



SATIATING THE INSATIABLE DINER

BY KATE ROCKWOOD

HERE'S HOW
TO ENSURE BIG
APPETITES
GET THEIR FILL

RAVENOUS.
VORACIOUS.
HEARTY.
HOWEVER YOU DESCRIBE THEM,
DINERS WITH BIG APPETITES ARRIVE AT
RESTAURANTS LOOKING TO BE FED—A LOT.

They're the same diners who look askance at scanty portions of protein, who ask about the size of a special before placing an order, who embrace the breadbasket with gusto.

It's easy to assume that insatiable diners only frequent buffets and all-you-can-eat deals, but that thinking would be off base.

"Consumers today are looking for a variety of options on menus, so they can get exactly what they want depending on the eating occasion and customize their meal," says Annika Stensson, director of research communications at the National Restaurant Association.

For every health-conscious diner who's hoping for a half-portion, there's a bigger appetite that doesn't mind paying a premium to fill up. To balance hearty appetites against the bottom line, think beyond one-size-fits-all portions, and deploy simple strategies that help hungry diners get truly fed.

"What we're seeing more of is staggered portions on menus nationwide," says Mary Chapman, formerly of food research firm Technomic Inc.

Eighty-six percent of diners in a Technomic survey said they'd be more likely to visit a restaurant with substantial and filling portions. Yet nearly as many diners

rated staggered portions as an important value-driven consideration over large portions. Younger diners dig the appeal of creating a customized meal: 65 percent of 18- to 34-year-olds are willing to pay more for large portions, and 40 percent are willing to splurge for more protein.

This means satisfying these hungry diners can also feed your bottom line.

"Someone should be able to come in, get fed and leave full," says Kelly Whitaker, chef-owner of Denver-based restaurants Cart-Driver and Basia. "You don't want a guest paying a \$150 bill and then asking where the closest In-N-Out Burger is for the drive home."



Dare to Share

Shared plates may feel so 2011, but their flexible format appeals to more than one demographic. At Basta, the \$82 scratch-made lasagna requires 24-hour notice but still gets ordered multiple times a week. Though the menu suggests the dish for “four to six people,” Whitaker’s seen tables of two order the mammoth dish. “Some people know they want to bring most of it home for lunch the next day, others are just hungry,” he says.

Diners aren’t the only ones satisfied. Shareable plates are a back-of-house boon. “With large format, one serving of beef takes care of four guests instead of four individual servings,” Whitaker says. “That really offsets the load of the line.”

Beef It Up

In Duluth, Minnesota, hundreds of made-from-scratch diner meals are served daily at The Duluth Grill. To avoid overwhelming analysts’ bustle with staggered portions, the restaurant relies on add-ons like a half-pound, grass-fed beef burger, lamb shank gyros, grilled kale and bacon-blue cheese coleslaw. “We don’t title anything hearty or lighter, but that’s an easy way to adjust your portion size,” says co-owner Tom Hanson.

Bulk doesn’t always have to be served on the side, either. When Matt Selby was the chef at Denver’s Central Bistro & Bar, he created a protein menu for those looking to beef up a meal. “People add seared salmon or housemade bacon or grilled steak to everything,” says Selby, who recently launched a restaurant consulting business. “The protein add-on increases check averages and it helps the guest feel like they got enough to eat.”

Show Me the Bread Basket

Wait-watchers know to avoid the breadbasket’s siren song, but offering that mountain of carbs can be a win-win for everyone: It fills diners up without dramatically driving up food costs.

To reduce wasted money on tables that aren’t going to touch it, Chef-owner Christy Hayes of Woodland, California-based Mojo’s Kitchen-428, has a simple solution: Ask first. “We ask every table if they want bread after they order,” she says. “A lot of people are staying away from

Portion Perception

Make a serving seem bigger—even when it’s not.

- 1. Downsize your plates.** Researchers at Cornell University have found that people tend to underestimate the portion size of larger plates, thus eating more and feeling less satisfied with a meal.
- 2. Bag before you serve.** Diners expect smaller delicacies, not dump trucks of food, with premium ingredients like locally raised protein or heirloom vegetables. Set expectations before they see the portion size to shift their perspective and minimize disappointment.
- 3. Go tall and slim.** Here’s a reason to rethink your short, squat barware: People perceive tall-stemmed glasses as larger, food researchers have found.
- 4. Intensify the flavor.** Food that’s smoky, spicy or intensely flavored can have a greater impact on a diner’s palate and cause them to eat more slowly, even if the portion is somewhat modest.
- 5. Plate with circles.** The Delboeuf illusion causes us to perceive something as larger when it’s surrounded by a tight circle. Keep that in mind next time you’re finishing a plate with a garnish or sauce.
- 6. Stretch it out.** If \$40-per-pound morel mushrooms are killing your food cost, consider cutting the recipe with a less expensive variety. You’ll still get the flavor and balance costs without shrinking the portions.

FOOD FANATIC ROAD TRIP!



FOOD FANATIC

Craig Peck, a Food Fanatics chef for US Foods, says think Maine instead of Oregon when you hear Portland.



@CraigMPeck

Follow the Food Fanatic on Twitter for more insider tips.

ILLUSTRATION BY TIM MARRS

Get a mouthful from our resident expert

THE HIGHLIGHTS

Empire Chinese Kitchen

A reincarnation of the famous Empire Chop Suiy, which stood in the same location from 1916 to 1963, serves up authentic versions of Chinese dishes. Go for dim sum, and don’t miss the wok-tossed fried rice and hoister stir-fried Hong Kong style.

Street and Co.

Sam Hayward and Dana Street’s casual concept features a Mediterranean-centric menu showcasing local ingredients, pasta and simple, yet well-prepared fish.

Ohio

Batall may have called these guys “d-bags and thieves” for allegedly copying his restaurant by the same name, but with 10 storefronts in metro Boston and Maine, the local pizza chain turns out some serious pie. Meatballs are a hit, too.

Gorgeous Gelato

Don’t get the name? You will when you meet husband and wife Milanese transplants, Donato Giovine and Mariagrazia Zanardi. Try traditional Italian flavors like bacio and zabaglione, as well as Americanized favorites,

sourced menu after his inaugural year. Twenty-seven-year-old Cara Stadler of Bao Bao Dumpling House has taken what she learned from her mom in Shanghai to turn out authentic soup dumplings. You’d do anything for those dumplings. And I mean anything.

Over the past few years, newcomers, such as Taco Trio, East Ender and Slab Sicilian Street Food, have introduced international fare, furthering Portland’s position as an innovative food destination.

The arrival of creative chefs comes with new takes on our local classics. At Eventide Oyster Co., lobster meat is tossed in warm browned butter and served on a housemade bao bun. Hake is battered, fried and slathered in housemade tartar sauce for a fish sandwich. You can’t eat another bite, but you do anyway because the housemade whoopie pie will knock your socks off. It’s the perfect ratio of vanilla buttercream to devil’s food cake.

With so many options, you might as well own up to the fact that you’ll eat several meals a day—more than once. ■

Who would have ever guessed that a sleepy seaside town in Maine would rival San Francisco for the most restaurants per capita?

Portland, a modest community of 66,600 that more than triples during the summer, is becoming known as one of the most restaurant-dense cities in America. This culinary boom is shifting conventional thinking that it only has lobster and a good-looking shoreline.

Twenty years ago, James Beard award-winning chef Sam Hayward and Dana Street opened Fore Street in the Old Port District, laying the groundwork for the local and sustainable food movements. The partners have since doubled down, opening two more concepts: Standard Baking Company and Street and Co.

With over 500 restaurants in 21 square miles, Portland is drawing chefs with major street cred. Standouts include Chef Chris Gould who left Boston’s Uni Sashimi Bar at Clio to open Central Provisions and became a James Beard award finalist for his locally

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bread these days, or they want more of the food instead of the filler. But for others, they really have to have it.”

Offer up top-notch bread, and you can charge for it. At Tremont 647, in Boston, Chef-owner Andy Husbands replaced the complimentary baskets of focaccia with \$7 skillet cornbread. It helps slash food waste without shrinking the average check order. “We see people ordering it as an appetizer sometimes, but mainly as an accompaniment with their dinners,” he says.

The Art of Selling

“Portion sizes are different everywhere, and guests are becoming more savvy about asking,” Whitaker says. For restaurateurs, that means arming the front-of-house staff with the proper intel to help hungry diners order appropriate portions.

“As soon as a new menu is typed up, the sous chef does a class with the servers and goes over the ins and outs of each menu item,” says Selby. The debrief goes so far as to offer the exact ounces of the protein amount of pasta served with each dish.

“With the right menu knowledge, servers can custom fit any part of the menu to someone’s appetite,” he says.

If a diner is hungry and eyeing the primi pastas, for instance, a server might suggest the entree pasta instead. If a diner asks about the flatbreads, the servers know that one flatbread is an ideal snack, while three work as a starter for a table of eight.

“It’s really all about reading the guests,” says Selby. “Solid communication can be the difference between someone leaving disappointed and someone feeling fed well.” ■

Kate Rockwood is a freelance writer and insatiable diner.