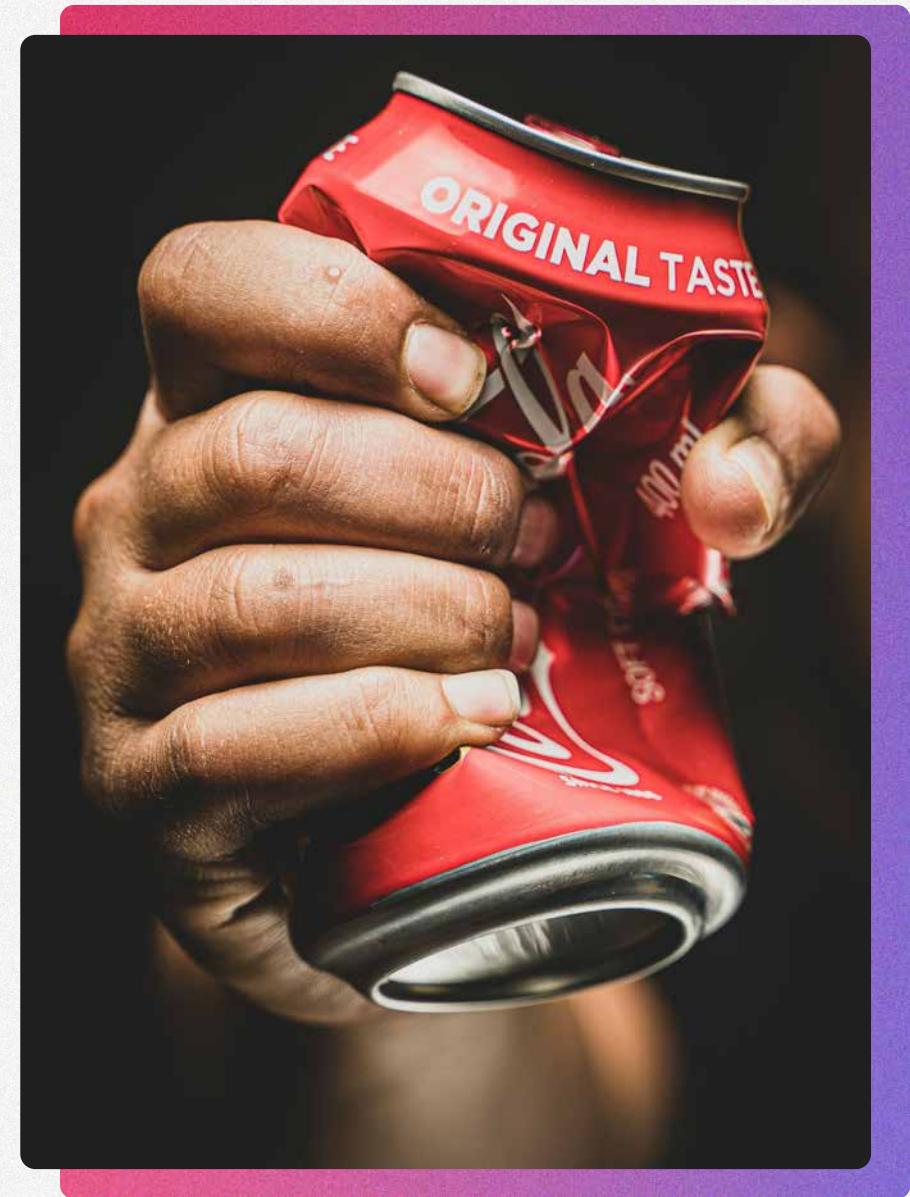
With wellness being the driving force behind the trend, expect more partnerships between hospitality, F&B, and wellness and lifestyle brands – from yoga and brunch partnerships, to co-branded menus between bars and supplement brands. These crossovers will help brands reinforce their relevance amongst key audiences and tap into consumer mindsets.

By 2026, early dining will be firmly embedded in UK social culture. The brands and venues that are able to adapt and reposition “early” as an experience worth celebrating will be best placed to thrive. Whether through a 6pm supper club, or a wellness-focused partnership, success will belong to those who make early feel exciting.

Good things come in paper packages

This year saw the introduction of the new Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) scheme – a policy that shifts the cost of packaging waste management away from councils and onto producers.

Because EPR fees are calculated on a hybrid weight-and-volume model, glass packaging is subject to higher fees than other materials due to its weight. By contrast, PET plastic bottles and aluminium cans are currently exempt from EPR fees, since they'll fall under the upcoming Deposit Return Scheme (DRS), due to launch in October 2027. The result is that currently, EPR is incentivising drinks producers away from glass in a cost-reducing effort – something that is sure to drive packaging innovation into 2026.



What does this mean for 2026?

Wine, spirits, and premium soft drinks are likely to be among the categories most affected. Glass has long been tied to perceptions of quality, but EPR is forcing brands to innovate to keep costs down.

We've already seen a slow shift away from traditional glass bottles over the last few years, from the likes of Nice Drinks, Laylo Wine, and Avallen, but now we can expect to see further, and faster, innovation as a result of EPR. Trends that we could see in 2026 include:

Rapid normalisation of paper-based bottles and cartons:

Following in the footsteps of Avallen's paper Calvados bottle, [Absolut Vodka's trial of a paper-based bottle and cap, as well as RTDs such as Funkin and Reef launching in Tetra Pak](#), expect to see more high-profile launches from brands moving from glass into paper-based formats.

A premium rethink of boxed wine:

With brands like Laylo proving that paper-based packaging can also be positioned as stylish, convenient, and premium, [2026 could be the year that boxed or bag-in-box wines finally shed their "cheap and cheerful" associations.](#)

Varying formats by channel:

Larger producers with deeper budgets are likely to operate dual strategies – offering lighter paper or canned formats for convenience and grocery channels, where price sensitivity and portability matter most, while [retaining glass bottles for more premium routes to market](#), such as prestige retailers, gifting, and on-trade accounts.



While a few years ago, alternative packaging was often associated with low quality, nowadays [eco-led design is being woven into brand identity](#). A paper bottle of whisky or a Tetra Pak cocktail is now seen less as "compromise" and more about progress. Therefore, [early adopters of innovative packaging solutions can position themselves as leaders in sustainability](#), while those left behind risk looking outdated.



The new ice age

Attitudes towards frozen food are shifting. Once viewed as just the convenient or budget option, consumers are increasingly realising the benefits that frozen can offer, driven in large parts by the ongoing cost-of-living pressures.

Data shows that 63% of people now recognise frozen food can be as nutritious as fresh¹³, and the popularity of appliances like air fryers seems to also be encouraging more of us to make the swap to frozen – around one in eight consumers say their purchase of a new gadget has prompted them to buy more frozen food.^[5] Beyond health and value, sustainability is also playing a role in category growth, with two-thirds of consumers more likely to buy frozen food that is labelled as sustainably sourced or produced¹⁴.

It's a change that is reflected in the sales data – over the last year, the frozen food category as a whole has continued to expand, building on the significant growth seen in 2024 when the market rose by 11%.¹⁵ Brands such as PACK'D, the organic frozen food producer, are also reporting huge successes – achieving 35% year-on-year growth.



What does this mean for 2026?

With all the data pointing in one direction, the growth of the frozen food category is sure to continue into 2026. And with consumer perceptions of frozen food continuing to evolve, the industry is likely to see an increasing number of brands entering the sector.

For brands, the key to success will be aligning product offerings with trends that are most important to today's shoppers. Consumers are no longer just seeking quick or cost-effective options, they are looking for products that combine convenience with nutrition, sustainability and quality. These are some trends that we expect to see in 2026:

Swapping fresh for frozen:

As general awareness of the benefits of frozen food continues to grow, more shoppers are likely to choose frozen over fresh. Categories such as fruit and vegetables and seafood nutrition are poised especially well for this, offering not only the nutrition, but also longer shelf life and lower waste.

An increase in premium offerings:

Historically, frozen food has carried a reputation for being lower quality, but as consumers are recognising the benefits of frozen products, the sector will start to see more innovation in premium ranges. Expect to see more "fakeaway" style products, chef-inspired ready meals and restaurant-quality ranges that cater to the "big night in" occasion.

The rise of 'freeze-dried' products:

Freeze-dried technology, which removes moisture to preserve flavour, nutrients and shelf life without the need for refrigeration, is gaining traction. In fact, this year saw JUX secure a Tesco listing for its freeze-dried vegetables, herbs and spices – demonstrating the potential within this sub-category. While still very much in its infancy, freeze-dried products offer an even greater benefit than frozen – they can be stored in cupboards. Expect to see more innovation and product launches in the months ahead.

As the frozen sector continues to grow, brands will need to focus on differentiation, education, and experience to stay ahead, reframing "frozen" from functional to aspirational and positioning the aisle as a space where nutrition, sustainability, and modern lifestyles meet.

2026 hot takes

"The next big food stars won't be chefs – they'll be brands with personality. People want connection. They want to know who's behind the flavour, what drives them, and why they care. We're seeing a huge shift towards brands that have heart, story, and humour – the kind that feel like a mate recommending you something amazing to eat. That's the future: flavour with personality."



**Rikki Constantinou,
co-founder
truffleguys®**

"With data showing that the number of people on weightloss jabs now makes this a similar size category as the vegan and vegetarian market, a lot of companies are developing products that fit alongside weightloss jabs – food you can have while you're on the jab or coming off it. It's not one that we are personally looking into at Moving Mountains, but we're definitely onlookers of the trend and it will be interesting to see how this develops in the industry."



**Eleanor Faragher-Siddall,
marketing manager
MOVING
MOUNTAINS**

"Chaos packaging will flip category norms on their head, turning the pack itself into a content engine. As consumers become flavoured out and immune to traditional ads, formats like squeezable olive oil bottles, BuzzBallz's toy-like cocktails, and tampons in ice-cream tubs create instant "wait, what?" moments that fuel social media engagement. Liquid Death proved the power of breaking format rules by putting water in a craft-beer style can. Alcohol is now crossing those boundaries too. We are driving this with VK Squashka moving into a resealable Tetra Pak that behaves more like an oat milk than an RTD. Category lines are blurring fast."



**Matt Bulcroft,
marketing director
GLOBAL BRANDS**



Wellness in 2026 is less about abstinence and more about intentional indulgence. Consumers are tracking their sleep, recovery and habits more closely than ever, and those same metrics guide how, when and what they drink. The next evolution is wellness-compatible drinks that fit into a healthy lifestyle rather than disrupt it.



Ushira Kapoor,
Head of Brand
**WEDNESDAYS
DOMAINE**



"2026 is the year the frozen aisle will truly come into its own. Consumer perceptions are shifting, the freezer is no longer just for emergencies; it's becoming an everyday essential. Quality-focused brands are redefining the space with great taste and choice, transforming what was once an unloved category. Consumers are still time poor so convenience remains front and centre in people's lives, but guilt-free solutions that aid clean cooking matter more than ever. With so much fresh produce ending up in the bin, the freezer is the natural solution. Today's consumer is savvy, focused on cutting food waste and eating well – and frozen provides the ultimate cheat code."



Katy Hamblin,
Marketing Director,
PACK'D

- 1 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2475299124023643>
- 2 <https://www.foodmanufacture.co.uk/Article/2024/02/20/solving-the-big-uk-fibre-gap/>
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- 5 <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/data-19-million-uk-adults-ditch-upfs-as-health-fears-grow/706988.article>
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IWSR's latest Bevtrac survey of consumer sentiment
- 8 <https://mediacat.uk/the-sober-generation-new-research-suggests-a-more-mixed-picture-of-gen-z/>
- 9 <https://www.askattest.com/blog/research/whats-driving-growth-in-ready-to-drink-alcohol>
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- 11 <https://www.distillventures.com/article/whats-attracting-consumers-to-low-and-non-alcoholic-drinks-non-alc-statistics>
- 12 <https://www.distillventures.com/article/whats-attracting-consumers-to-low-and-non-alcoholic-drinks-non-alc-statistics>
- 13 <https://www.nomadfoods.com/frozeninfo/>
- 14 Spotlight on Frozen Food, January 2025 – British Frozen Food Federation
- 15 Kantar 2024 Report

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