



Signature appetizers with versatile ingredients increase profits

Restaurateurs drive creativity and sales with potato appetizers.

When it comes to popular appetizers, there's often a potato involved. Be it French fries, tater tots or potato skins, the king of tubers often dominates the sales mix in a menu's starter section.

Eager for new ways to deliver flavor news on the appetizer menu and generate great margins, chefs are now using this reliable standard as a versatile platform for innovation. Whether a variation on a proven theme (smoked bacon and cheese tater tots) or a truly unusual twist (fried potato-wrapped shrimp), new potato-based appetizers are appearing on restaurant menus everywhere.

Top 5 Reasons Potato Appetizers are Perfect Profit Partners

1. Great canvas for delivering **flavor** news
2. The **margin** potential is endless
3. Multiple **variations** and applications from one product
4. Guests are seeking out appetizers with **sharing** in mind
5. People love the **interaction** of finger food

"We're really seeing innovation [with potato appetizers] in independent concepts," says Leslie Kerr, president of Intellaprice, a Boston-based menu research and consulting firm. "This is an area independent concepts want to take advantage of because of the margins it offers."



At Sagar Chinese in New York's borough of Queens, potato-battered shrimp are served with a carrot-sweetened red chili dipping sauce. At Olga's in Tinton Falls, N.J., potato, onion and cheese pierogies — pan-fried in bacon fat— are notably popular. And at Nashville, Tenn.-based O'Charley's, guests can tie into a pile of crispy potato tots served with a creamy cheddar fondue.

"The versatility of a potato appetizer is only limited by the chef's imagination," says Arlene Spiegel, a New York-based restaurant consultant. Easily paired with sauces, salsas, cheeses and ground or diced meats, "it becomes the perfect carrier for a second item on the plate."

According to a 2015 appetizer research report from Datassential, when choosing an appetizer, consumers look for unique, upscale, and visually appealing offerings and over half of consumers surveyed say they are interested in shared plates.

Those findings didn't surprise Kerr. "People love finger foods" she says. "They like the interaction."



Ed Sadler, director of research and development for Montana Mike's Steakhouse say he creates many of the chain's appetizers for sharing. Not only do customers like sharing, the addition to a table's check seems less when divided among multiple customers.

"Some of our selections are designed to feed three to four per appetizer," says Sadler. "It's a generous portion for less than \$10 ... and food cost is about 30 percent."

According to Kerr's research, potato-centric appetizers are affordable for both customers and restaurants. The most common price nationally for appetizers such as cheese fries, tater tots and potato skins is \$6.99, although the range swings from \$4.29 to \$9.99.

Last year, Sadler began working with Idahoan® Tater Tumbler Appetizer Mix, a shredded potato product that's easily customized by forming into balls, pancakes and baskets, or stuffed with vegetables, cheeses or meats. He created a cheesy bacon tater tot that was fried and served with sriracha-infused ketchup and hand-formed tots, made from the Idahoan® Tater Tumbler Appetizer Mix,



covered with refried black beans, jalapeño slices, grilled chicken, pico di gallo and cilantro-lime cream. The nacho-like presentation led to the name Totchos, and its subsequent sales success.

“Idahoan® Tater Tumbler Appetizer Mix is a very operator-friendly item, one of the better speed scratch items that’s hit the market in years,” Sadler says. “We want to minimize the opportunity for inconsistency in product, and this really helps with that.”

As the owner of Big Daddy’s BBQ in Meridian, Idaho, Hoss Grigg thought it natural to add smoked brisket to the center of his fried tater tots made with Idahoan® Tater Tumbler Appetizer Mix to create a loaded tot dubbed Tater Pigs.

“Since everything tastes better with bacon, why not add cheddar and make it a winner?” he says. The sharable appetizer sells for \$5.95 and includes six to eight 1.25-ounce tots. “They run us about 14 cents apiece, so we’re generous with them.”

