

Chicken Wings: Growing or Dying? The Real State of America's Most Controversial Menu Item

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Few menu items spark as much debate as chicken wings. Are they still a growth category, or have rising prices, supply chain swings, and shifting consumer habits pushed them into decline? To hear many operators tell it, wings have become unpredictable, overpriced, and difficult to manage. And yet—nationwide consumption keeps rising, wing-focused chains continue expanding, and consumer demand remains remarkably resilient.

So, which is it? Are chicken wings growing or dying?

The truth: **wings aren't disappearing—they're evolving.** And the restaurants that evolve with them are experiencing some of their strongest margins and most loyal repeat traffic to date.

Wing Demand Continues to Rise

By every macro measure, wings remain a powerhouse category.

Americans now consume **well over a billion wings during Super Bowl weekend alone**, and global consumption continues to climb year-over-year. Chicken-centric fast casual concepts—most notably Wingstop—are expanding aggressively, proving that wings have moved from a bar snack to a full-fledged restaurant category with serious staying power.

In short: A dying category doesn't add thousands of new locations. Wings are alive and well.

The Cost Curve Has Changed—Forever

If wings feel riskier today, it's because the economics have shifted:

- Wing prices now behave like a **volatile commodity**, not a predictable protein.
- Wholesale costs have swung from record highs to multi-year lows and back again.
- Operators who priced wings as a "loss leader" in 2015 paid for it in 2021–2022.

The modern wing program requires **real menu engineering**, not guesswork:

- Portion accuracy

- SKU rationalization
- Flavor strategy
- Price optimization
- Data-driven bundling

The days of treating wings as a casual add-on are over. They now demand the same operational rigor as steaks, seafood, or specialty alcohol.

Where Wings Are Growing

1. Fast Casual & Delivery-Driven Concepts

Wings have become one of the most successful delivery categories in America. They travel well, reheat well, and pair perfectly with sports, gatherings, and events. This alone continues to fuel demand.

2. Global Flavors and Culinary Innovation

Operators are moving far beyond “mild–medium–hot.” Today’s wing menus lean into:

- Gochujang
- Peri-peri
- Harissa
- Nashville hot
- Dry rubs
- Citrus, herb, and spice blends
- Flavor “flights”

Consumers want variety, novelty, and exploration—and wings are the perfect canvas.

3. Event-Driven Off-Premise Sales

Wings dominate key calendar moments: playoffs, UFC cards, New Year’s, fight nights, March Madness, and more. Operators that build event-based bundles and promotions see massive spikes in volume.

4. Menu Versatility & Cross-Utilization

Bone-in wings, boneless wings, thighs, and tenders create a flexible “chicken ecosystem” that allows operators to move volume when commodity costs swing. This flexibility makes wings even more valuable—not less.

Where Wings Are Struggling

1. Operators Who Haven't Adapted

Those who still treat wings like cheap bar food often find:

- Margins evaporate
- Inconsistency creates guest complaints
- Competitive pressure intensifies
- Flavor innovation stalls

Today's guest expects more—and will leave for a specialized wing competitor if they don't get it.

2. Lack of Packaging and Execution

Wings succeed in delivery, but only with:

- Ventilated, crispness-preserving packaging
- Proper saucing technique
- Accurate portioning
- Swift ticket times

Many operators underestimate these factors—and their sales suffer for it.

3. Growing Competition

Dedicated wing chains now operate with incredible efficiency. They have:

- Signature sauces
- Digital ordering dominance
- Dialed-in cook systems
- National recognition

Independent restaurants must compete strategically, not reactively.

Where the Category Is Heading

1. Premiumization

Higher-quality sourcing, cleaner labels, smoked wings, and chef-driven preparations are on the rise.

2. Smaller Portions, Higher Check Averages

Four- and six-count flights are outperforming 10- and 12-count traditional servings, reducing food cost while boosting experiential value.

3. Plant-Based Alternatives

Still niche, but growing—especially among Gen Z and flexitarian diners. Many operators now offer a plant-based “wing” made from mushrooms, cauliflower, or plant proteins.

4. Globally Inspired Wing Bars

Concepts built entirely around sauce bars, rub stations, or chef-curated flavor journeys are beginning to appear across the U.S.

What Restaurants Should Do Now

For operators, the question isn't “Are wings dying?”

The real question is: **Are you treating wings like a modern profit center, or like yesterday's appetizer?**

As a consultant, here's what I advise:

1. Build a Flexible Chicken Strategy

Balance bone-in, boneless, and tenders so you can shift volume as costs fluctuate.

2. Engineer the Wing Menu, Don't Just List It

Develop:

- Signature sauces
- Seasonal LTOs
- Bundles for delivery
- Shareable flights
- Strategic portion sizes

3. Invest in Packaging

Delivery wings should arrive crisp, sauced, and steaming—not soggy.

4. Price with a Plan

Set pricing models that protect your margins whether wings are \$1.80/lb or \$3.20/lb.

5. Lean Into Events

Game-day bundles, party packs, happy hours, and beer pairings are high-margin differentiators.

6. Tell Your Story

Highlight sourcing, signature preparation methods, or unique flavors—wings are emotional food, and customers love a backstory.

Final Verdict: Wings Are Growing—and Getting Smarter

Wings aren't dying. But the old way of doing wings is.

The category is bigger, more competitive, more innovative, and more margin-sensitive than ever before. Restaurants that adapt will see wings become one of the most profitable, craveable, and brand-defining menu items they offer.

Restaurants that don't evolve will declare the category "dead," even as their competitors experience record demand.