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Beyond 2020: What will the future taste like?

GEMIMA CODY January 28 2020



The me&u app is coming in hot. Photo: Supplied

Greetings, Time Lords, and welcome to The Future. That mystical era we've been dreaming of has finally arrived. And while we might not be flying around in hover cars yet, we are living in high-tech times, as exciting as they are horrifying.

At the start of a new decade, it would remiss of us not to roll out the crystal ball and guess at what's coming down the pipeline. But to look ahead, you've got to look back.

A decade ago, we were unabashedly getting excited about tacos. We were hearing the first rumblings of food trucks firing up. We were yet to meet [Melbourne's Chin Chin](#), which didn't drop its endlessly imitated aesthetic until 2011. We were outraged we couldn't book tables. Maybe you were getting your food news from a blog. Remember those? Then came Instagram, and American barbecue. Burgers rose and rose. Napkins vanished, place-mats came. Then they went as we started to tackle waste. Meal delivery ruined us all.

A decade on, we could tell you more of the same. About tacos, take two (funnily enough, Mexican is making a comeback in 2020). That a hot new craze in the coffee world is freezing milk to concentrate the sweetest part for a luxury brew. Who knew? I could tell you which new superfoods to look out for and what's trending online (switching off, FYI). Or that Middle Eastern and West African food are on the up.

But now it's 2020, we need bigger vision than that. The digital revolution may just be colliding with the start of the end of the world that we knew. Strap yourself in, then, for the food trends we think will really rock your world.

Robot waiters

Do you hate people? This is your time. Food delivery apps have already disrupted the hospitality industry. Now, platforms like TabSquare and me&u are coming in hot. They allow diners to digitally browse menus, order and pay using an app and an at-table terminal, while old-fashioned flesh staff simply deliver the dishes.

The upside for you? Convenience. As with Uber, you can split bills with friends and when finished just get up and leave. Concerning, though, is TabSquare's pitch to business owners: "Cut staff costs by 30 per cent!"

With the [2019 wage wars](#) exposing the true cost of paying staff properly, the pitch will understandably have cut-through. And job cuts, though likely not at dining's top end. In fact, as faces disappear from our tables, we might start to properly appreciate them when they do show up.

This isn't a maybe. Merivale mogul Justin Hemmes is exploring me&u for suitable venues, and the Rockpool Group, Opera Bar and many other Sydney venues are getting on board, while [Victoria's Portsea Hotel](#) is the guinea pig down south.



Will robot waiters become reality? Photo: iStock



Assorted pickles and preserves at Cornersmith in Sydney. Photo: Steven Siewert

Rise of the preppy prepper

Prepping, if you haven't heard of the movement, involves making ready for the apocalypse by building food stores, stockpiling fuel, learning weaponry and potentially fashioning tin foil hats. Consider it Scouts for adults, with far more paranoia. Long considered the domain of eccentric recluses, given current world events, we tip prepping is about to go mainstream.

Even if you don't think we're doomed, the prepper principals intersect with wellness ideals. Everyone should be experiencing the salve of growing your own, anywhere possible. Dig a wartime-style victory garden in your tiny yard. Build an aquaponics system over a fish tank in your apartment. Or join the myriad community gardens now crowning shopping centres and even airports. It's food security and free therapy at once.

While you're at it, skill up. Preservation methods such as [pickling](#), [fermenting](#), dehydrating and salting don't just stock your pantry for a rainy day (or in the too-real case of this summer, for weeks of power cuts due to bushfires). They give you 10 ways to look at one ingredient, allow for serious bulk buying, mass savings, and less food and packaging waste. Maybe we are doomed, but we can always go down deliciously.



Grounded Foods' cauliflower camembert. Photo: Shaun Quade

The low-carbon diet

Oh yes, plan to hear that phrase trotted out. Particularly in the plant-based foodiverse.

As hard as some are working to deny that current farming practices are becoming unsustainable, others are seeing the upside to meat market disruption: money. Heaps of money.

Venture capitalists cannot throw enough money at meat-free meat and cheese-free cheese development.

In 2018, Veronica Fil and chef Shaun Quade sold out of South Melbourne restaurant Lume to open one in Los Angeles. They planned to run vegan label Grounded Foods as a side hustle.

Fil says investors were more interested in the plant-centric product line than the restaurant itself. "The first guy we spoke to offered us \$2 million to buy the cheese concept from us." Realising the potential, they ditched the restaurant idea and have moved to New York with a \$200,000 grant to develop the range full-time.

If you remember Quade's freakishly convincing camembert made of cauliflower, [served as part of Lume's degustation](#), you'll appreciate he's the guy for the job.

Their range, which they plan to launch in the US but eventually manufacture in Australia too, includes that soft, funky "camembert", marinated feta and an aged gruyere. Better still: they're based on cauliflower offcuts, addressing a waste problem while avoiding allergy issues faced by products using nuts and soy.

Millennials are turning away from animal products in droves, and they are the long-term customers that businesses want to court. And while animal justice and low carbon diets may be at the heart of the marketing right now, as competition and quality climbs and production costs drop, they may soon become the cheaper option.

Lab-grown meat is still a work in progress. Right now, it's entirely possible to grow a burger patty using stem cells and sample muscle tissue, but the cost is still too high to be commercially viable. It's also quite creepy. Still, with big money being pressure-hosed over start-ups the world over, that could change soon.

Impossible Foods, the market leader in plant-based fake meat products, predicts they will be cheaper than meat by 2022 - and probably sooner in Australia, given produce prices are set to skyrocket due to drought and fires.



Photo: Alamy

High times

On January 31, new legislation will come into effect allowing the good people of the ACT to get high on their own supply of two marijuana plants. Could this be a baby step on the road to the kind of legalisation sweeping North America? We should probably hope so.

A report by cannabis investors The ArcView Group estimates that by 2022 the US market for food products infused with the active THC chemical in cannabis will be worth \$US4.1 billion (about \$5.9 billion) and that the global market could be worth \$46 billion.

From a distance, it still seems outrageous. But Canada has been on the bandwagon since 2018, and the UK, while far more restricted, is now creating its own lines of bespoke chocolates with a buzz. Giant beer companies such as Budweiser and Coors are now releasing cannabis beers and other beverages.

Can Australia afford to miss out? On growing crops? On lucrative tourism opportunities where the curious come to explore the green belt? Even governments are raking it in via special taxes. High times indeed.



Seedlip serves up another non-alcoholic spirit. Photo: Supplied

Sober times

On the flip side is the craze for ditching booze, or switching it for something softer. What began as Dry July and Febfast has now been joined by Sober October and abstinence periods that don't even rhyme (hello, Dry January).

By the end of 2019, reductionist culture was already in full swing. Low-ish alcohol drinks such as [hard kombucha](#), or kombucha-beer hybrids are coming out in force and cocktail bars are adapting to all those sober months by putting [non-alcoholic "spirit" alternatives](#) like Seedlip and Lyre's on their backbar.

But look overseas and we might soon be seeing a further split. New York has a burgeoning "sober bar scene": pop-up clubs slinging coconuts only; karaoke bars split into boozy and dry areas. In Australia, the group Hello Sunday Morning offers dance parties and other events for those who want to party with their heads on straight.

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