



July 12, 2013

Unique Visitors per Month: N/A

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Small plates: Popular, creative dishes in petit form grow in popularity



The craze of tapas in the early part of this century in concert with the tapping of many ethnic flavors are taking small plates far in the industry. Operators are finding that small plates are a balance of flavor combinations, training and awareness and finding the right fit for the concept.

The Stanton Social is a restaurant concept in New York that delivers social and intimate experiences through small plates. It's become a regular hotspot and is owned by Chef Chris Santos, developed with TAO owner Richard Wolf and Happy Ending's Peter Kane.

Small dishes make up the bulk of the menu and they are meant to bring in groups and turn the setting into a communal and social journey.

At the **Porch in Dallas**, a mix of tavern and bistro, where the dining experience is translated into social and welcoming, Executive Chef Adam West is keen on balancing the menu with selective appetizers as well as sharing the growing trend with graduating culinary students from El Centro College in Dallas, where he's an advisor for a new apprenticeship program.

Small plates are aided by the popularity of global flavors —plates that have ethnic origins, and attribute their popularity to a history of communal eating or being considered “finger food”. West says that these types of flavors are especially conducive to small plates because of their bold flavors and a history of sharing.

“Meal time in most countries is thought to be a communal experience that includes using your hand as utensils,” says West. “This, in addition to bright colors and flavors, makes for a great transition to small plates.”

At the [Stanton Social](#), the Ahi Tuna Poke blends crispy wonton, avocado, fresno chili, which reflects an ethnic flair and stimulates guests’ curiosity. There’s a Hand Pulled Chicken Arepas that is served with jalapeño and salsa verde.

Arepas are corn dough or cooked flour patties, familiar to South Americans. It originated in Venezuela and is most popular with Columbian and Venezuelan natives.

Along Greek traditions, the Stanton Social Baked Spanakopita fits the bill. A greek phyllo pastry is filled with spinach, feta and lemon aioli.

“Often times when people dine out, they are interested in recreating or reliving an experience they had abroad through the food.,” says Santos of the Stanton Social. “Our restaurants have always embraced global personality because it makes the meal more interesting when each course encompasses flavors from varying parts of the world.”

Larger restaurant groups and chains are also welcoming diners with small plates and shareable meals. The Olive Garden’s test of small plates has received a lot of media buzz and brings the experience to a select markets of the 800-unit chain.

The Olive Garden Grilled Chicken Spiedini sets chicken skewers up with finishing touches of a choice of dipping sauces —spicy garlic aioli or citrus-apricot. An Insalata Caprese combines fresh mozzarella and sliced tomatoes with olive oil and balsamic drizzle. The dish is then topped with basil.

[California Pizza Kitchen’s](#) small plates menu lists an inventive White Corn Guacamole + Chips, a blend of diced avocado, sweet white corn, black beans, jicama, bell pepper, cilantro and serrano peppers is paired with nacho chips.

The small plates menu at California Pizza Kitchen also includes a Mac n'Cheese, lightly fried with Panko, served atop a creamy cheese sauce. For both California Pizza Kitchen and Olive Gardens, the marketing of new, lighter fare is smart and has great potential for imbibers and those wanting lighter bites before a bigger meal at home or a more traditional dinner appointment elsewhere.

Snacking and small plates addresses the bigger trends of consumers tending to have more meals and snacking. Millennials, in particular, have been described as avid fans of "grazing," or eating small meals at odd hours, and spreading dining and drinking dollars over several destinations.

So for the larger chains, the marketing of small plates is a balance of marketing in parallel to the snacking craze and matching menus to eating habits, while not negatively impacting check averages. Also, it's important to note that although small plates may be more communal in a sense, they can be an ideal stage to grow engagement and check averages with single diners, potentially in the bar and lounge settings of restaurants, who may want to linger longer and experience different flavors.

At the Jeremy Restaurant and Bar in Keego Harbor, Michigan, Jeremy Grandon, executive chef and owner is embracing small plates. He's adding a small-plates centric menu to add some lighter, more price-conscious fare to the restaurant's menu and showcase some bite-size innovation.

The new menu will feature Fried Green Tomatoes, Peaches & Mozzarella, a summer-time play on Caprese Salad. A fried egg roll filled with duck confit will also be on the menu which is likely to delight customers.

"Ethnic dishes lend themselves well to small plates, because of a finger food quality and the fact that many of these plates were meant for sharing originally, notes Grandon. For Grandon, small plates is a strong component of a strategy to lower prices, while also making the dishes more appealing and offering them in a more palatable portion size.

"When the portions are smaller and the price is smaller, you sell more." And Grandon is finding that the right price point is something a lot of consumers are looking for. At Grandon's [Jeremy Restaurant and Bar](#), entrees will be reduced in

portion size and different price points will reflect additional value for guests when the new menu rolls out later this month.

In a small-plate environment, the key of success is to strategize upsell opportunities, sell and bring more dishes out for customers. Meanwhile, keeping drink glasses full and offering a variety of bar drinks, wine, and beer is also a complementary strategy to small dishes.

Certainly there has to be an awareness and building excitement and checking averages with customers, but not cannibalizing larger entrée portions. This is done through tactful marketing, customer segmentation, as well as server training.

“This concept has to be controlled very closely by your service staffs through intelligent scripting as well as overall menu knowledge,” says West. “Check averages can remain a constant by service staff being able to upsell items to groups who may not even know that they want to try something new.”

While small plates can bring more price-conscious options, their size and variety will provide opportunity for more exploration and thus, more plates [are] sold,” says Santos.

“Our dishes are priced so that diners will be encouraged to order a few dishes per person -- just because one party is larger than another doesn't necessarily mean they will sample more dishes because they might need to order multiple plates of one dish to satisfy the whole party.”