
IN DEPTH

Business

COOKING UP A VARIETY OF OPTIONS

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Beyond low prices

Three-fourths of people surveyed by researcher NPD Group are described as "cautious consumers" — especially skewed toward the unemployed, less affluent and retirees. They said they were reducing their restaurant visits, trading down and ordering fewer items. They are more concerned with price and value.

About 24 percent of those surveyed — and those more likely to be employed and live in affluent households — said the recession hadn't really affected them, so they were less inclined to moderate their restaurant spending. They are more concerned about service and a relaxing atmosphere.

Technomic, a Chicago food industry research firm, found that many daily deals were bringing in new customers, and a majority would later return without coupons and recommend it to their family or friends. Many also are posting reviews of the restaurant on review site Yelp, Zagat survey or Facebook pages, further promoting the operation.

Bakery cafes such as Panera continue to lead in these "value beyond low prices" promotions. But Technomic said they had been joined by the "better burger" operations such as Smashburger and Five Guys Burgers and Fries, and big-portion Tex-Mex franchises such as Chipotle Mexican Grill.

MCT NEWS SERVICE**New menu items**

"Sustainable," "healthy" and "low-fat" are still buzz words, but restaurants also are whetting appetites with new trends. Try "small plates" and "street food."

It probably goes against your grandparents' idea of a good buy — ordering a round of appetizers instead of a single entree. Still, the latest dining-out-in-a-tough-economy news isn't about abundance on the plate. Restaurants are beefing up their small-plate menus.

Apparently, diners want tiny tidbits that are stuffed, grilled, cured and fried, as long as there's a lively setting bundled with an affordable price.

"We're offering a social dining experience," Burlap's executive chef Brian Malarkey told conventioners during a restaurant-trends discussion at the **Western Foodservice & Hospitality Expo** on Monday in San Diego.

Burlap, new to Del Mar, has two bars, an outdoor pagoda and a focus on little bites like carb-free crab cakes, venison carpaccio and a small snapper sold whole. At Malarkey's other packed-house restaurant, Searsucker in the Gaslamp Quarter, there's a similar dining model: "To keep ordering small plates and keep enjoying yourself all night long," he said.

It's a similar scene at Little Italy's hot new Davanti Enoteca, which highlights antipasti like Italian cheese, rustic breads and salumi, a family of Italian-style cured meat.

And just this year in North Park, The Linkery embraced this petite-plates template, replacing its meaty entrees with mini-mouthfuls. Now the \$7.50 Berkshire-bacon-wrapped octopus is its big hit.

Another trend that's quickly taking off: street food. Just like gourmet food trucks have done, sit-down eateries are piggybacking on the back-to-basics fare you'd get cheaply and quickly off a pushcart.

"Bringing the street to the seat" is the tagline for the cozy, gourmet taco-and-sandwich-place Empire House in Hillcrest. In Bird Rock, Beaumont's has Korean street tacos made with duck confit. There's a new, well-traveled menu in South Park's Alchemy, where chef Ricardo Heredia reinterprets pirogies from Europe and jerk chicken from the Caribbean.

At the Gaslamp gastropub Quality Social, where chef Jared Van Camp is state-certified to break down whole pigs, they make all the meat for a \$7 bacon-wrapped Tijuana-style hot dog in-house.

Has bringing street food indoors appealed to value-driven customers?

"Yes, we try and remove pretension from anything that we do. Preparing street foods from scratch with quality ingredients" turns familiar, so-called "lowbrow foods" into first-rate dishes, Van Camp said by email from Europe, where he's on a food-research trip, eating artisanal salumi and cheese off food trucks in France.

Keli Dailey • U-T

Small-size it

With fewer new shopping centers being built in the slow economy, restaurants have to look elsewhere to expand, and smaller formats give them more flexibility. They also are cheaper to build.

Red Robin plans to test about a half-dozen smaller-size operations — 2,000 to 4,000 square feet, compared with its traditional 5,600-square-foot restaurants. Kevin Caulfield, spokesman for Red Robin, said the smaller restaurants could go in airports, near college campuses and in urban areas where space is at a premium.

Cheesecake Factory builds restaurants in a variety of sizes, including 8,000, 10,000 and 12,000 square feet, as well as a new 7,200-square-foot unit that is opening this year. A spokesman said the success of the 8,000-square-foot restaurants enabled the company to build in smaller cities at lower risk because the smaller restaurants can be 20 percent cheaper to build.

Darden also is planning on testing a combination Olive Garden/Red Lobster restaurant. The operation shares a kitchen but has separate dining rooms, each about half their typical sizes.

MCT NEWS SERVICE Not-so-hot trends

In counterpoint to what's working to draw customers, a recent Zagat survey listed "The 10 Most Annoying Restaurant Trends." Some samples:

- Communal tables: They're great for the single diner who's looking to make "friends," but if you start talking to the person next to you at a communal table, you're probably interrupting a date or butting your nosy self into someone else's business.

- Chalkboard menus: We kind of got over reading off a chalkboard in preschool. After a long day of staring at a computer screen, the last thing we're trying to do is have to squint at a barely legible menu scribbled on a wall halfway across the room.

- Mustachioed bartenders: We're not knocking all facial hair, but we don't need Wyatt Earp mixing our martini.

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