

Redefining Menu Parts



It used to be that restaurant menus, and meals, were pretty standard. You had your appetizers and sides, your entrées, desserts and beverages. Meals were served at three times of day, and diners could expect the menu at any particular restaurant to feature most of the same dishes, or the same types of dishes, week in and week out, regardless of the season.

No more. This comfortable, if constraining, routine has been turned upside down as diners and restaurants have redefined meals, meal parts, meal times and menu predictability. Let's look at some of the ways this new menu creativity is playing out in various restaurant niches and segments around the country.

Snacks, Samplers and Small Plates

Consumers have abandoned the “three square meals a day” paradigm. Consider the following points, all taken from a recent survey:

- 55% of consumers report that they eat a snack at least once a day
- More than a quarter of consumers (26%) indicate that they eat more than one snack daily
- More than two out of five consumers (42%) said they typically either skip one meal a day or replace one meal a day with a snack
- 52% of women and 38% of men said they like seeing smaller portions at lower price points on dinner menus
- 47% of women and 30% of men said they sometimes put together a dinner from the appetizer menu.

In addition, consumers are increasingly eating at “off” times—having breakfast for dinner, “linner” (lunch + dinner) in the mid-afternoon or hitting restaurants and bars for the happy-hour or late-night daypart.

In response to these lifestyle changes, restaurateurs are reassembling menus to include small plates, large plates, samplers, platters and assemble-your-own-combos that don’t necessarily involve a traditional entrée.

“Small plates” menus have proliferated over the past year, moving from white-tablecloth restaurants to casual-dining chains and independents. In steakhouses, these promotional menus, often limited to certain hours, give diners a chance to enjoy upscale sliders, shrimp, oysters, calamari, sushi, fish tacos, chicken wings and other succulent fare at prices far below those of the dining-room menu. Bar-menu items may be paired with specific wines, beers or cocktails, which may also be offered at a special price.

Meanwhile, operators in the varied-menu casual-dining segment are taking their inspiration from Spanish tapas and eastern Mediterranean mezze, offering small-plate menus or assembling appetizer samplers of often ethnically inspired small-portion treats. One varied-menu chain added 10 tapas-style dishes intended for sharing, such as crab fritters, a hummus sampler, and

sliders of beef, barbecue pork and barbecue chicken; it also added an Asian sampler appetizer with glazed pork pot stickers, spicy soy chicken tenders and ginger-coconut shrimp with sesame slaw. For their part, family-dining operators are catering to consumers’ desire to assemble hearty or skinny meals from small parts by offering a plethora of side dishes—menus in this segment list as many as 14 or 15 sides.

More snacks and samplers are being seen in limited-service settings, too. One LSR offered a mixed-proteins sampler of fish, shrimp, chicken, french fries and hushpuppies. A hybrid FSR-LSR concept inaugurated a late-night small-plates menu of \$3 snack items including mozzarella sticks, chili con queso dip, roasted-garlic mushrooms, mini corn dogs, onion rings, and chips with salsa. Personal pizzas and mini sandwiches are other frequently seen manifestations of the trend toward smaller portions.

And while meal combos have been around forever, operators are giving their diners more flexibility by decoupling the idea from anything that might resemble a “main dish.” A bakery-café, for instance, offered a “Savoury Sampler” combo deal that allowed customers to choose three items from a list of selected soups, petite salads and half-portion quiches and flatbreads for a set price.

Not to be left out of the trend are sweet endings. The dessert category is growing—and small-portion and shareable treats may have something to do with that. An Italian casual-dining concept inaugurated “Piccoli Dolci,” shot glass-sized portions of desserts such as chocolate mousse, dark chocolate cake and amaretto tiramisu, and a QSR burger chain added a petite funnel cake to its line of diminutive churros. Shareable, upsized dessert platters and samplers are also proliferating. A steakhouse showcases a trio of its most popular desserts: carrot cake, cheesecake and a brownie sundae, while an LSR wings chain offers a sampler featuring three bite-sized chocolate brownies and three mini Bananas Foster.

One bar-and-grill concept launched a menu of starters available in two portion sizes—full and small—to please all appetites.

Always Something New

Complementing the trends toward small plates and big platters is the increased role of limited-time offers (LTOs) in restaurants. Menu tracking data shows that the number of new and limited-time items is up significantly in both chains and independents—new appetizer introductions, for instance, were up 25% in 2010 over 2009. It makes sense; daily, weekly or monthly specials are a great way for restaurants to build excitement, traffic and trial. They can be used to promote existing menu offerings or to introduce new foods, sometimes with local or seasonal ingredients.

For the fall and winter holiday season, for example, we're once again seeing more pumpkin items at all price points. One Italian restaurant debuted pumpkin and butternut squash ravioli topped with sage-and-brown-butter sauce, while another introduced a pumpkin and cilantro soup and a pumpkin and arugula risotto. Meanwhile, a family-dining chain rolled out pumpkin praline pancakes. Other restaurants are featuring LTO harvest salads with apples, cranberries and pecans or walnuts. Fall and winter desserts increasingly feature local-harvest fruits such as apples and pears.

Retro, Rethought

Classic American dishes will always have a place on U.S. menus, but classic dishes prepared with modern twists make traditional meals look and taste larger than life. Consider, for instance, the updated cafeteria concept in Minneapolis that menus housemade potato chips with bacon, blue cheese and scallions; a grilled cheese sandwich made with Cheddar, Brie and fresh basil; and a mac & cheese

One trend that went mainstream for the first time this fall was the Oktoberfest menu, pairing limited-time food specials with the season's limited-time beers.

featuring four cheeses, applewood-smoked bacon and tomato. Then there is the meatloaf takeout shop in Chicago that offers such concoctions as its "wing and a prayer loaf," combining ground chicken, wing sauce, celery and crumbled blue cheese and served with ranch dressing.

Retro, Rethought—continued

The updated-retro trend has been particularly strong on the dessert menu. The nostalgic treats we're seeing include Rice Krispies bars, Sno Balls, whoopee pies, éclairs, housemade donuts and above all, fancy cupcakes—sometimes served in flights of three. Drinkable desserts include floats, milkshakes and hot chocolate.

Sysco Can Help

With such a flood of trends in restaurant formats, menus, portion sizes and dining hours, it can be difficult for an independent operator to figure out how to appeal to his/her particular customer base in a coherent way. Not to mention crafting the correct marketing message tell the story.

Fortunately, Sysco has the talent and reach to help its customers make sense of—and take advantage of—the latest menu trends and consumer motivations. Sysco Sales Associates, and the array of Sysco experts that back them up, can help with advice and assistance on menus, portions, pricing, operational logistics and marketing. Sysco's Business Review program provides operators an even deeper assessment of their business; during these meetings at Sysco offices, executive chefs showcase new menu ideas and other specialists offer recommendations in their areas of expertise, including menu analysis, inventory management, waitstaff coaching tips and other elements of running a restaurant, all with the goal of helping the operator grow profits and reduce costs.

In addition to the deep expertise that Sysco itself provides its operator customers, Sysco's iCare suite of services provides restaurateurs with connections to business partners that help them compete effectively. Local and national partners can assist operators with operational, financial, human resources and marketing services.

For more information, contact your Sysco Sales Associate.



COMING NEXT: Emerging Trends for the New Year.