

FLAVOR & THE MENU

ABOUT THE BUSINESS OF FLAVOR

TOP 10 TRENDS



INFLUENCING FLAVOR & MENU DEVELOPMENT

BLUE PLATE

updates

Creative meal deals let diners—and chefs—have fun experimenting with new and unusual flavors

BREAKFAST, LUNCH AND DINNER—SO YESTERDAY. BAR AND LATE-night noshing—been there, done that. Now there's a new game on the menu: one-of-a-kind business-boosters, multi-course bundles and other specials designed to entice guests during these recessionary times and keep them around when things get better.

"There's nothing worse for business than no business," says Philippe Boulot, executive chef of The Heathman Restaurant & Bar, located in the historic Heathman Hotel in Portland, Ore. Boulot knows that an empty dining room—the death knell for any struggling restaurant—is a sure sign to potential guests to stay away as well.

Business-Building Meals

Boulot's strategy to avoid empty seats was to launch the Happy-All-The-Time program, an extension of the restaurant's existing happy hour and regular menus. With it, Boulot is tapping an important psychological tenet: In tough times, people may want to save money, but they also want to be surrounded by a sense of well-being and energy.

Other savvy restaurateurs are creating slow-day specials to bring in business. Like the blue-plate specials of the last century, today's enticements offer value, comfort and the fun of something different. For instance, A16 turned San Francisco on its head with Monday-night Meatball Madness, galvanizing other restaurants to follow suit with concepts like Pig-Out Tuesdays at Betelnut, an Asian beer house in the city. Lemon-Brined Fried Chicken is the Monday-night star at Thomas Keller's Ad Hoc in nearby Yountville, Calif.

Bolete, in Bethlehem, Pa., offers wine dinners, a casual tavern menu and a Frugal Foodie Hour program, with a three-course, \$35 prix-fixe menu and \$1 oysters at the bar. Regular nightly features at



At Ad Hoc in Yountville, Calif., Thomas Keller has made family-style fried chicken a weekly attraction for people who crave the kind of home cooking no one does at home any more.



TIPS FOR MAKING **BLUE PLATE UPDATES** WORK FOR YOU**FLAVOR PAYOFF**

Gathering around the table to share a meal is still the perfect way to reconnect with friends and family, as more people become more disconnected in everyday life. Here are a few tips to consider:

- ▶ **MAKE CONNECTIONS:** Family dinners, Sunday suppers and chefs' tables play into diners' desire to reconnect with the people who grow, produce and make their foods. They want to learn about what they are eating and share with friends. Also, interactive and shareable items are great to engage conversation. At these dinners, diners often are seated with people they don't know, so new friendships are created over a meal.
- ▶ **TAKE UP THE SLACK:** Feature a Sunday Supper or Chef's Dinner weekly or

monthly. Pick a slow day in your restaurant and create a delicious, appealing, family-style menu featuring seasonal comfort foods that correspond with your concept's style.

- ▶ **FIX PRICES:** Charge a reasonable price, and also consider offering a beverage-pairing package that includes an opening cocktail and then wines, beers and a unique variety of beverages to complement each course.
- ▶ **TAP NEW MARKETING CHANNELS:** Gather customers' e-mail addresses for marketing, and also promote through Facebook, Twitter and a newsletter.

— KATHY CASEY

Tin Roof Bistro, a new restaurant in Manhattan Beach, Calif., run from Comfort Monday with chicken pot pie and Take-It-Easy Tuesday, a feast of steamed-mussel frites. "The Pope Says Fish on Friday" spotlights wood-fire-roasted, whole striped bass, and "Live-It-Up Saturday" features apricot-braised lamb shank.

The New Prix Fixe

Dante de Magistris, chef/owner of two Boston-area Italian restaurants, introduced a three-course, \$35 Menu da Favola at Dante in Cambridge, Mass. It was a direct response to the recession but also has become a successful way to integrate some of the lessons learned at the more-rustic Il Casale in Belmont, which he opened in April 2009.

"It started out as an experiment, but it worked out so well that it's become permanent — at least for now," says de Magistris, who runs both restaurants with his brothers, Damian and Filippo.

Favola means fairy tale, or dream come true, explains the chef. It's so named because the menu represents an opportunity to do the kind of small, tightly edited menu he always wanted to try. "Having a smaller menu with lower price points allows us to more easily control our costs," explains de Magistris.

TAKE-AWAY: *know your base*

Remember, if you are in tune with your customer base, then you know which type of menu fits best. For instance, Gen-Y customers love to interact and touch their food. They are multicultural and more familiar with eating with their hands. So sharing pita chips with phenomenal dips works for them.

RICK PEREZ

The three-course menu — which features the same type and quality of food as the old à la carte menu — allows customers to choose one from among seven or eight primi, such as seasonal green salad, grilled octopus and spaghetti carbonara. Next comes a half-dozen or so secondi, perhaps roasted cod, risotto or hanger steak. To finish, there's an equal number of dolci, panna cotta and a crostata, or tart.

Some items carry a supplemental charge; the bell-ringer Florentine-style, bone-in



Shared dishes and family-style sides help Executive Chef Michael Scelfo make the most of seasonal bounty and keep costs in line at Temple Bar in Cambridge, Mass.

TEMPLE BAR

sirloin, for instance, adds \$22. There is also an ample selection of \$5 sfi, or “small tastes,” such as olives or chicken-liver crostini, as well as \$7 contorni, or shareable side dishes, such as broccoli rabe, and \$3 cheeses. Collectively, these add-ons allow customers to build a more elaborate meal, if they wish, and help boost check averages, but the smaller, core menu has done its job, giving de Magistris a better handle on food costs and reducing staff while moving employees to the new restaurant.

“We can adjust much more quickly if our costs get out of hand,” says the chef, explaining that customer counts are up from last fall, and wine sales have also been strengthened.

“The \$35 price point has changed the customers’ approach to ordering,” says de Magistris. “They’re comfortable with that \$35 ‘magic number,’ but they still have ordering flexibility. And, frankly, we couldn’t have kept on with the old à la carte menu. People are looking for deals, and we need a way to control our costs.”

Resurrecting Sunday Suppers

At the Temple Bar in Cambridge, Mass., the “Sunday Supper Club” menu allows customers to enjoy a casual, family-style

TAKE-AWAY: *be selective*

I have always felt that a value menu should occur only on select days as a special feature. If you are constantly “discounting,” you never get back to the real value of your food. Be careful not to encourage your customers to cherry-pick your promotions.

STEVE SCHIMOLER



PURPLE PIG

Plates "for the table," like the shareable platters at Chicago's Purple Pig, keep things casual while saving on service expenses and creating a convivial ambiance.

meal with meant-for-sharing comforts like farmer's cassoulet, braised veal breast with ricotta gnocchi and lamb shanks. It also allows Executive Chef Michael Scelfo to make his end-of-week sales targets and better utilize product.

"This isn't just a once-a-week, three-course menu," says Scelfo, who transplanted the successful Sunday-supper idea from other, previous restaurants, including Wildwood in Portland, Ore. "These are unique items of special value, with a different style of presentation and service. We're getting back to the essence of food and dining at a time when people crave that — getting together and sharing a meal. Even the staff loves it."

And, by keying the night's items, including family-style sides, to the Temple Bar's seasonal menu, Scelfo not only constantly changes his specials but also keeps costs in line and provides another point to service for house-made items like sausages and pickles.

"It's an opportunity to step into the walk-in and get the inventory down to zero for the start of the new week," he explains. "You always have to do a good job on costs, but the Sunday suppers allow us to push a little harder at a time when every penny counts."

Kitchen-Table Style

At Dinette, in Seattle, the twice-a-month Sunday supper is an extension of "secret-restaurant" dinners that chef/owner Melissa Nyffeler held in her apartment on a fold-down table before she opened the restaurant in 2005. In fact, the name Dinette comes from that very table. The suppers allow Nyffeler to experiment with flavors, ingredients and techniques that she wouldn't normally use.

TAKE-AWAY: *compartmentalize*

The original blue-plate specials were served in compartmentalized dishes. Why not invest in an updated version of that serviceware? It's a simple change that can encourage people to order retro food like meatloaf, fried chicken or fricassee. These dishes showcase culinary skill and creativity rather than expensive ingredients.

PRISCILLA MARTEL

"During the week, Dinette has a country-Mediterranean focus," explains the chef, "but I might do anything from Chinese food to Mexican on Sunday nights."

The event is invitation only; Nyffeler has built a list of some 1,300 names, in part because of sign-ups for the suppers, and guests know only the general theme of the menu.

"You have to be ready for anything," she notes.



The Happy-all-the-Time program for bar menus helps The Heathman Restaurant & Bar in Portland, Ore., and its customers ride out the economic storm in good taste.

JOHN VALLS FOR THE HEATHMAN

Customers love the adventure and conviviality of the event and Nyffeler loves the challenge of doing the research, sourcing the ingredients and cooking something different.

Nimble Menus

If you think this all sounds as if it will accelerate a change to a more-casual, friendly, flexible style of dining, you're right.

The daily "Happy-all-the-Time" menu at The Heathman, for instance, is all about giving customers a wide range of options and lots of convenience — as well as building sales.

"We wanted to make this as appealing as possible for people," explains Boulot. "We didn't want people to have to wonder, 'When is the happy hour, when is the bistro burger served, and when is the sidewalk café open?' Why not just make it all the time?"

The lengthy menu includes more than two-dozen options in all, from olives, nuts and artisanal cheeses to sweetbreads and Korean short ribs. It touts small and large sizes of all items and is available at all three dining outlets: the Marble Bar, Sidewalk Café and the historic Tea Court.

"People can have a snack and a glass of wine or make a whole meal for themselves," says Boulot, who describes a menu with selections as varied as onion soup, pâté, dips, crab cakes, mac and cheese, lomi-lomi salmon, chicken piperade sandwiches and boudin blanc with frites.

Going Whole Hog

"The economy being what it was, we needed a plan to address some of our more price-conscious customers," says Robert Wellbeloved, managing partner and general manager of Betelnut Peju Wu in San Francisco, part of the 12-concept Real Restaurants group. "In this neighborhood, we have a lot of 20-something customers who are on the prowl for a good deal, and a lot of restaurants have seen their business dwindle because they haven't responded."

Wellbeloved and chef Alex Ong responded with Pig-Out Tuesday. The two were reluctant to tinker with the stylish-yet-casual regular menu, which is based on the Chinese version of tavern or "beer-hall" dining. Core offerings include everything from starters like Betelnut Poke and Mongolian Hoisin Pork to dumplings, rolls, rice and noodle bowls and "Tempting Treasures" entrées like Ma La tiger prawns and kalbi short ribs, all served family style. With their Pig Out, customers get a platter of whole roasted pig for two, served with side dishes like wok-tossed organic vegetables and jasmine rice, all for \$24. There is also a different, complementary Pinot Noir available every Tuesday for the bargain price of \$5 a glass.

The program, which began as a special in 2008, has exceeded all expectations as far as building sales, with half of the night's 275 to 300 customers coming in for the special but ordering other items off the regular menu as well. And the pig special always sells out.

Part of the reason for such success is the pig itself, a 40- to 60-pound whole animal locally raised and marinated overnight in a flavorful soy-and-sugar-based brine. It's bathed in hot water to help remove the fat and then cooked upright between two metal grills in the restaurant's special Chinese oven, which renders the fat and keeps the meat tender.

The pork is served with a sauce made from pork stock and soy, bolstered with whatever ingredients Ong selects to complement the changing array of accompanying vegetables or whatever else is seasonal.

"This is something that's low-impact on the restaurant but gets a high-impact response," says Wellbeloved. "And, when business picks up again, which it will, we'll come out ahead, because we've made this investment in keeping our customers happy." ☺

TAKE-AWAY: *retro redux*

Good old steak-frites will make a splash back onto menus as chefs regionalize this once-forgotten, classic, hearty dish. Also, Châteaubriand for two will emerge as a less sexy, stripped-down version of the classic steakhouse dish.

JAMES BRISSON

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