

# Small Plates,

# BIG Profits

By Skye MacBroom

In the current economy many restaurants are wondering how they can cater to patrons with tight wallets and still offer great food for smart prices. The solution? Small plates – big profits. Different from appetizers, small plates offer flexibility for both the chefs and the customers.

Although Spanish restaurants have always traditionally offered tapas, they are becoming more popular with American, Greek, Italian and Asian cuisine also. Independent restaurants, as well as large chains such as P.F. Chang's, TGI Friday's and The Cheesecake Factory are capitalizing on the trend. The results are big.

After being in business for 16 years, Walker's American Grill and Tapas Bar knows a thing or two about small plates. They offer a combination of tapas plates and bistro style large plates to appeal to a broad spectrum of guests.

"Not everyone in the relatively conservative community of Billings, Montana is ready to part with their 'meat and potatoes' meal that they are accustomed to ordering," explains Keith Yeager, Bar/Beverage Manager. "It is a balance of the two menus and a variety of fare that has kept us profitable and popular in spite of the current economic hard times. The adage, 'One must diversify in the face of adversity,' is as important today as it ever was. One of the beauties of tapas is its simplicity – fresh ingredients used to prepare small plates in little time. Where one would expect fresh ingredients to drive up prices, the preparation tends to be less labor intensive and thus still affordable."

Small plates allow diners to try unique dishes that perhaps they would not normally risk ordering in a full size entrée. Chefs can experiment with expensive ingredients and get creative with their preparations. Restaurants can order smaller quantities of specialty items like expensive cuts of meat, wild fish, exotic vegetables, or gourmet items like truffle oil. Plus small plates usually have more visual appeal than a three-pound bowl of macaroni or a slab of porterhouse steak.

Diners enjoy the community dining aspect of small plates – sharing tasting notes, and sampling different flavors in a laid back atmosphere. The Baby Boomer demographic in particular has caught onto the tapas craze. The smaller portion sizes are appealing for calorie counting diners as a way to enjoy an indulgent dish without the guilt or bloat.

This style of dining also has a fresh ready-to-order appeal that takes pressure off of the chefs and wait staff. Dishes are brought out to the table when they are piping hot, instead of waiting for all the entrees and side dishes to be ready at the same time before serving.

"The Baby Boomers have seemed open and accepting of the smaller portions, as long as the food isn't too esoteric," adds Yeager. "They prefer familiar foods, although you can work in special twists. Braised petite veal osso buco with Yukon gold mashed potatoes and a veal demi-glaze is a way to bridge the gap between a conservative diner and the tapas style of meal."

Many restaurants notice that although the small plates offer greater flexibility for patrons who want to stay within a budget, sometimes the bills end up being larger because diners end up ordering more food. Research has shown that many times, people who enjoy more than one flavor or spice in a meal actually consume more calories per sitting than those who eat a meal with just one set of spices. The theory is, when there are more options available to us, we feel compelled to taste each different flavor to satisfy the aromatic cravings.

At Cork Wine & Tapas Bar in New Bedford, Massachusetts, the concept behind their menu is sharing "fun" food while drinking wine, as opposed to designing a wine list that complements the food. "We are not a traditional Spanish tapas bar with grilled anchovies or squid in its own ink. Our patrons are a bit more Americanized," explains proprietor Richard Cardoza. Cork was opened in 2006 as an exten-



sion of Cardoza's, a 75-year-old retail wine and spirits business. It is deliberately branded as a bar, even though it is an upscale eating establishment.

"The premise is that it's more fun to eat in a bar than to drink in a restaurant," Cardoza adds. "In a typical restaurant you sit down, order a drink, soup, salad, entrée, coffee and perhaps dessert, and then it's time to go. In our setting, the guests can stay as little or as long as



# TAPAS

they like without feeling that it is 'time for the check' (and the boot.) Although most restaurants have appetizers on their menus, patrons sometimes do not feel comfortable ordering a few apps and a cocktail unless they are sitting at the bar. In the main floor of our restaurant, it's comfortable and the staff doesn't make you feel rushed."

A salad, braised mini beef steaks and a glass of wine costs only \$22.00. "In this new economy, we are redesigning our menu to include even lower priced items that people can feel comfortable ordering," says Cardoza.

Cork's signature tapa dish was made from ingredients that just happened to be in the kitchen one day when the chef prepared a lunch snack for the owner and managers. On the main menu that week was a shrimp dish, a pork dish, risotto balls, and fresh clams. The chef whipped up a tapa with a few black olives thrown in that is reminiscent of a Portuguese dish called Pork Alentejana. This creative culinary invention points to perhaps one of the most important benefits of having a small plates menu. Chefs can reduce waste by cross utilizing fresh ingredients in multiple tapas without having a stale or boring looking menu.

Federico Castellucci, III is the owner of Sugo Restaurant & Tapas in Roswell and Duluth, Georgia. The five-generation family business is based on Italian and Greek cuisine with exotic dishes such as

veal sweet breads, goat, rabbit, octopus, and lamb belly. "Instead of saying, 'I'll have the salmon or the steak,' like they always do, diners will test the culinary waters and try something new and special," says Castellucci.

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Some patrons will order the tapas as appetizers, and some will eat their entire meal based on the small plates menu. "Many restaurants have a hard time selling their appetizers. A small plate menu almost always guarantees a first course sale though. Almost every person who walks in our door will order a few tapas," he says.

Castellucci explains that diners don't want to frequent white tablecloth restaurants these days. They want an environment that is fun, casual, busy and affordable. In fact Sugo is considering expanding with a late night bar menu of tapas, especially for the younger crowd who would find a "beer and a meatball" combo to be especially appealing after 9:00 pm.

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