The Big Trend to Small Foods

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Appetizers and small plate menus are on a roll. T.G.I. Friday’s Endless Choice all-you-can-eat option, which offers restaurant patrons an unlimited assortment of appetizers for just $12, has been wildly successful for nearly two years.

Small plate menus and restaurant concepts are among the hot culinary trends for 2016 cited in the National Restaurant Association’s (NRA) 2015 What’s Hot Survey. One-third of consumers say that they are eating more small portions than they did a few years ago, according to Packaged Facts’ 2014 What America Eats report, so positioning small plates as a light meal for those with a sense of culinary adventure is right on target. Perhaps most important, appetizers/small plates are uniquely positioned to permit low-risk/low-cost experimentation, easy customization, culinary conversation, and social interaction.

Garlic bread is America’s favorite appetizer, according to a 2015 Datassential report, so one-third of consumers say they love it. Other favorites include french fries, shrimp cocktail, fried cheese sticks, chicken strips/nuggets, potato skins, crab cakes, deviled eggs, crudités, cocktail meatballs, franks, sausages, sliders, and bruschetta.

Two-thirds of appetizers were eaten away from home, according to Datassential. According to Technomic’s 2015 Starters, Small Plates & Sides Consumer Trend Report, burgers/sandwiches are declining as starters in the Top 500 full-service restaurants and are being repositioned as small plates. In addition, fried appetizers/items have declined on the Top 500 limited-service restaurant menus over the past two years; product categories that showed sharp declines include breaded proteins, cheese sticks/fried cheese, breaded vegetables, and fries.

Cheese, guacamole, quesadillas, hummus, other dips, and chicken strips were the appetizers chosen most frequently for at-home consumption. Millennials are the demographic group most likely to have a dinner-time meal of appetizers, according to the 2014 Gallup Study of Cooking Knowledge & Skills report.

At home, 46% of appetizers were made or assembled from scratch, 29% were prepared using prepacked/refrigerated items, and 25% were frozen, according to Datassential. Sales of frozen appetizers/snack rolls topped $1.9 billion in mass channels for the year ended May 17, 2015, according to IRI. The top brand, Totino’s Pizza Rolls, enjoyed a 4.7% sales boost after the introduction of Bold Rolls.

Lettuce wraps, ahi tuna, hummus, meatballs, and flatbreads and poke/ceviche are the top appetizer trends for 2016, according to the NRA.

Watch for upgrades to traditional starter fare. More upscale and exotic options with potential include offerings like breaded Cotija cheese sticks, seafood hush puppies, hand-cut fries made from Yukon Gold potatoes, and crab cake sliders.

Tostones, croqueta, empanadas, tacos, and quesos are the fastest-growing Latin appetizers and flavors on menus; nachos, quesadillas, guacamole, quesos, and pico de gallo appeared most frequently on menus in 2015, per Datassential. Bao, edamame, lettuce wraps, tempura, and sashimi are the fastest-growing Asian appetizers on menus; dumplings, egg rolls, wontons, spring rolls, and ribs appeared most frequently on menus.

Pasta (especially gnocchi), caprese salads, carpaccio, and poutine are other ethnic favorites gaining traction as starters. Skewers, stacking, layering, smashed, and pickled are among the trendy preparation descriptors appearing on restaurant menus.

With micro vegetables among the hot produce trends for 2016, expect them to take a starring role on appetizer menus along with root vegetables and bitter greens, according to the NRA. Seasonal/limited-time offers like grilled fresh pineapple or coconut shrimp in the

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