

Deliciosa La Variedad

by Julie Gustafson

Looking for a change of pace for your menu? Consider "small portion" dining as an alternative to your club's usual fare. It's a concept that's been growing in popularity in restaurants across the country and may work well for your members.

The concept of eating small portions has many names — tapas, appetizers (in lieu of an entrée), grazing menus, small plates, dim sum, etc.

One form of small portions, called tapas, originated in Spain years ago. There, on nearly every street corner, patrons could go into a bar, order a drink, and receive a small bite of food included in the price. Choices ranged from simple canned olives to various seafood, to hams, sausages, and cheeses, often served with bread or toast and a little olive oil and garlic.

The idea was to stretch out the drink and encourage good conversation in an era less obsessed with

productivity.

Of course since then, the world has changed and people are busier than ever. They have even less time for dining and socializing. So when they do go out, they want to make the most of it. Sharing and experimenting with food, whether it be tapas, appetizers, or multiple smaller portions, is one way to encourage lively conversation and make the dining experience enjoyable. It's also a great way to let chefs try new

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The Spanish tradition of
Tapas
is casual dining at its best

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dishes and for patrons to broaden their palates.

In fact, in a recent Land O'Lakes FoodWire survey, consumers said the top two factors that motivate them to order appetizers are the fun of sharing with friends (63 percent) and wanting to try new or additional flavors (62 percent).

"Consumers today want a fun dining experience," said Bonnie Chlebeczek, manager of Land O'Lakes Foodservice Test Kitchens. "They want plenty of time to sit back and talk with friends, and a plate of appetizers helps spark conversation."

Restaurants around the country continue to recognize the need for an interactive dining experience. In addition, they recognize that patrons are interested in trying foods with more complicated flavors and compositions. But by the same token, they know that these patrons don't want to commit to one entree they're not familiar with and risk not enjoying it.

Enter "smaller portion" dining.

Restaurants across the country have been successful over the past few years with a concept of smaller portions or sampling menus. The idea is to offer regular entrees as well as a mix of new items in smaller portions at reduced prices. Patrons order about three choices each to make up their meal and often share them around the table.

Flying saucers. Tim Mallet, owner of three St. Louis, MO, area restaurants, has been offering a small plate menu for nine years at his Blue Water Grill restaurant. Called "Flying Saucers," his menu is a mix of cold and hot items ranging in price from \$3.50 to \$8.95. Items on his summer menu include grilled jicama and portobellos on watercress with a lime vinaigrette; seared scallops on puree of celery root with essence of shiitake; and mango BBQ salmon with chipotle creme fraiche.

The success of "Flying Saucers" has led to an expanded small plate menu at Mallet's other restaurants.

Chilled Avocado Sauce

1 1/2 avocados pitted and peeled
1/2 red onion rough chopped
1/2 poblano chile rough
chopped
1/2 cup cilantro leaves packed
2 Tbsp. lime juice
3 cups heavy cream
cold water
salt and pepper to taste

Combine first six ingredients in blender and puree until smooth.

Add cold water to thin to sauce-like consistency.

Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Sauce is excellent with chicken, beef, or pork.

"We're known for our adventurous appetizers at Blue Water Grill," Mallet said. "But we realize our guests don't always like to commit to one entree. Sometimes it's too much risk for them. That's why the small plates work well. People can get several and experiment."

In Denver, CO, restaurateur Josh Wolkon has added a twist to the

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idea of sampling. His Vesta Dipping Grill takes simple grilled foods like beef, lamb, and fish and pairs them with a choice of 30 different dipping sauces.

With flavors from around the world like herb pesto, ancho maple sauce, coconut mango lime, Thai chili sauce, and charred peach salsa, guests can be adventurous and choose sauces on their own, or go with the recommended ones for their entree.

"The entrees are fairly simple. We leave the flavor primarily up to the sauces," Wolkon said.

At Cafe Tu Tu Tango in Orlando, FL, everything is served in small portions perfect for sharing. To ensure the festive atmosphere, a stack of plates and silverware is kept on the table so everyone has a chance to sample. Items include Arabic, Spanish, and Mexican dishes.

So how can managers incorporate a sampling or small plates menu into their club?

Bring in the crowds. A number of different ways, according to Tarein Kapoor, a professor at the school of hotel and restaurant management at California State Polytechnic University in Pomona, and the director of the school's professional development institute.

"The premise of tapas (small portions) is strong. In the club setting it provides a number of interesting options," Kapoor said.

"The way I'd focus it is that you can come alone or with friends and tapas could become a community

issue," Kapoor said. "Imagine in a club if you had a community table and anybody could come and sit down. You can do that very comfortably in a club setting. This is really a pass-around food and it can

Coconut Mango Lime Sauce

2 mangos peeled with pits removed
zest and juice of 1 lime
1 jalapeno stemmed
3 oz. pineapple juice
1 1/3 oz. can coconut milk
1/2 cup rice wine vinegar
1/4 cup sugar
3/4 cup orange juice
Combine all ingredients in blender and puree until smooth.
Taste and adjust seasoning as desired.
Sauce is excellent with fish, particularly halibut.

be done individually or as a community."

There are a number of ways to incorporate small portion dining into your club.

Dining Promotion

One option is to offer small portions as a promotion to attract members on a slow dining night. For example, the idea of an international menu of items could be very inviting to members, especially if it's packaged as a complete concept.

An idea managers might want to try is an evening of Spanish cuisine. Clubs could offer true Spanish tapas along with a selection of sangrias for a set price of \$15-\$20 for three plates and three sangrias. Even those members reluctant to experiment on a regular basis may be tempted to "let their hair down" once in a while, especially when the price is reasonable for a complete meal and beverages.

"Packaging the concept takes the risk out," Kapoor said. "Even an older couple will be adventurous once in a while."

Other international packages could include Chinese foods and a sampling of Asian beers; French cuisine and the latest French wines; hearty German foods and German beers and so on.

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19th Hole

Another possibility is to offer a selection of small portions in the grill area after a round of golf. A word of caution though, since golfers tend to be male and a little older, the concept of small portion dining could be faced with resistance unless it's tailored to these members' preferences.

For example, a selection of skewered meats with various dipping sauces, hearty salads, and similar items could be a great alternative to the typical burger and fries or full-size entree many golfers order.

"Bar-B-Q'd meats are an international concept. They just use different seasonings and marinades depending on the region," Kapoor said.

Plus, the sharing factor in small portion dining lends itself well to a "19th hole" venue where relaxation and talking with friends are top priority.

Sampler Lunches

Similar to the grill area idea is a small portions "display" for casual lunches or ladies' lunches. Like a buffet, displaying the various lunch items gives members a chance to see the variety of interesting foods offered. It also gives staff the opportunity to educate members on each dish's ingredients and about the concept of small portion dining.

"Education is key with tapas (small portion dining)," Kapoor said. "People need to know what it is and how they should eat it."

Unlike a buffet, though, members don't help themselves to the food but instead point out what they'd like to try. The staff either serves the food from the already-prepared dish as with salads, paella, and some skewered meats, or it cooks the items to order. Pricing could be either fixed, for a set number of items, or on a per-plate basis.

Wild Oats Market, an organic market with an in-store dining room, has stores throughout the country. It offers a large selection of hearty salads in its deli section both to go and for eating in. Choices like Salmon white bean salad, potato asparagus salad, and tuna salad with lime are all departures from the typical salad fare. Patrons can choose three salads for a set price and have an eclectic lunch.

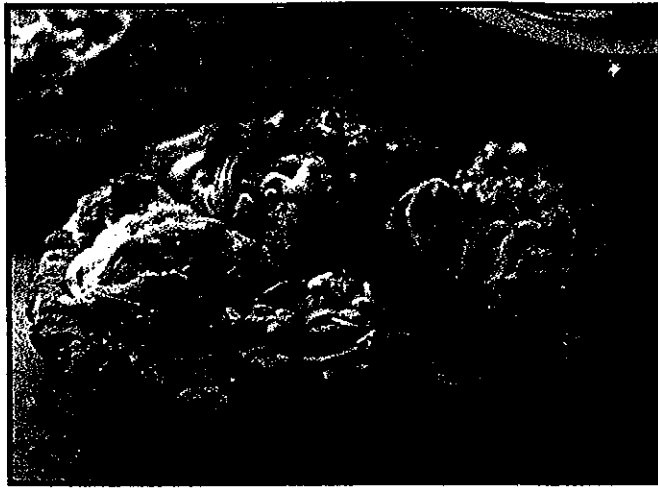
"Our salads are extremely popular for lunch. People seem to really enjoy the variety of different foods," said Scott Emanuel, Ladue, MO, store manager. "It's helpful to them to see exactly what's in a dish because many people aren't familiar with eating these types of foods."

Cocktail Receptions

Small portion menus also work great for cocktail receptions, particularly a Friday night casual get together. But be advised that atmosphere is almost as important to these events as is the food, according to Kapoor.

"This kind of food works great for a bar setting or a casual cocktail party. It works very well in an environment with revelry, noise, and excitement," Kapoor said. "It's a natural fit."

In fact, many restaurants offering small portion din-



ROASTED VEGGIE PIZZA

ing have special entertainment like Flamenco dancing, live music, or something similar to enhance the festive atmosphere.

"It's a very unique experience," said manager Javier Figuero of Cafe Tu Tu Tango in reference to his restaurant's entertainment. "We have tango dancers, tarot card readers, and various local artists performing in the restaurant. There's a lot of interaction."

Teaching tapas. If you're leaning toward trying small portion dining, but looking for a way to create a promotion around the tapas-style cocktail reception, consider offering a cooking class. For example, in the afternoon prior to the cocktail reception, the club's executive chef could teach members how to create a few of the dishes that will be offered later in the evening. By involving members in the cooking class, clubs can generate excitement for the new foods as well as make members more receptive to trying new items. In addition, it lets chefs show off their culinary expertise to the members.

While Kapoor does see interesting applications for small portion dining in the club setting, he noted that in order for the concept to work, managers need to remember that it's a casual style of dining, and not appropriate for the fine dining room.

"The minute you tell me I'm coming to the club dining room, then tapas will not create the spirit or the environment of sharing (that you want)," Kapoor cautioned. "This style of dining is all about enjoying yourself, relaxing, socializing with friends, and being adventurous and willing to try a few new things."

As one can guess, small portion dining is also most popular with a younger crowd.

"I would test it in beach clubs and yacht clubs where the membership is 45 or younger," Kapoor said. "Tapas needs to start with the 25-45 demographic rather than 45+. It has to be casual."

Feeling adventurous and want to try small portion dining? Check out the preceding pages for sauces to offer with grilled meats and fish. The recipes are compliments of Executive Chef Matt Selby at Vesta dipping grill in Denver, CO. 