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Daily Insight Article:

THE FOOD NETWORK FOR THE NEXT GENERATION: Q&A WITH SPOON UNIVERSITY

WE TALKED TO THE FOUNDER OF SPOON UNIVERSITY—A FOOD NETWORK FOR THE NEXT GENERATION—TO LEARN MORE ABOUT COLLEGE DINING AND MILLENNIALS' IMPACT ON THE FOOD CULTURE…

Spoon University is bringing together food-loving college students, and finding out what they want out of their college dining experiences. The site—which we recently included our post on college dining trends—features food-related articles put together by a network of chapters on campuses to create the ultimate college foodie community. The company was started in 2014 by two 23-year-olds who wanted to connect with their peers about food at Northwestern. According to Business Insider, their website now attracts 2 million unique visitors every month and has 120 chapters within college campuses, including schools like NYU, Dartmouth, and Penn.

We talked to one Spoon University's founders, Mackenzie Barth, about the impact of her website, as well as her thoughts and insights on how college dining halls have reshaped their strategies to appeal to the Millennial generation:

Ypulse: Tell us about Spoon University—how did the company come to be?
Mackenzie Barth: Spoon University is The Food Network for the next generation. We have chapters on college campuses across the country who self-organize and create communities around a passion for food. They create content through photos, text, and articles, as well as come together around events within their local communities and their campuses. When my co-founder Sarah Adler and I were in college we lived off-campus and had to learn how to feed ourselves for the first time—a realization everybody has when they go to college. It was strange to us that there was no resource or community around that struggle. There was a ton of food media—I was watching Food Network religiously—but nothing spoke to what I was going through. We started a website and print magazine on campus to solve that problem just at Northwestern, and ended up building a team of about 100 students who were writing, editing, doing photo and video, and had on-campus events. It was basically just a way for us to learn from everybody else on campus to see what they were doing and what was happening in their food world.

By the end of senior year we started getting emails from other schools who wanted to start something similar on their own campus. We built them a small website, walked them through how to lead a team, and suddenly there were four mini-Spoons at colleges… So the past two years we've been growing through this campus model. We have about 100 chapters and about 5,000 contributors that work at different capacities. The theme that connects everybody is that they are all super passionate about food and they want to come together and connect with people outside of their friend groups. It's a big cultural revolution within college students, and young people in general, so that's pretty cool to be able to tap into.

YP: Tell us more about the on-campus events.

MB: Chapters will organize everything from a small potluck to a 300-person food fest where they get tons of local foods from vendors, student organizations will set up tables, and sometimes there are performances—so there's a whole spectrum.

YP: What do you think has made your brand so successful with college students?
MB: I think what has made it successful so far is that we handed it over to them to do the talking and the creating of everything. We don't have that many filters, so they can write about whatever they want. We just give them the guidance, the tools, and the framework so their content can be seen by many people as possible. The appeal is that they can read things from their peers and they can write things to their peers, so it feels very communal in that sense. Also that this hasn't really been done before in the food space. There is a lot of other similar models in colleges, like Her Campus, but that's news and fashion. There's really nothing in food at a time when food is becoming the forefront of everyone's minds.

Ypulse: How are you building this following for Spoon University?
Mackenzie Barth: Word of mouth has been huge, it's been really crucial to starting new chapters on campus. We've done some social media outreach to recruit more campuses but consistently the people that come to us have a friend in a chapter from another school or saw something on Facebook their friend posted. Social media has been best way to reach out demographic so we really take advantage of that network. We have a really engaged Instagram audience, we put a ton on Facebook, and we just launched a partnership with Food Network's Snapchat Discover page where we do a Spoon takeover every Saturday. It's been a great way to reach hundreds and thousands of people on that channel that we wouldn't have reached otherwise.

YP: Do you have a specific social media strategy that you use?
MB: Facebook is constantly changing and so we experiment with our strategies there. With Instagram, we want our posts to have a purpose and a value to all of our followers because there's so much food content on Instagram now and you have to differentiate it somehow. I think that by making things useful or funny or actionable, and having that deeper connection then just a pretty food photo is really important to making our Instagram stand out from the other food ones.

YP: How has college dining changed from when you were in school?
MB: People have a lot more awareness now and they care more about what they are putting in their bodies. It's pretty amazing that people are talking about it and thinking about it way more than when I was in college. Back then in the dining hall you were given what you were given, and you'd eat it and it would be fine. Now people are demanding higher quality, more innovation, and creativeness—dining halls have had to respond to that. And so there has been a lot of really cool ways our chapters have partnered with dining halls to address these needs. At Northwestern, for example, every Friday they make dishes from our Spoon site and blow up posters showing the recipes across all dining halls on campus, as way to show they are tapped into what college kids want to eat and not just giving them what's available. Another chapter is curating the menus for different dining halls on certain weeks—so again just trying to really get a pulse on what people want, and students are definitely responding to it. There's a long way to go, but it seems they are moving in the right direction.

YP: How have Millennials influence college dining?
MB: I think in a huge way. Millennials are pickier and more vocal. They have access to places that they can go to say bad things about dining halls if they want to, so if dining halls want their business, they have to give them what they want. Especially now with so much more access to food delivery, restaurants, and people who are interested in cooking themselves, there's competition where people are going to eat while at college. Dining locations need to be not only not just a place to get food, but get good food that people want—and that includes higher quality, and more creative and heathier options.

YP: What are the biggest challenges for the college dining industry today?
MB: Not having the right feedback loops. I remember when we were in college the only feedback we would give consisted of people writing reviews on a little piece of paper to put on the bulletin board. It was mostly like "This chef rocks!"—it was so archaic. This past summer Sarah and I were in a hackathon at Food + Tech Connect and one of the prompts we actually did was how should food service providers interact more, close the feedback loop with diners, and be able to make big changes on such a massive scale. The hack app idea that we came up with was similar to Yelp where students could go to the dining hall, take photos of their food, upload it, and comment positively or negatively. It would give direct feedback as well as data and analytics to their dining services. It would be a social and natural method that is using technology and could provide interesting analytics on the backend. If there was a place for food service providers to get direct feedback like that I think students would be willing to give feedback as long as dining halls are willing to make changes, and I think it would allow for transparency.

YP: Why is sustainability an important issue within dining locations and what are the best ways college dining can practice it?
MB: In a similar way that people care about what they are eating, there is now an emerging movement about caring a lot more about what happens after the food is consumed or not. There is an organization called The Campus Kitchen Project that a lot of our chapters partner with and they take leftover dining hall food and repurpose it, by giving it to homeless shelters and other methods. We are also doing a partnership with *Food & Wine Magazine*, similar to a grant program where students can apply to do projects around food waste and sustainability on campus. We've had 15 schools apply to do different events. I'll give you a few examples: at Northwestern they put together meals with recipes that used foods that were expired or about to be expired, and handed them out for free on campus. They recorded a video of everyone loving the food and saying that it tastes good, and then telling them the food is actually expired. Their reactions were of shock and it got the message across that the sell by or expiration dates on food packaging don't actually mean that the food will go bad and you shouldn't be throwing away perfectly good food. We also had another campus bring in a famous chef from the area to make recipes from leftover restaurant food that would've been thrown away. There's a lot of interest around this topic and people are really starting to care about the implications of what's going on in the larger food industry. The point of our partnership with *Food & Wine* is to show that even college students can do little things in their communities to make an impact and help reduce the maximum amount of foods wasted every year.

Ypulse: What are your thoughts on the recent stories on cultural sensitivity in dining halls?
MB: We just had two opposing articles go on the site about about cultural appropriation. [Articles here and here.] I have very mixed feelings. I think it's good that dining halls are trying to diversify and offer things that are different. There are articles published on Spoon from two of our writers on different campuses that don't appreciate Asian food being considered trendy. For them Asian food has to do with culture and it should be a way life—not a trend. It's a sensitive topic for people who come from different culture and backgrounds, or have this deeper connection with food. I think that it's fine to acknowledge other cultures and to have some diversification in the dining hall with their offerings, but to throw a sauce on a dish and call it an Asian meal, that's not ok.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity

MACKENZIE BARTH
Mackenzie Barth is the CEO and cofounder of Spoon University, a food network for the next generation. She started Spoon with Sarah Adler as undergrads at Northwestern University

after having worked at Food Network Magazine, The Daily Meal, and Viacom, and recognizing a need for a college-focused food media community. She is a graduate of the Techstars NYC '15 program.

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