Smoothie bowls, grain bowls, global porridge bowls and more are emerging as a healthy, trendy start to the new day.
By Tara Fitzpatrick

Buzz-worthy Breakfast Bowls

Want more from your morning menu? Look to the bowl. Breakfast bowls can hold more of the ingredients that make daybreak worth getting up for: more whole grains, more veggies, more seeds and nuts, more perfectly poached eggs on top...and what’s more, they can hold flavor profiles from anywhere on the planet, ranging from sweet to savory to spicy and everything in between.

Vibrant bowls of nourishment offered in the morning are also a way to fulfill menu promises: health-conscious, antioxidant-rich, plant-based and even culturally diverse menus can get a boost from breakfast bowls.

A Changing View of Breakfast

At Cornell University, the breakfast options set the tone for the dining department’s philosophy with the new Breakfast of Change program. It’s an initiative designed to add more vegetables to the first meal of the day, and it’s been shaking things up alongside the more traditional breakfast lineup at Carl Becker House, a living/dining center for undergrads.

Anthony Kveragas, CEC, executive chef/manager at Carl Becker House, initiated Breakfast of Change, and has used it as a vehicle to connect with students from diverse cultures, and also to anyone who is eating vegan and gluten-free.

"It's a separate breakfast food line of fresh vegetables and..."
specialty items," Kveragas says. "My campaign slogan is: 'Vegetable are not just for lunch, dinner and snacks anymore.' From my perspective, the traditional American breakfast (pancakes, bacon, etc.), although very tasty, is full of carbs, fat and grease."

So Breakfast of Change has been, well, changing all of that at Cornell, and the focus is breakfast bowls.

The breakfast bowls begin with bases: Morning Zhou, a Chinese porridge/brothy soup with jasmine rice that's cooked with chicken or vegetable stock, (find the recipe on p. 26) and ginger and Jamaican porridge, made with cornmeal and coconut milk.

From these bases, it's essentially a build-your-own-bowl setup that makes it easy for students to customize and be creative, making egg-rice-veggie bowls with their choice of spinach, cauliflower, broccoli, whole mush-rooms, artichokes, tomatoes, peppers, pumpkin, eggplant and squash. The veggies are either raw, steamed or simply roasted and dressed with a little olive oil.

"The students top their bowls with vegetables, so they often take less of the traditional American breakfast items and end up eating more vegetables," Kveragas says, adding that the set up of a separate line is simple (and DIY) enough that there's been no change in the existing labor model.

Why Congee?

Some form of congee, or rice porridge, has long been the bedrock of breakfast for many people waking up on the other side of the world, including the people of suburban Bangladesh.

That's where Nazim Khan, CEC, grew up. He remembers breakfast prep beginning right after dinner as a matter of practicality: "You utilize your night meal to transform into breakfast," says Khan, who is now executive chef at Bryan Health Medical Center in Lincoln, Neb. "Why is it rice? At the end of the night, you have leftover rice. You don't have refrigeration. So you would take cold water and cover the rice overnight to keep it fresh."

During that process, the rice becomes creamier, almost like the grits that Southerners cherish. And then the rice is topped with chili sauce, scallions, sometimes raw onions and a fried egg "as a luxury," Khan says, adding that "this food has a history and foundation."

Khan is currently working with a rice bowl idea as an expansion on a successful noodle bowl station at Bryan Health.

He's toying with the idea of adding pork belly (pictured, at left, with poblano and corn) as a topping to make the dish more Midwestern.
Buzz-worthy Breakfast Bowls

THE BOWL WITH THE BUZZ: Don't call it a parfait. The acai bowl is a whole different animal—more customizable, livelier and certainly trendier. The acai bowl has made quite a journey, from the traditional breakfast of ancient tribes of the Amazon basin to the present-day "it" breakfast for the coolest urbanites.

It's a Bowl...No, It's a Smoothie...It's Both!
The smoothie bowl could be a direct food-trend descendant of both the smoothie and the parfait. It's like both, but like neither. The smoothie bowl—and the acai bowl in particular—is much more of the moment, more youthful, more...South American.

One certain type of smoothie bowl seems to be rising above the rest in terms of buzz factor: the acai bowl.

Haven't heard of the acai bowl? You will. Possibly the trendiest bowl in the whole breakfast-in-a-bowl trend, popularity of the acai bowl is rising (and shining) in places like New York City, Chicago and Los Angeles. Does it sound too hyped-up for you? Well, "the buzz is 100 percent deserved," raves the Huffington Post.

That's because of the health benefits and delicious tropical taste of the berry itself and the customizable anatomy of the bowl: a thick, cool smoothie that's topped with shredded coconut, toasted nuts and seeds, oats, raisins, granola, gummy bears or marshmallows for special occasions...it's not hard to see why it's a buzz-worthy breakfast.

"The students have been specifically asking for acai bowls," says Beth Emery, RD, director of dining services at Boston College (BC). Emery and her team also got acai bowl inspiration at the national NACUSP conference last year in Indianapolis.

BC students can find acai bowls at two campus locations, weekly at the upper campus location and every day in the Loft at Addie's. The bowls are made to order in to-go cups so students can devour a healthful, fiber-filled, protein-packed breakfast on their way to class. Toppings include fruit, seeds, coconut, granola and more.

"There are long lines during peak periods," Emery says, adding that after recent culinary training, a couple of managers developed a new breakfast bowl, a quinoa-oatmeal parfait that students are already waking up early for.

Whole Health Bowls

These three breakfast bowls are both a tempting and nutritious way to start the day, proving that there's no excuse for a boring bowl of oatmeal when you've got options like crunchy walnuts, fresh berries, and toasted quinoa for crunch and even herbs for garnish.

Breakfast quinoa with walnut cream and blueberries

Toasted quinoa breakfast sundaes

Lazy morning muesli with apple and walnut crumble