Mmmm. Tasty: What made bacon and cupcakes hot

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Bacon. It's everywhere. Wendy's features it in the "Baconator" and Paula Deen crumbles it into quiche. Ditto for deluxe cupcakes top-heavy with frosting. They're showing up beyond bakeries, in coffee bars and supermarkets.

Bacon and cupcakes — like sliders, bubble tea, popsicles, food trucks and chipotle — have caught on from coast to coast.

But how?

Food fads don't always spread the same way as other types of pop culture, such as fashion and music. Chefs don't walk the runway at food shows holding up this spring's hot pad thai. There are no top-ten charts for food that show red velvet cake is No.1 with a bullet.

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But favored foods items can go viral in the time it takes to upload a picture of salted caramel ice cream. The arbiters of trendy tastes include big-name chefs, bloggers, urban hipsters, eater tweeters and journalists. Usually, they work in some hard-to-quantify combination.

"It's kind of like trying to grab a jellyfish, in terms of trying to understand it," says Ted Allen, host of Food Network's "Chopped."

Food fads are older than the fondue pot in the back of your parents' pantry. But the lines of dissemination were easier to track before the advent of the Food Network and the Web. The high-brow authority then was Gourmet magazine. Home cooks took cues from cookbooks and friends. There were just a few famous culinary authorities, like Craig Claiborne or Paul Prudhomme, who helped popularize Louisiana cuisine.

Top-down authorities live on in the food world, even if they now share the stage with the cyber-masses. Serious eaters still are influenced by magazines like Food & Wine and Bon Appetit. But the rise of food TV has dramatically multiplied the number of celebrity cooks who can popularize a food trend. Think of what Rachael Ray did for extra-virgin olive oil, or what Bobby Flay did for grilling.

Television is widely believed to have kick started the long-running cupcake craze. Celebrity chefs had nothing to do with it, however. Credit goes to Carrie Bradshaw and her pals on "Sex and the City," who treated themselves to the luxurious cupcakes at
Manhattan's Magnolia Bakery. Mainstream and social media took it from there.

The obvious difference now is how food blogs and food-centric websites offer more possible trends at a faster rate, whether it's Epicurious listing "16 Restaurants that count" or a contributor posting a picture of tuna tartare on Foodspotting.

"Because of social networking, everybody is now a food expert," says Phil Lempert, a food marketing expert known as The Supermarket Guru. "When you look at Yelp, when you look at Foodspotting, when you look at all the social networking tools that are out there, everybody is telling everybody about every food trend that exists. The rules have changed dramatically and you can get something going very quickly."

Consider how social media helped bring food trucks into the fast lane.

Trucks serving burgers or gyros are nothing new, but the mania for hip, high-end mobile foods like Belgian waffles is more recent. The Kogi Korean taco truck in Los Angeles became the breakout star of the movement a couple of years ago. The fact that the food was creative and tasty made it popular, but Kogi's use of Twitter to keep fans posted on the trucks' whereabouts added to the buzz.

"If there were no Twitter, would the food truck trend be as large?" asks Food & Wine editor-in-chief Dana Cowin. "I think the answer to that actually has to be 'No.' Because before there was Twitter, there were food trucks: They were the local taco trucks … Once you hooked up Twitter and chefs and higher end ingredients at a great value, you've got a perfect match."

Old-school media played a role too. Newsweek in 2009 dubbed Kogi "America's first viral restaurant" and the "food media elite," as Allen calls them, wrote about it too. The result is that food trucks have become as ubiquitous as package delivery vans in downtowns from Miami to Milwaukee.

The same media dynamic helped spread the word on "incubator cities" — trend-setting places with a nucleus of creative chefs and adventurous young eaters, like Seattle, Portland, Austin and Oakland.

"You know how somewhat spontaneously music scenes spring up in Athens, Ga. or Seattle, Wash.?" asks Jane Goldman, editor-in-chief of CHOW.com. "It's the same with a food scene in a place where rent is cheap and people who want to be creative and have the freedom — because they don't have to worry about making the rent — to experiment. And then a community grows."

If there's one food trend that illustrates how top-down and grassroots phenomena combine it might be bacon.
It likely started with chefs tossing bacon into dishes earlier this century to add a dash of flavor. That encouraged others to think of bacon as more than a just a complement to eggs. The movement gained sizzle through media exposure and word of mouth. It appears it was not one big thing that led to the bacon Renaissance, but a bunch of smaller things.

For instance, in southern California about six years ago, Rocco Loosbrock paired peppered bacon with Syrah wine at a tasting. His "swine and wine" was such a big word-of-mouth hit it inspired him to go whole hog into bacon. Today, he sells bacon jerky, bacon chocolate, bacon coffee and more on his Bacon Freak website, part of a suite of bacon sites.

Today, talk of bacon in sophisticated circles can bring on the same eye-rolls teens react with when middle-age people say "Dude." But while food hipsters may have moved beyond bacon, America has not. Chain restaurants serve everything from bacon-wrapped sea scallops to bacon club chalupas.

And perhaps it was simply inevitable, but there also are recipes online for bacon cupcakes.

"Bacon is one of the greatest things that was ever invented," says Allen. "I think what has peaked is us discussing that fact."