

Protein Across the Foodservice Menu

Proposed 2027 Research Program #12745

Introduction

Protein has moved beyond the center of the plate. Operators are using protein in breakfast, snacks, beverages, bakery items, handhelds, bowls, appetizers, and foods positioned around health, energy, strength, and satiety. At the same time, traditional meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, and dairy remain fundamental to menus, while plant-based products and protein-enhanced foods continue to evolve.

The opportunity is significant, but it is not uniform. Protein priorities differ by channel, daypart, menu application, customer group, price point, and operating model. Operators must balance customer appeal with food costs, labor, preparation, yield, portion size, supply reliability, nutrition, and menu versatility. Some protein claims may meaningfully influence product selection; others may generate more attention than actual purchasing demand.

This study will identify where operators see the strongest protein opportunities, which formats and applications are gaining traction, how purchasing decisions are made, and where manufacturers can create products and support that fit real foodservice needs.

This proposal is a working research framework that will be refined with study sponsors before fieldwork begins.

Overall Objectives

- Assess how operators define the protein opportunity across foodservice menus and channels.
- Identify the protein categories, formats, applications, dayparts, and occasions offering the strongest growth potential.
- Measure operator usage, purchasing priorities, product requirements, barriers, unmet needs, and future plans.
- Understand how health, satiety, value, indulgence, convenience, sustainability, and customer demand influence protein decisions.
- Evaluate the operational and financial tradeoffs affecting product selection, portioning, preparation, cross-utilization, and menu pricing.
- Determine where protein claims and protein-enhanced products create meaningful operator value—and where interest may be overstated.
- Provide sponsors with practical recommendations for product development, positioning, sales, and channel strategy.

Proposed Key Issues

To be refined with sponsor input during kickoff.

The Protein Opportunity

- How important is protein to menu development, customer satisfaction, check averages, traffic, and competitive positioning?
- How do operators expect protein demand and menu usage to change during the next three to five years?
- Which channels, customer groups, dayparts, and occasions offer the greatest potential?
- How do protein priorities differ among commercial restaurants, c-stores, colleges and universities, K-12, healthcare, senior living, lodging, and workplace foodservice?
- Where are operators expanding protein variety, reducing portions, changing specifications, or reformulating menus in response to cost and demand?
- Which protein trends are translating into sustained operator action rather than short-term interest?

Categories and Competitive Positioning

- What is the outlook for beef, pork, poultry, seafood, eggs, dairy, plant-based proteins, and protein ingredients?
- How do operators perceive the strengths, limitations, and appropriate applications of different protein sources?
- Where are products competing directly, and where do they serve different needs or menu roles?
- How important are taste, familiarity, versatility, nutrition, portion cost, yield, preparation, availability, and customer perception?

- Where are blended, hybrid, alternative, or protein-enhanced products gaining consideration?
- How do operators balance traditional proteins with plant-forward menu strategies and changing customer expectations?

Protein Across Dayparts and Menu Applications

- Where is protein gaining importance at breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks, late night, and beverage occasions?
- What are the opportunities in sandwiches, handhelds, bowls, salads, pizza, appetizers, entrées, meal kits, snacks, bakery, and desserts?
- How are eggs, meat, dairy, plant proteins, and protein beverages being used in breakfast and morning programs?
- Which formats work best for grab-and-go, delivery, convenience, portable meals, and smaller eating occasions?
- How important is protein as a component that can be used across multiple menu items and dayparts?
- Where do operators want products that add protein without fundamentally changing familiar foods or flavors?

Protein Beverages, Snacks and Emerging Formats

- What is operator interest in protein shakes, smoothies, coffee beverages, dairy and plant-based drinks, hydration products, and other protein-enhanced beverages?
- Where do protein snacks, bars, bites, bakery products, yogurt, cottage cheese, and portable foods fit within foodservice?
- Which channels and customer groups are most receptive to these products?
- How important are protein amount, source, taste, texture, sugar, calories, portability, branding, and price?
- What operational, merchandising, equipment, storage, or sourcing barriers limit adoption?
- Which emerging formats have the potential to become meaningful foodservice categories?

Health, Nutrition and Customer Demand

- What customer needs do operators associate with protein: satiety, energy, strength, weight management, healthy aging, recovery, or general wellness?
- How much do operators believe protein content influences customer selection and willingness to pay?
- Which protein claims are useful, credible, confusing, or unnecessary in foodservice settings?
- How do protein priorities differ for children, college students, athletes, older adults, healthcare patients, and mainstream restaurant customers?
- How important are complete protein, protein quality, source, serving size, and other nutritional distinctions to operators?
- Where do health positioning and indulgence coexist successfully?

Value, Pricing and Menu Economics

- How are protein costs affecting menu prices, portion sizes, specifications, purchasing, and menu development?
- How do operators evaluate cost per serving, yield, trim loss, shrink, holding performance, and total plate cost?
- Where will customers pay more for additional protein, premium sources, larger portions, health benefits, or higher quality?
- How are operators using smaller portions, mixed proteins, add-ons, upgrades, bundles, or menu engineering to protect margins?
- Which protein products are seen as strong value and which are becoming difficult to justify?
- How can manufacturers help operators communicate value without relying solely on larger portions?

Operations, Labor and Product Performance

- Which preparation formats are preferred: raw, pre-portioned, pre-seasoned, pre-cooked, ready-to-heat, thaw-and-serve, or fully prepared?
- What tradeoffs will operators accept among labor savings, product cost, customization, quality, consistency, and speed?
- How important are portion control, shelf life, food safety, holding, reheating, yield, clean-up, and ease of training?
- Where do equipment, storage, employee skill, or production capacity limit protein menu expansion?
- Which products perform effectively across dine-in, takeout, delivery, grab-and-go, and centralized production?
- Where are operators seeking multifunctional products that can be cross-utilized across recipes, venues, or dayparts?

Purchasing and Supplier Selection

- Who influences protein specifications, menu decisions, product testing, purchasing, and supplier approval?
- Which product attributes carry the greatest weight when operators evaluate a new protein product?
- How important are distributor access, case size, minimum orders, pricing stability, contracts, traceability, and supply assurance?

- What causes protein products to be rejected during testing or to underperform after rollout?
- Where do operators want more culinary support, menu applications, nutrition guidance, training, consumer insight, or cost analysis from suppliers?
- How can manufacturers differentiate themselves beyond product quality and price?

Proposed Product and Channel Scope

Final coverage will be established with sponsors. The study may include animal proteins, eggs, dairy proteins, plant-based products, protein ingredients, protein-enhanced foods and beverages, and products positioned around protein-related benefits.

- Commercial restaurants, including QSR, fast casual, full service, and other multi-unit operations
- Convenience store foodservice
- College and university and K-12 dining
- Healthcare and senior living
- Lodging, workplace foodservice, recreation, and other relevant channels

Proposed Methodology

The study will use operator surveys only. No consumer research or separate qualitative interview phase is proposed.

1. Engagement Initiation

- Private kickoff discussions with each sponsor to review objectives, product categories, channel priorities, and intended uses of the research.
- Sponsor review of the operator questionnaire before launch.
- Confidential sponsor-only questions incorporated into the survey and reported privately.

2. Existing Data and Menu Review

- Review of public information, operator menus, industry reporting, and relevant FSIP proprietary research.
- Development of a baseline assessment to inform questionnaire design and interpretation.

3. Quantitative Operator Research

- Approximately 200 nationwide online surveys with qualified foodservice operators responsible for culinary, menu development, purchasing, operations, nutrition, or category decisions.
- Coverage of relevant commercial and noncommercial channels, with quotas refined according to sponsor priorities.
- Measurement of current product usage, menu applications, purchasing criteria, operating requirements, perceived growth opportunities, barriers, unmet needs, and future plans.
- Optional confidential concept, product, claim, or positioning questions for individual sponsors.

4. Strategic Analysis and Reporting

- Analysis by channel, operator type, menu application, protein category, and other relevant segments.
- Identification of priority opportunities, product requirements, adoption barriers, and manufacturer implications.
- Development of a practical how-to-win framework for sponsor innovation, sales, marketing, and channel strategy.

Study Deliverables

- Comprehensive PowerPoint report featuring detailed analysis, strategic implications, charts, and executive commentary.
- Assessment of protein categories, dayparts, applications, operator needs, channel differences, and future direction.
- Identification of product-development, positioning, menu-support, sales, and channel opportunities.
- Complete operator questionnaire, cross-tabulations, and supporting data appendix.
- Confidential reporting of each sponsor's proprietary questions.
- Sponsor presentation and discussion following internal review of the report.
- Ongoing access to FSIP for follow-up questions and interpretation at no additional cost.
- Optional post-study strategy workshop to translate findings into company-specific priorities and action plans.

The Strategic Value to Sponsors

This study will help sponsors distinguish broad interest in protein from the specific products, applications, channels, and operating needs that can support actual foodservice growth. It will connect menu opportunities with the cost, labor, preparation, distribution, and product-performance requirements that determine operator adoption.

Sponsors will gain a clearer understanding of where their products fit, which operator groups and menu applications deserve priority, how different protein sources are evaluated, where current offerings fall short, and which forms of manufacturer support can improve customer relevance and sales effectiveness.

Foodservice IP's Experience

Foodservice IP's engagement team includes experienced foodservice strategists and researchers with backgrounds in growth strategy, operator research, menu and product analysis, noncommercial and commercial channels, distribution, innovation, and go-to-market planning. The project will be led by Tim Powell, Principal, who has advised foodservice manufacturers and industry organizations for more than 20 years.

Timing and Fees

- Anticipated project duration: approximately 10–12 weeks from initiation.
- Target kickoff: late fourth quarter 2026.
- Target delivery: first or second quarter 2027, depending on sponsor timing and final survey scope.
- Pre-launch sponsors will help refine study objectives, channel coverage, product scope, and questionnaire content.
- \$15,000 per sponsor for one study.
- Discounted participation: two studies for \$26,500 or three studies for \$35,000 when confirmed together.
- Private, in-person presentations are exclusive of travel expenses.

Billing Policy

- 50% upon project initiation
- Balance due upon delivery of the final report

Conclusion

Protein presents opportunities across virtually every foodservice channel, daypart, and menu section, but growth will depend on more than consumer enthusiasm. Products must meet operator requirements for cost, labor, preparation, consistency, versatility, availability, and menu relevance. This study will provide sponsors with direct operator evidence and practical strategic guidance for translating the protein opportunity into products and programs that foodservice customers can use.

Participation Authorization

Our company confirms participation in the Foodservice IP multi-client study, Protein Across the Menu #12745, in the amount of \$15,000.

Billing will follow the terms described in this proposal: 50% upon project initiation and the balance upon delivery of the final report.

Name

Title

Company

Address

Email

Signature

Date

To participate, please sign this page and return it to tpowell@foodserviceip.com. Questions may be directed to Tim Powell at 312-600-5151.