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# Extraordinary sides earn their keep

A once-forgotten category raises eyebrows and check averages **BY BRET THORN**



REUBEN BLOOM

Stoke gives carrots a Southern touch, above, by tossing them in a spice rub reminiscent of barbecue flavors. Genghis Grill serves a new line of burgers with Pan-Asian Slaw, below.



GENGHIS GRILL

Order envy — seeing what someone else got in a restaurant and wishing that you'd ordered it, too — used to be something that only happened with entrées and desserts. However, the once-humble side dish is stepping up, grabbing attention and raising check averages as chefs rev up parts of the meal that used to be afterthoughts.

That's what happened at Millie's Supper Club, a Wisconsin-style supper club

in Chicago that opened in the spring. The restaurant focuses on prime rib, fish fry and broaster chicken. Entrées come with potatoes, but vegetables are extra.

"We used to have a bunch of vegetables that weren't selling great," said general manager Emlyn Thomas — things like steamed broccoli and roasted Brussels sprouts. "We said, we've got to jazz them up a little bit."

So they introduced broccoli that's roasted until it's well caramelized, placed over a smear of blue cheese dressing and finished with toasted garlic chips and lemon.

"People are loving this, and it sells well," he said.

Michael Slavin, the director of culinary at 71-unit Houlihan's, based in Leawood, Kan., found the same thing. When he started at the casual-dining chain earlier this year, the restaurants on average sold about 12 portions per day of plain grilled asparagus. So he swapped it out for Brus-

sels sprouts roasted with olive oil, salt and pepper and then topped with a pesto crema and Parmesan cheese before being browned under a salamander.

"We're selling almost 40 a day," he said.

Slavin said creativity with side dishes is crucial in his competitive segment.

"It's a talented space, and people are

**"It's a talented space, and people are constantly expecting more and more. Veggies and sides aren't in the backseat anymore."**

—Michael Slavin, Houlihan's

constantly expecting more and more. Veggies and sides aren't in the backseat anymore."

So this fall he's introducing a side dish of whole roasted carrots served with honey Sriracha butter and crystallized mint — a type of dehydrated mint that lends a texture reminiscent of Pop Rocks. Three

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## Side dishes earn their keep

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of them will be served stretched out on a sushi plate. He's also rolling out a side dish of eggplant, made by cutting it in half and roasting it thoroughly, "like you're going to make baba ghanoush," Slavin said, but instead of scraping the flesh out of its shell,

**"By creating an Asian twist on a classic side, we are able to stay true to our roots as a brand, while creating a dish that is innovative and approachable to our guests."**

—Brittany Neisen, Genghis Grill

he's serving it in the shell topped with a combination of oven-dried tomatoes, olive oil, sherry vinegar and onions.

"You're just eating it right out of the shell, and all those natural juices are in the bottom of it," he said.

Early next year Slavin plans to serve half heads of cauliflower roasted with a white truffle biscuit crumb polonaise.

A polonaise is traditionally a sprinkling of breadcrumbs, hard-boiled eggs, parsley and butter, but Slavin is replacing the bread with crumbled biscuit and using white truffle oil instead of butter. He plans to serve it whole, allowing the textural contrast between the stems and florets, and even the leaves, which get crispy like Brussels sprouts leaves.

"When you see a good wedge salad and how impressive that is, it's about the size of that," Slavin said.

Side dishes also can help underscore a restaurant's brand identity, such as Dallas-based Genghis Grill's Pan-Asian Slaw, which is served with the 86-unit chain's new line of burgers. It's made with udon noodles and green cabbage tossed in a sesame dressing and topped with pickled red cabbage.

"By creating an Asian twist on a classic side, we are able to stay true to our roots as a brand, while creating a dish that is innovative and approachable to our guests," research and development chef Brittany Neisen said in an email.

Carrots get a Southern touch at Stoke, a restaurant that opened in Charlotte, N.C., in August. Executive chef Chris Coleman blanches heirloom carrots and then tosses them in a barbecue-like spice rub of cumin, coriander, dried mustard, smoked paprika and brown sugar, and

then cooks them in the wood-fired oven.

He pairs them with a barbecue sauce made by juicing carrots, reducing the juice to a syrup and emulsifying that with a local mustard, along with cumin and coriander.

He plates it with a pesto made with carrot tops, pine nuts, Parmesan cheese, oil and lemon.

At Amami Cocktail Bar, a Japanese restaurant in the Brooklyn, N.Y., neighborhood of Greenpoint, French fries get a Japanese treatment by chef and owner Nick Want.

He uses relatively low-starch Japanese purple potatoes, "so it's more fiber and juicier," he said. "Crispy on the outside and more full on the inside." He cuts them into fries, dips them in tempura batter and fries them. He serves them with Japanese mayonnaise mixed with premium matcha, or powdered green tea.

"It maintains the natural flavor of the green tea to balance out the oily feeling from the fries," he said.

Similarly, at the Seattle location of Sansei Seafood Restaurant & Sushi Bar, a five-unit concept that's part of the D.K.



Branch Line offers drippings from rotisserie chicken as a side dish priced at \$5. The Westin Austin Downtown serves biscuits topped with hot bacon grease and Maldon sea salt, below, for \$5.

FAMIN DEVINER



THE WESTIN AUSTIN DOWNTOWN

Restaurant group, based in Hawaii, executive chef Scott Lutey adds an Asian flair to string beans by serving them with pork belly and a spicy, garlicky kimchi sauce.

"Our Seattle guests enjoy this side dish because we are able to feature local produce from Washington with a "Taste

of Hawaii' flair," managing partner Ivy Nagayama said in an email.

Branch Line in Watertown, Mass., has managed to make a profitable side dish out of a byproduct of its rotisserie chicken. It charges \$5 for a side of drippings from its rotisserie chicken, embellished a bit with roasted garlic, salt, pepper and herbs.

"The idea to serve a side of the drippings from the rotisserie for dipping bread came from an early visit from acclaimed chef and restaurateur Chris Schlesinger," partner Andrew Holden said in an email.

When Holden brought bread and olive oil to Schlesinger's table, the chef said, "This looks great, but don't you have a whole bunch of drippings in the base of that rotisserie over there?"

Over the course of the next week, Branch Line chef Stephen Oxaal tinkered with the drippings to come up with the final garlic-enhanced item.

That's considerably less effort than what Michael Cerrie went through for the #16 Biscuits at The Westin Austin Downtown, so-named because it was his 16th iteration of the item.

"I always refer to them as five weeks and 15 pounds of my life," said the chef.

The biscuit is 60-percent butter by weight. The butter is frozen, shaved and hand mixed with flour and other ingredients at least every hour. The biscuits are topped with hot bacon grease and Maldon sea salt before going into the oven. Three of them are served with honey-whipped butter for \$5.

"The price point's great," Cerrie said. "It's a really easy sell." ■

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