



A DOZEN WAYS: GREAT SIDE SHOWS

OPERATORS BENEFIT BY UPPING THE FLAVOR AND PRESENTATION ANTE ON SIDE DISHES, DRIVING TOP-LINE SALES AND SATISFYING THE DINER'S PURSUIT OF HEIGHTENED FLAVOR EXPERIENCES.

*Whether served
à la carte, family
style or as part of
an entrée plate,
side dishes deserve
as much flavor
focus as the rest
of the menu*

Operators in every dining segment do daily battle with shrinking margins and the challenge of driving top-line sales. With operating costs on the rise, some restaurateurs too quickly resort to menu price increases, trying to save their way to success.

In reality, one of the best ways to move the sales needle has absolutely nothing to do with raising prices and everything to do with raising the flavor quotient. A great way to do this is by leveraging extraordinary side dishes and plate accompaniments to add meaningful value to a lower-cost protein, making the ordinary extraordinary. With this approach, operators can run better food costs, increase their margins and drive sales.

The other cost-conscious opportunity “on the side” is to offer an à la carte selection of truly signature side dishes that are not only desirable and memorable but

- ▶... Ways to make side dishes the main event on menus
- ▶... How mix-and-match, à la carte and family-style menus offer flexibility and make fiscal sense
- ▶... Hashes, mashers, grains, au gratins and more — 12 great ideas for adding sizzle to sides

are presented in a manner that truly makes heads turn. Taking the “mix and match” approach allows diners to control how much they choose to spend. Operators can keep menu prices affordable, while giving the guest options to control their own dining destiny.

The benefit is obvious: An operator who can sell 25 orders of a signature side dish at \$5.95 every night will not only increase sales by over \$50,000 per year but lower food costs, thus improving profit margins.

Emphasizing side dishes also creates a tremendous opportunity for operators to capitalize on a growing trend of family-style sharing, a menu format that has seen great success in steakhouses, where sautéed mushrooms, asparagus or potatoes Lyonnaise are served in portions large enough to be shared by the table.

The other fringe benefits that innovative side dishes offer are flexibility and changeability. Operators and chefs can showcase the latest and greatest ingredients as they rotate their menus with changing seasons, replacing macaroni and cheese for spring peas when the time is right.

Offering a selection of outstanding side dishes that deliver great flavor and reflect menu innovation represents a huge opportunity to drive top-line sales. Whether à la carte or as standard offerings, side dishes deserve renewed focus. Here are a dozen ways to get your own sides onto center stage.

RE-HASHING OLD FAVORITES

Corned beef and red-flannel hash will never be the same, but it may be better. Leveraging recognizable and familiar foods with a contemporary twist is a big idea. Hash has the benefit of being a beloved comfort food, is operationally friendly and can be adapted to take on a variety of flavors, from smoked brisket to root vegetables. Hash functions in multiple day parts, can be made in advance and can add value to under-utilized raw materials, minimizing waste. It easily lends itself to local ingredients, seasonality and is a great way to use kitchen trim and byproducts. Examples:

- Blackened redfish with Jack Daniels sweet potato hash
- Exotic mushroom hash with sweet Maui onions
- Grilled sirloin tri-tip with Black Angus prime rib hash
- Rockfish hash with boniato potatoes



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2 SIDES WITH SIZZLE
Grilling imparts a flavor second to none, and there are plenty of side-dish strategies to drive top-line sales and leverage this on-trend cooking technique. Topping grilled seasonal vegetables with flavored oil or compound butter not only adds value to an existing menu item but works well as a stand-alone. Examples:

- Santa Fe grilled corn basted with chipotle barbecue butter
- Kabob of seasonal vegetables, grilled and basted with white balsamic vinaigrette
- Fire-roasted baby eggplant with pan-seared tomato concassé
- Grilled vegetable rajas with herbed chimichurri glaze

3 RIGHT ON RICE
Rice is the ideal side dish, easily married to any cuisine while also inexpensive and versatile. The venerable grain plays well in diverse menu applications, whether filling a Mexican burrito, soaking up regional American flavors or supporting ethnically inspired new-wave Asian or Mediterranean fare. Traditional rice pilaf is getting a makeover as operators look beyond standard long-grain rice to use basmati, jasmine, Arborio and black sticky rice and add exotic vegetables, seasonings, fried vermicelli, nuts, toasted coconut, golden raisins, other grains and flavored teas. Examples:

- Jambalaya with chicken, sausage and crayfish
- Nasi Goreng with basmati jasmine rice and coconut milk
- Spring risotto with peas, greens, prosciutto and Parmesan
- Crisp jasmine rice cakes

4 SAVORY SOUFLÉS
Guests love the concept of ordering a dessert soufflé for its perceived decadence and indulgence. This same appeal can easily be adapted to drive side-dish sales. While the traditional preparation can be intimidating, with some ingenuity and flavorful ingredients, savory soufflés can be made in advance and held warm or even cold prior to service. Examples:

- Spinach and three-cheese soufflé
- Sweet corn, arugula and sharp smoked Gouda cheese soufflé
- Fallen goat-cheese soufflé
- Sweet potato-praline soufflé

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THE POWER OF PACKAGING

With sides, sometimes it's all in the packaging. Vegetables are taken to new heights when wrapped in phyllo dough, puff pastry, popovers, savory tarts, tortillas and wonton skins. Examples:

- Wild mushroom strudel with spring vegetables
- Popover stuffed with a ragout of winter vegetables
- Phyllo nest filled with braised and sherried exotic mushrooms
- Caramelized Vidalia onion tart with Maytag blue cheese, sage and walnuts

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FOR A FRESH APPROACH, CONSIDER WRAPPING TRADITIONAL OR EXOTIC SIDE-DISH INGREDIENTS IN CLEVER PACKAGING LIKE STRUDELS OR POPOVERS.

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THE STUFFING STRATEGY

Stuffing vegetables creates a memorable side dish and adds value to the plate while utilizing many existing ingredients within the inventory. Stuffed veggies also elevate the perceived value of a main course. Leveraging the seasonality and local availability of vegetables moves side dishes into the realm of best supporting roles rather than afterthoughts on the menu. Examples:

- Kabocha squash stuffed with sweet and spicy ratatouille
- Oven-roasted Maui onions stuffed with picadillo of lamb and apricots
- Baked stuffed eggplant with five cheeses, toasted pine nuts and pancetta
- Stuffed poblano chile rellenos with smoked corn, roasted tomatoes and smoked Gouda cheese

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AWESOME AU GRATIN

Traditional au gratins are dishes topped with cheese or bread crumbs mixed with bits of butter, then heated in a hot oven or under a broiler until brown and crispy. The big opportunity here is to utilize seasonal and more flavorful ingredients and get creative with the toppings. Examples:

- Macaroni and Gorgonzola cheese with bacon crumb au gratin crust
- Maple bourbon yams with cinnamon-almond streusel
- Creamy au gratin potatoes with horseradish-crumbs crust
- Cauliflower au gratin with yogurt, feta, cumin and pita-crisp crumbs

SWEET ON SWEET POTATOES

Sweet and rich spuds are just too good to be relegated solely to holiday tables. Clever chefs are finding innovative ways to take this familiar comfort food and create some interesting spins. Examples:

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- Sweet potato and bacon fritters
- Shredded sweet potato pancakes with bourbon-maple butter drizzle
- Mashed sweet potato tart with lemon zest and brandy
- Roasted sweet potato salad with arugula, goat cheese and candied walnuts



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CUSTOMIZED ADD-INS BRING NEW INTEREST TO SIDE-DISH STANDARDS LIKE MASHED POTATOES.

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PACK ON THE POTATOES

Try to imagine a menu that doesn't include the beloved potato. After all, it's the perfect vehicle for virtually all flavors, yet it always manages to keep its own identity. Traditional preparations comfort customers, while an array of more innovative approaches fortify the side-dish category. Mashed potatoes have moved beyond garlic-flavored and are appearing with every ingredient imaginable, including pesto, wasabi, truffle oil and goat cheese. Offering a "naked" mash with a list of flavorful add-ins is another way to raise this side-dish spud from its humble roots. Examples:

- Oven-baked three-potato "lasagna" with Gorgonzola and caramelized red onions
- Fontina-stuffed and truffle-scented potato puffs
- Hickory-smoked Idaho potato stuffed with chive butter, aged cheddar and frizzled country ham
- Crisp potato galette with Gruyère cheese and toasted pine nuts

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GREAT GRAINS

Whole grains once had an image problem, misunderstood as difficult to cook and too good for you to taste good. Fortunately, whole grains have undergone an image makeover; their health benefits have become too good to ignore, their nutty, complex flavors stand on their own, and the more we know about their composition, the easier they've become to cook. Whole grains, including barley, quinoa, amaranth, spelt and many others, are the foundation of many ethnic cuisines. Grains are generally inexpensive and can easily be flavored and paired with more expensive or exotic ingredients to create a truly memorable side dish. Examples:

- White bean cassoulet with a millet crust
- Wheat berries with fragrant spices, currants and toasted almonds
- Timbale of multiple grains with wild mushrooms and asparagus
- Grilled polenta cakes spiked with blue cheese and fresh herbs



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WHOLE GRAINS HAVE UNDERGONE AN IMAGE MAKEOVER, PACKING BOTH FLAVOR AND NUTRITION ONTO MENUS.



SWEET-ONION COLE SLAW IS A COOL PARTNER TO THIS SMOKE-AND-FIRE PORK TENDERLOIN.

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COOL COLE SLAW

Once relegated to backyard barbecues and fish-fry joints, cole slaw is gaining menu stature. Rightly so: It's familiar yet new, easy to prepare and adaptable, adjusting to any number of inexpensive ingredients and diverse cuisines. Examples:

- Warm tri-color pepper slaw with jicama and chile-lime mayo
- Shaved fennel and celery slaw with Asiago and herbed olive oil
- Bok choy and Napa cabbage slaw with sesame oil and rice wine vinegar
- Moroccan carrot slaw with raisins, ginger and orange dressing

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APPEALING PRESENTATION

Sometimes, menu appeal isn't about what you serve but how you serve it. Packaging offers opportunities to play with presentation and create the "wow" factor. Many successful operators understand this concept and utilize specialty serviceware to devise memorable presentations. Guests see these snazzy side shows as having a higher perceived value and are willing to trade up for a better dining experience. Examples:

- Jeweled couscous served in a clay pot
- Caramelized Brussels sprouts served in a warm cast-iron skillet
- Bistro fries piled high in a paper cone
- Tower of hand-breaded crispy onion rings stacked on a spike

Whether offered à la carte, family style, as add-ons or part of the evening's specials, sides are another menu section with ample ways to showcase your kitchen's creativity. Guests will welcome the chance

to sample and share new flavors while controlling their own destiny relative to dollars spent.

Additionally, unique accompaniments afford operators the opportunity to differentiate themselves from the competition. And every à la carte side sold is added revenue that goes directly to the top line. ☺

take-away tips

- ▶ **MAKE A HASH OF IT:** Upscaled hashes use up kitchen excess and trim, and are versatile enough to go with any main course
- ▶ **THE WOW FACTOR:** Clay pots, mini skillets, paper cones and skewers add visual interest to the side of the plate

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