

\$alvation in Small Plates

Small plates are fun for diners—and chefs enjoy the creative prep. But, best of all, they can positively affect the bottom line.

By Karen Weisberg

Menu small plates and “they” will come, according to a cross section of restaurateurs who offer them. They’re pretty much guaranteed to entice newly penny-pinching customers to venture in, and, surprisingly, rarely cannibalize entrée sales.

In fact, while nothing is quite as much fun as dessert, small plates come very, very close.

And the casual, festive mood associated with dining in tapas bars or grazing “street food” outdoors can be easily incorporated into most any small-plate menu.

Small indulgence

Executive chef Mathew Lake is so convinced that menuing small plates is the way to please today’s consumer that he ditched his

regular menu, and now exclusively offers small plates at 160-seat Honu Kitchen & Cocktails in Huntington, N.Y.

In 2007, when the then 5-year-old Blue Honu restaurant needed some renovations (and a name change), owner John Tunney and Lake decided a menu revitalization was in order, as well.

“We both love to order small plates ourselves, so we figured, why not? It’s worked out to be a good thing in this economy with our lower price point,” Lake says. “It allows the customer to control expenses instead of being locked into

Jason Ziobrowski puts a meatless spin on the slider trend with this red quinoa/farro vegetarian version.



Red Quinoa/Farro Vegetarian Sliders

Jason Ziobrowski, Corporate

Chef—Eastern Region

Indian Harvest

Bemidji, Minn.

Yield: 22 (3-oz.) servings

4½ cups vegetable stock, divided
8 oz. dry Indian Harvest Red Quinoa
8 oz. dry Indian Harvest Farro
14 oz. firm tofu
3 garlic cloves, minced
½ cup chopped fresh cilantro
1 T. cumin
3 T. chili powder
Panko breadcrumbs, as needed
Salt and pepper, to taste
Olive oil, as needed
22 mini burger buns, English muffins or split dinner rolls
22 tomato slices
Red onion, julienned, as needed
Sprouts, as needed

1) In pot, bring 2 cups vegetable stock to a boil. Rinse red quinoa. Add to boiling stock; simmer, covered, for 15 minutes. 2) In separate pot, bring 2 cups stock to a boil; simmer farro, covered, for 25-30 minutes. 3) Purée 1 cup cooked farro just enough to leave a little consistency. Purée tofu (will yield 2 cups when whipped); add to puréed farro. In bowl, combine puréed farro/tofu, remaining cooked farro, cooked red quinoa, remaining vegetable stock, garlic, cilantro, cumin and chili powder. Mix well. (If mixture is too wet, add just enough panko breadcrumbs to enhance binding.) Season with salt and pepper. 4) Portion out burger mix into 3 oz. patties. Lightly coat with panko breadcrumbs. Pan-sear in olive oil for 3 minutes per side. 5) To serve: On each bottom half of mini burger bun, English muffin or split dinner roll, layer tomato, red onion and sprouts. Top with seared quinoa/farro patty. Brush each top half of bun with condiment of choice.

an entrée priced in the mid-\$20s before even ordering a drink. They can come in and order a salad—perhaps Boston Bibb Salad with asparagus, sunflower seeds and tangerine vinaigrette—for \$8, a small plate and a glass of wine. During the week, the average check with a beverage is about \$35, and about \$43 on weekends.”

A total switch to a small-plate menu may not be for every venue, Lake warns. “Make sure you know your clientele will be open to the change. There’s no halfway. You have to be fully committed to it.”

Top sellers at Honu Kitchen include Seared Tuna, Wasabi Aioli (\$14); Gnocchi, Wild Mushrooms (\$13); and Chilean Sea Bass, Polenta Spinach Cake, Lemon Beurre Blanc (\$16). The Chilean Sea Bass is a 5-oz. portion of fish, so it’s not tiny bites of food, such as those on a tasting menu.

“It’s all about having fun,” Lake contends. “Now, more than ever, I think people don’t want to go to a high-end restaurant and sit like they’re in church. They want to have a glass of wine, laugh with friends, pass around food. Almost all restaurants



Mirabelle Tavern at Three Village Inn

This braised pork belly with carrot/ginger salad and slivered scallions is one of numerous small plates on the menu at Mirabelle Tavern.

making a difference are focusing on that. Fun is what it’s all about.”

However, experienced operator that he is, Lake doesn’t lose sight of several other requisites for success, such as consistently providing the freshness and quality that today’s more discerning customers expect. (All meats served at Honu are organically raised, hormone-free, but Lake doesn’t put that information on the menu, figuring customers will taste the difference.) Waste is another issue, and he keeps it in check simply by using “great ingredients, and not adding a bunch of other stuff.”

Small is “cool”

About 20 miles away, in Stony Brook, N.Y., chef de cuisine Guy Reuge also puts his focus on small plates (in the \$7-\$13 range, as well as in the \$15-\$18 niche for trilogy plates) at the newly opened Mirabelle Tavern at Three Village Inn. Reuge and his wife owned and operated Mirabelle, a white-tablecloth restaurant in St. James,



Cervena Venison



N.Y., for 25 years. Following a merger with Lessing's Inc., Great River, N.Y., in February 2009, he opened Restaurant Mirabelle, as well as Mirabelle Tavern.

"I realized a lot of people wanted casual versus dress up and long meals," says Reuge, who hails from France's Loire Valley region. "They wanted something 'cool,' and not have to choose from a long, burdensome menu. Here, I wanted the customer to have fun."

Open for both lunch and dinner, seven days a week, numerous small plates are featured on the regular menu. Basket of Zucchini Fritters (\$7)—the zucchini is dipped in tempura batter then fried—has proven to be one of the most popular selections. "It's served with fried *panisse*, a paste made of chickpea flour. When cooled down and solidified, we cut it into french-fry shapes and deep-fry it," Reuge explains. "It's plated with mayo that's flavored with harissa—a hot pepper paste that includes Moroccan spices."

Sliders, now pretty much an expected—and warmly anticipated—small-plate menu item, designed to share, are prepared at Mirabelle Tavern from Kobe beef. It's a "trilogy plate—where good things come in threes," with each portion placed on a

baked-in-house brioche topped with sea salt. And each receives a unique finishing touch: homemade ketchup, homemade jalapeño mayo or a small slice of bacon and American cheese.

Business has been brisk thus far, but Reuge remains vigilant. Although he doesn't hesitate to spend money on good ingredients, nothing is wasted, he says.

Small is "hot"

Roger Freedman, chef/owner of three restaurants in Jackson Hole, Wyo.—Il Villaggio Osteria, Q Roadhouse and Rendezvous Bistro—menus lots of small plates, but they're simply listed under appetizers. However, he notes that "small plates are a hot thing right now. Everybody's trying to get value out of this economy. Plus, people are starting to eat that way. They're interested in getting a bunch of appetizers as their entrée—to whet their palate with a variety of flavors while spending a bit less."

Lamb sliders, three served with a bit of Moroccan flair (and some homemade chips), are "an amazing seller" at Q Roadhouse, says Freedman. "We got this great lamb with a good amount of fat in it, and I combined it with other recipes I was doing. So there's lemon aioli on one side of the locally baked bun and almond pesto on the other side.

Left: Catalan Food & Wine menus Cervena Venison Thai street food that takes on a whimsical Southern flavor.

Right: At Abacus, these lobster/scallion 'shooters' from Kent Rathbun are a big hit with diners.

The fat in the lamb is the secret. You aim to not dry it out—just put it on the grill and don't overcook it." The lamb sliders are priced at \$9.95.

At Freedman's Rendezvous Bistro, fish tacos—two-to-the-plate—is the leading small-plate seller. Each tortilla is filled with a 2-ounce piece of fresh halibut dusted in panko and fried, plus chipotle cream, Napa cabbage slaw, fresh guacamole and salsa, for \$9.

On balance, Freedman contends that small plates aren't adversely affecting his bottom line. "All are good food cost items. Even with the lamb, we can still run about a 29% food cost, so that's cost-effective."

Big plus

Keeping "fun" top of mind, even Cervena Venison Thai Street Food (\$13), menued at 125-seat Catalan Food & Wine in Houston, can take on a whimsical Southern flavor, thanks to the efforts of executive sous chef Antoine Ware, who hails from New Orleans, and executive chef/partner Chris Shepherd,



Annie Littell

Good fatty lamb is the secret to Roger Freedman's lamb sliders at Q Roadhouse, but the lemon aioli on one side of the bun and almond pesto on the other add a nice touch.

Farms (Milford, Ind.) duck breast—prepared with chipotle/cilantro oil. “That’s been on our menu forever, and we do both an entrée and appetizer size,” he says.

Rathbun adds, “The biggest reason small plates are great is that people get to taste a lot of high-end products for little money. Most people equate their experience to the value they feel they get—they expect something of value. It’s real entrée-style food brought down to scale.”

New York-based award-winning journalist Karen Weisberg has covered the issues and luminaries of the food-and-beverage world—both commercial and noncommercial—for more than 25 years.

who has that New Orleans touch from his days at Brennan’s Houston. There’s also Mexican Street Food (mini empanadas brimming with pulled pork, \$12) and Catalan Street Food (pork butt confited in duck fat, then transformed into breaded and fried pork rillettes, plated with a spicy Tabasco sauce sediment rémoulade, \$14).

For the Thai Street Food small plate, Ware prepares sausage from a leg of venison, and shapes it into little balls. “We stick a sugar swizzle stick into each of them, so the customer can hold it by the stick to take a bite,” he says. The plate includes three balls plus a cucumber salad with a coconut sauce, a combo of sweet coconut milk and spicy hot jalapeño slices.

Ware also views small plates as a plus to the bottom line. “It’s not taking anything away from entrée sales,” he says. “It’s adding business, since some customers are coming in just for this street food, especially at lunchtime.”

Abacus in Dallas is celebrating its 10th anniversary this fall. From the beginning, executive chef/owner Kent Rathbun has been menuing small plates as an integral part of his five-category menu: specials, sushi, small plates, big plates and cheese plates.

“One of the most successful things I’ve ever done (originally for Julia Child’s birthday) is Lobster/Scallion ‘Shooters’ with Red Chile Coconut Sake (\$20 for six cups),” Rathbun says. “I place one bite-size dumpling in a sake cup, then the waiter pours the coconut/curry ‘soup’ into the cup, and the guest ‘shoots’ it. It’s phenomenally successful.”

For the restaurant’s 10th-anniversary fall menu, he plans to bring back one of his favorite products—wood-grilled Maple Leaf

Small goes vegetarian

“Yummy vegetarian” is not an oxymoron. However, if your vegetarian small plates are less than stellar, Jason Ziobrowski, corporate chef—Eastern Region for Bemidji, Minn.-based Indian Harvest whole grains/rice/legumes, has you covered. His recipe for Red Quinoa/Farro Vegetarian Sliders puts a meatless spin on the slider trend.

“Quinoa is huge right now,” Ziobrowski says. “Chefs are purchasing it since they’ve learned it boasts the nearly perfect balance of all eight essential amino acids. It’s amazing.”

Having duly noted the slider trend, he set out to create a small-plate concept that would provide chefs with a yummy trendy vegetarian/vegan option. “After portioning, these sliders freeze well,” Ziobrowski says. “When you’re ready to use them, slack them out on a sheet tray. If they’re wet or moist, add a light dusting of panko breadcrumbs (on the outside), then pop them on the grill.

“The small-plates idea is part of the lifestyle trend of people eating healthy. Eating vegetarian is part of the trend, and that won’t go away.”