



Familiar appetizers with a twist

Appetizer innovation is great — particularly when it's a variation on a well-known theme.

It's not surprising that America's favorite appetizers have remained the same for years, because, well, they're really tasty. Who doesn't enjoy beloved basics like garlic bread, chicken wings, fried cheese sticks and French fries?

But while consumers return regularly to what they like, menu trends over recent years demonstrate they're open to variations on those soul-soothing dishes.

For example, bruschetta has become a hit at many restaurants, especially when rendered in dozens of unique ways. Fried chicken wings flew from obscurity to fame on a river of vinegary-spicy Buffalo sauce, but now they're regularly broiled and smoked and served with dozens of exotic sauce choices. And Americans are gobbling up platters of poutine — French fries cloaked in melted cheese curds and gravy — while chefs at upscale casual spots seek to customize the Canadian dish by piling on smoked meats, trading Texas red chili for gravy and even adding roasted veggies in a wishful attempt at healthfulness.

The lesson here is clear: While great sellers are easily recognizable and destined to remain mainstays, making them distinctive gets customers' attention by signaling something's new. Chefs putting clever spins on reliable standards stand a solid chance of serving something memorable for

7 On-Trend Tot Starters

1. Tuck shrimp or crab in and serve with a cup of smoked tomato bisque
2. Pair with a savory tomato-bacon jam
3. Skewer with a Spanish olive for a Bloody Mary garnish
4. Stuff with high impact cheese like Gorgonzola or cheese curds
5. Coat with a spicy sprinkle of togarashi, dukkah or Sriracha sea salt
6. Stuff with shredded pork and serve with sambal
7. Go South with a drizzle of hot honey Bourbon sauce



which guests return and ultimately crave.

“We’ve found that customers do want something different — well, a little different anyway, as long as it’s recognizable,” says Ed Sadler, director of research and development for 25-unit Montana Mike’s Steakhouse based in Round Rock, Texas. The masses will always like meat and potatoes, he adds, but they’ve proven willing not only to let chefs rearrange the pieces somewhat, but also to introduce new ones. “That it’s familiar is important, but that it’s new and interesting matters just as much these days.”



According to a 2015 appetizer research report from Datassential, one safe way to begin turning the predictable into something deliciously distinctive is by fusing core favorites with ethnic flavors. Researchers found that restaurant customers were open to influences from ethnic appetizers with mainstream appeal as opportunities for flavor and freshness innovation. Spicy flavors found in Latin appetizers like empanadas and ceviche, and crunchy textures common to Asian appetizers like pot stickers, egg rolls and lettuce wraps have proven versatile when they are given mainstream applications.

“Those flavors we see coming from overseas have high appeal right now,” says

Arlene Spiegel, a New York-based restaurant consultant. “When you give a guest a chance to say, ‘Oh, I recognize that flavor,’ they’re really willing to try something new and different.”

This is true especially when portions are smaller and can be shared with multiple diners, Datassential researchers found. Since entrée portions are larger and less often shared, consumers tend to make “safe” picks when ordering main courses. But with smaller, sharable dishes, the risk is lower.

“I think people see appetizers as a place to be a little adventurous,” Spiegel says. “It’s not a big commitment to try something different and new.”

She sees restaurants responding accordingly through innovative limited time



“Tater Pigs” Stuffed Tots



offerings (LTOs), such as Joe's Crab Shack's crab nachos appetizer, and California Pizza Kitchen's Korean BBQ steak tacos — unique for their menus, but still connected to core dishes.

Hoss Grigg, owner of Big Daddy's BBQ in Meridian, Idaho, took a similar tack in creating a new Tater Pigs appetizer last year. Starting with the Idahoan® Tater Tumbler Appetizer Mix as a base, he blended smoked bacon and cheddar with the shredded potatoes, formed portions into balls and fried them. Sales of the new appetizers sizzled, he says.

"You see tots everywhere now, but we wanted something that had our signature on it," Grigg says. "The mix is super easy to use, so we can give customers something that you won't find everywhere, and that's not a big deal labor-wise."



Cheesy Bacon House Tots

Sadler used the Idahoan mix to develop a similar and highly successful cheesy bacon tater served with sriracha-infused ketchup, but he saw opportunities to push the envelope further by creating Totchos. Forming the Tater Tumbler Appetizer Mix into wide, flat coin shapes and frying them, he created this riff on nachos that included refried black beans, sliced jalapeños, grilled chicken, pico de gallo and cilantro-lime cream.

"That really took off because people understood it," Sadler says. "And it's really good, too."

Though the Datassential report found some consumers claiming interest in unique appetizers which are healthful and served in smaller portions, those claims were contradicted slightly by findings pointing toward preferences like group shareability — i.e. larger plates — and indulgence. Grigg says his customers' habits tend to reflect those latter preferences, adding that dining out with others still maintains the feel of a small celebration.

"Sometimes customers say one thing and do the opposite," Grigg says. "Maybe they try to eat better at home and have a little more fun when they go out. At least that's what we see our customers doing."

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