

Subway Chases Trends With Menu Tests

NEW YORK (AP) — Subway is testing hummus and thinner slices of deli meats that look more appealing as it looks to keep pace with changing eating trends.

Tony Pace, Subway's chief marketing officer, said in interview Tuesday that the chain began testing hummus as a topping in early April. Pace noted that many customers already order vegetarian sandwiches and that the chickpea spread would give people looking for meatless options another choice.

"It's something we've been talking about for the last three or four years," Pace said, saying it has "tremendous potential."

If the test is successful, Pace said it would be the first time the chain rolled out hummus nationally. Individual franchisees may have offered it independently in the past, he said.

Getting hummus as a topping will cost more, much like the avocado Subway added to its menu in recent years.

The hummus test comes at a time when many Americans are trying to cut back on how much meat they eat. In particular, Pace noted that people in their 20s are more "nutritionally aware" than any other past generation. In coming years, he predicted their eating habits will force the restaurant industry to adapt their menus.

Executives at Chipotle Mexican Grill, which recently began rolling out a vegan tofu topping for its burritos and bowls, have also noted that meatless options help the chain cultivate a relationship with younger consumers, who often experiment with being a vegetarian or vegan.

In a separate interview, Subway co-founder Fred DeLuca said the chain also started testing thinner slices of deli meat in December. In the test, which is taking place at restaurants in Illinois, DeLuca said franchisees are putting 12 slices of meat on a Footlong sandwich, instead of eight. He said the meat is the same but that it's just sliced thinner to improve its "bite" and appearance.

"For some reason, it looks better. It looks like more meat," DeLuca said.

DeLuca expressed optimism about the thinner slices and that the franchisees in Illinois were "very enthusiastic" about the change. Still, he noted that such a change would take considerable research and investment to roll it out nationally. The earliest it could be available nationally would be in about a year, he said.

DeLuca, who has been diagnosed with leukemia, also noted that he hasn't traveled as much in the past year because of his health. He added that he has "toyed with the idea that on the 50th anniversary, it might be a nice idea to step back."

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That would entail naming a president, while remaining in the CEO role, DeLuca said. The chain's 50th anniversary is next year.

Looking forward, he said he expects Subway to have about 65,000 locations globally in the next 10 years, with about half of those in the U.S.

Subway, based in Milford, Conn., currently has more than 41,800 locations around the world, 26,600 of those in the U.S.

The company is privately held and does not disclose sales data.

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