

SMALL PLATES, A DOZEN WAYS

How to mine your own menu and inventory for ways to capitalize on the small-plates trend

Sharing food has always been a cornerstone of great hospitality. The breaking and sharing of bread leads to the pouring of wine, the passing of comfort foods and the exchange of warm conversation. It is a tradition woven deeply into the fabric of civilized cultures, and the world abounds with examples of small dishes served in restaurant settings. Tapas bars perch on almost every street corner in Barcelona and Madrid, offering up salty, savory treats to pair with wine. Throughout Greece, ‘ouzorias’ serve up shared mezes along with the iced ouzo.

In Venice, early evening finds the trattorias jam-packed with guests drinking local wine and sharing small plates of food called *cicchetti*. And in Hong Kong, diners select hot foods directly from dim sum carts rolled through the dining room.

In all cases, the best way to enjoy these small plates

is with a group of friends or family members, all sharing, mixing, matching and comparing tastes.

And in our modern-day American restaurant culture, the idea of serving smaller portions appeals to almost every generation, from seniors who prefer smaller portions at lower price points to well-traveled baby boomers who often want a more adventuresome dining experience with a touch of this and a taste of that. These shrunken dishes are also the perfect size to pique children’s interest and make them part of the passing of plates.

A good way to approach a small-plates menu program is to imagine a table of four or six as a scaled-down cocktail party, where platters of bite-sized morsels are rotated around, cheese boards are loaded up, vegetables, meats, toasted bread and other bits are dipped, and the wine flows.

QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- Ideas for bringing the cocktail-party aesthetic to restaurant dining rooms
- How the simplest small-plate ideas can come from other parts of your menu or ingredients already in the kitchen
- Soup samplers, cheese plates, skewers, sausages and dips — 12 easy techniques for making shareable plates



LEE KUM KEE

DIM SUM, OR HEART'S DELIGHT, IS AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME FOR ALL CUISINES AND IN ALL RESTAURANT SETTINGS.

SMALL PLATE, BIG POTENTIAL

The small-plate trend spells big opportunities for restaurateurs. The best way to ride the wave is to reconfigure existing menu items and raw materials into smaller plates, allowing guests the opportunity to experience a multitude of flavors in a smaller portion size and keep coming back for more.

Teaching old food new tricks maintains optimum freshness and minimizes the number of new raw materials you need to source and develop into entirely new menu items. The big idea is for operators to challenge the existing menu and inventory to develop new menu options designed to be shared and offered at a lower price point.

The appetizer category is truly the entry point for flavor adventure and a perfect starting place for

shareable small plates. From the diner's perspective, the appetizer list presents a low-risk opportunity to experiment with new flavors. Appetizers are also one of the most profitable segments on the menu and can be influenced by regional and ethnic foods from around the country and the world.

When a sharing strategy and menu are well thought out, guests are enticed into choosing multiple plates that deliver a higher food and beverage check average, which is the overall goal.

Despite their potential for far-flung flavor references and exotic presentations, the best ideas for small plates can be pulled together with ingredients you already have or by resizing existing menu favorites. Following are 12 ideas to help you capitalize on the small-plate boom.

CURED MEATS AND SAUSAGES

Charcuterie and heavily seasoned sausages come with built-in flavor, along with their built-in ethnic credibility, ease of use and endless versatility. From Black Forest ham to Polish kielbasa and Spanish chorizo, cured meats and sausages are enjoyed throughout the world, and can be served hot or cold. Examples:

- Prosciutto wrapped around fresh figs or melon
- Serrano ham encasing crisp bread sticks or asparagus
- Duck and herb sausage with orange dipping sauce
- Grilled chorizo sausage in a red-wine reduction



TRY A SOUP FLIGHT AS A FUN AND FLAVORFUL NEW WAY TO REPACKAGE THIS TRADITIONAL MEAL STARTER.

CHEESE ALWAYS PLEASES

Cheese has always been a staple at cocktail parties and other gatherings, so there's great opportunity to apply that allure to eat-out occasions. Many upscale restaurants have brought the cheese course back into the dining room, and most casually themed operators have menus that already require multiple cheeses. Presenting a variety of soft and hard cheeses as a small plate creates another opportunity to feature a flavor favorite and design a dish meant for sharing. What makes the cheese plate even more memorable is distinctive accompaniments such as sugared wine-grape clusters, fresh or dried fruit, chutney, jams, nuts, olives and a selection of interesting crackers, crostini, bread sticks or artisanal bread. Examples:

- Brie crusted with toasted pine nuts and baked
- Goat cheese spread spiked with Cabernet Sauvignon
- Feta marinated in herbs and fruity olive oil
- Parmesan crisps on a bed of greens

A SAMPLING OF SOUPS

Traditionally, soups have not been presented as a shared menu item. How about a soup sampler or flight? Ronette Snyder, marketing manager of Woodinville, Wash.-based soup maker StockPot, has seen restaurants serve two smaller portions of soup accompanied by an appetizer item, creating a ready-made small-plate offering. She suggests pairing related soups, like Broadway Basil and Tomato Bisque with Golden Tomato and Fennel Soup, to show the range of flavors that can come from an otherwise humble cup of soup. And adding soup to a mix of passable plates means that diners round out their dining experiences, turning a cup of soup and some appetizers into full meals. Examples:

- Gazpacho prepared with vine-ripened tomatoes and served in a martini glass
- Mushroom "cappuccino" topped with porcini foam and served in a small coffee mug
- A flight of complementary cream- and broth-based soups

SHAREABLE SHRIMP

Whether you call them prawns, *gambas* or *camarones*, shrimp continues to be one of the most popular items on the menu. By deconstructing traditional menu offerings — like turning shrimp scampi into herb-and-garlic-marinated shrimp sautéed in butter — operators can create innovative, shareable dishes that leverage existing inventory and afford additional opportunities to drive top-line sales. Examples:

- Sizzling skillet of *gambas* with olive oil and roasted-garlic butter
- Caribbean coconut-fried shrimp with Captain Morgan dipping sauce
- Grilled *camarone* skewers with red chile citrus glaze
- Shrimp toast flavored with ginger, miso and mirin

SHELLFISH OPPORTUNITIES

Many ethnic cuisines have driven up the demand for fresh clams and mussels, and their natural packaging and single-serving sizes lend themselves to sharing. Many operators offer them at a single-serving price, so tables can order as many as they want. Clams and mussels are affordable, generally available throughout the year and often eaten as an easily passed hand-held food. Examples:

- Skillet of mussels served with red curry sauce
- Stuffed mussels with Serrano ham and herbed crust
- Baked stuffed clams with bacon-Parmesan crust
- Poached oyster forcemeat served on the halfshell

MUSHROOMS' MOMENT

Operators usually have some sort of mushroom in their inventory, but most are used as an ingredient in another dish, as in a risotto or atop a cheeseburger. But these meaty, protein-heavy beauties have the power to stand alone as a small dish, presented in slices, halves or whole. They take on flavors wonderfully and can be cooked ahead, then re-warmed or served chilled or at room temperature. Examples:

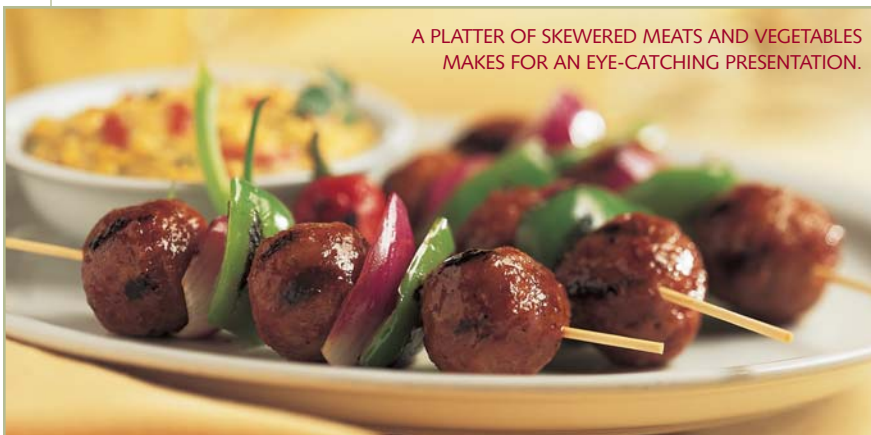
- Portobellini or jumbo mushrooms stuffed with Italian sausage, grilled vegetables, toasted pine nuts and Parmesan cheese
- Sautéed garlic mushrooms served over grilled polenta cakes
- Skillet of mushrooms with garlic and white wine
- Skewered marinated mushrooms with a minted yogurt sauce

QUESADILLAS

Extremely popular and recognizable, quesadillas offer numerous opportunities to take existing braised meats, trim or leftover ingredients, roasted or grilled vegetables and fresh herbs, and incorporate them into a cross-cultural offering. Using gourmet, artisanal or farmstead cheeses and adding dips or toppings to the presentation transforms them from the ordinary to the extraordinary. Examples:

- Osso buco quesadilla with roasted vegetables and fontina cheese
- Duck confit quesadilla with grilled pears and goat cheese
- *Machaca* of braised beef with green chiles, fire-roasted vegetables and chipotle cream
- Radicchio, manchego and toasted-pine-nut quesadilla

A PLATTER OF SKEWERED MEATS AND VEGETABLES MAKES FOR AN EYE-CATCHING PRESENTATION.



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SKEWERED SNACKS

Shish kebabs of grilled meats and vegetables have long been a staple in Greek restaurants, steakhouses and casual-theme venues, and smaller versions are perfect for shared plates. Operators often use kebabs to lower their food cost on prime cuts of meat, providing guests the opportunity to purchase a steak item at a more affordable price point. And think beyond the typical bamboo sticks to create more impact. Examples:

- Grilled Mediterranean lamb on rosemary skewers
- Harpoons of Cajun-grilled chicken and andouille sausage
- Lemon grass shrimp skewers
- Indonesian beef satays skewered on chopsticks served with two dipping sauces

A NEW SIDE OF VEGETABLES

In many Mediterranean small-plate presentations, dozens of vegetables are served throughout the evening, each cooked and prepared in a unique way. Shift vegetables away from their traditional role as a side dish and, viola, they are even more flavorful and tantalizing. Examples:

- Char-grilled artichokes with basil pesto
- Sweet miso-glazed Japanese eggplant
- Tempura-fried vegetables with Asian dipping sauces
- Southern-fried green tomatoes with crumbled feta and lemon dressing

THE FABULOUS FRENCH FRY

Already one of the most popular restaurant foods because of their size, french fries are a great finger food, portable, fun to eat and designed for dipping. Usually served on the side, why not make fries an official sharing opportunity? Examples:

- Try shoestrings, shaped cuts or sweet-potato sticks
- Classic *gaufrettes* (lattice wafers), fried crisp and seasoned with a combination of salt and fresh herbs
- *Pommes frites* served with smoked ketchup, bleu cheese and honey Dijon
- Add a variety of drizzled sauces, melted cheese and dips to a seasoned-fries sampler plate for a mix-and-match extravaganza

SPREADS AND DIPS

Another cocktail-party favorite, spreads and dips are designed for sharing, incorporate a wide range of ethnic influences and can be made with shelf-stable ingredients and seasonings — like beans, olive oil and garlic — already on hand. Pair with artisanal breads, ethnic flatbreads, multi-colored corn chips or black and white sesame-crusted wontons. Examples:

- Hummus with garlic and roasted red peppers, served with pita chips
- Tapenade of Mediterranean olives and sundried tomatoes with crusty bread
- Maplewood-smoked trout spread on crostini with horseradish drizzle

SMALL-PLATE SALADS

Many salads are oversized and certainly large enough to share, but try whittling piles of greens into smaller mounds so diners try several. Small-plate salads make sense because they are typically fast out of the kitchen, have lower food and preparation costs and leverage the seasonality of the raw materials. Examples:

- Caesar fondue: top romaine with shaved Parmesan and serve with a Caesar dressing dip
- Carpaccio of roasted red and yellow beets with crumbled goat cheese and balsamic drizzle
- Lettuce wraps with Asian-inspired fillings and nutty dipping sauces
- Endive leaves tipped with chèvre and served with a lemony dip

RESIZED FLAVORS

When you think small, the possibilities are endless. Look to your entrée list and consider how your big dishes can be repackaged as shareables, like mixed-grill samplers, diminutive Steak Diane and little chops, done “lollipop” style.

On the other end of the size spectrum, consider how upscale bar snacks can round out a small-plate menu for the serious snackers out there. Some bars offer curried or “truffled” popcorn, mixed olives or

sautéed pecans with grapes and olives. Add these to a small-plates menu at an appealing price point, and you’re emphasizing the whole “cocktail-party” feel of your small-plate program while easily adding to your bottom line. ☺

TAKE-AWAY TIPS

- **TWELVE EASY PIECES:** Look at a dozen of your favorite on-hand ingredients and re-tool them into small plates for sharing
- **MICRO-MANAGE:** Re-envision your entrées as scaled-down shareable plates for easy and profitable menu additions

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