

RE-IMAGINING YOUR MENU

with Produce Front and Center

Today's customers demand seasonal produce, ethnic influences, and layers of flavor. They are emphasizing quality over quantity; they're adventurous and want to experience new tastes, textures, and ingredients; they're knowledgeable about a greater diversity of foods, and expect standout presentations as seen on the Food Network and in food magazines.

The great news is that customers don't seem to mind when flavor, texture, and artful presentation are substituted for larger portion sizes. So, while current consumer preferences pose multiple challenges for operators, the dining landscape is well primed for smart menu strategies that include more fresh produce and unusual ingredients to achieve well-balanced, nutritious dishes with perfectly balanced layers of flavor. This presents many opportunities to put produce front and center, as in the following suggestions.

*Pictured: Zucchini Rolls
with Cheese, Basil and Pine Nuts*



SEE THE WHOLE PLATE

Rather than positioning the starch and a vegetable of the day as “sides,” marry them to the protein in your own signature ways, and use a mold when appropriate to create height. The opportunity here is to incorporate produce into main courses with a respect for their complementary textures, colors, and contribution to the plate. For example, combine braised pork with chickpeas and brussels-sprout leaves for visual and textural appeal; instead of serving six oysters in the same style, serve just three oysters, each prepared in a different style, for a tri-color assortment. You can charge a little less for the smaller portion, yet still turn a higher profit.

BUY IN SEASON

For maximum flavor impact combined with cost savings, keep an eye out for in-season, locally grown herbs, fruits, and vegetables whenever possible. Your in-season sourcing will go a long way toward differentiating you from the competition. Treat your customers to such in-season delicacies as pencil-thin asparagus, baby zucchini with the blossoms still attached, or a sour-cherry compote that balances the richness of grilled duck and tarragon sweet potatoes. You’ll be pleasantly surprised at the in-season cost, as well as the price you can charge thanks to customers’ higher value perception of the finished dish.

EXPLORE EMERGING VARIETIES

Twenty years ago, who would’ve thought the humble potato would now be available in so many different shapes, sizes, and colors? Today you can find fingerling potatoes, purple potatoes, Yukon golds and other “new” varieties right next to the traditional whites, reds, and russets. Take advantage of their contrasting colors and shapes to create dazzling plates. Growers are bringing back heirloom varieties of tomato, corn, melons and other produce. Be sure to attribute the source of these items, and name the specific varieties, on your menu. Although heirloom varieties do cost more, they also offer rich flavors and unusual color contrasts – and command a higher price.

CUSTOMER PREFERENCES

– A BALANCING ACT

According to Unilever Food Solutions' *World Menu Report Global Research Findings 2012*:

- ◆ **52%** of diners worldwide look for healthier menu options but 72% of them decide to treat themselves instead with something that's more appealing and not that nutritious.
- ◆ **40%** of diners say that healthy menu items don't sound as tasty. Plus, they are afraid these choices aren't as filling; people want to be as satisfied as possible when spending their money to dine out.
- ◆ **66%** of international diners would prefer to see just "slightly" healthier menu options when eating out.
- ◆ **60%** of respondents would like to make small changes to their meal to make it healthier, rather than swap out their favorite dish for a healthier alternative.
- ◆ **57%** of those surveyed believe that healthier options tend to be more expensive.
- ◆ One of the main barriers to choosing healthy options is the unappealing way in which they are described on the menu.

What does this mean for you?

- ~ Make meals "slightly" healthier by including plenty of vegetables, lowering the fat content, grilling instead of frying and using fresh ingredients – while keeping your dishes hearty and flavorful.
- ~ Describe menu items to appeal to customers; let them understand where the ingredients come from and how they are prepared in your kitchen.
- ~ Keep an eye on portion costs to keep the menu price within reach of your customers.

BORROW FROM ETHNIC INFLUENCES

Traditional cuisines are great sources of inspiration for vegetarian and vegetable-based dishes. You could explore the huge range of Vietnamese salads using raw papaya, luffa squash and lemon grass, or Indian yogurt-based salads and chutneys that give a lively flair to such simple ingredients as grated carrots and spring cucumbers. Latin America offers any number of fresh ingredients such as epazote (a leafy herb with a clean, pungent taste), chayotes (a crisp, pear-shaped vegetable), and nopales (the tender ears of the prickly pear cactus). Raw and cooked salsas also offer endless opportunities to incorporate fresh ingredients into the flavor profiles of your creations. Further afield, Mediterranean can offer inspiration with such ingredients as fresh fava beans, poppy greens and amaranth shoots. Layer the flavors and textures for unique, palate-pleasing contrasts.

USE FRESH HERBS AND WHOLE SPICES

While excellent ground spices and dried herbs are readily available, you can see, smell, and taste the difference when you start with fresh herbs or whole spices that you grind in a coffee mill set aside for the purpose. Try it for yourself by roasting cumin seeds lightly in a sauté pan and grinding them immediately before use. The volatile oils – which contain the aroma – dissipate rapidly after grinding. This simple technique captures and transfers the full, rich flavor to your creations. You can taste the difference fresh herbs make in salad dressings, and their brightness will highlight your emphasis on seasonal ingredients.



BEVERAGES

While ready-to-serve beverages and sodas offer great convenience, there's nothing quite like fresh fruit juices and purees to elevate the value perception and profit margin of your beverages. Look to the range of Mexican-style aguas frescas, which incorporate fresh watermelon or other fruit juices with lightly sweetened water. Serve them in appropriate glassware to highlight the delightful colors, and finish them with a fruit garnish and a sprig of mint. Ever-popular smoothies also offer loads of creative potential. And for customers who want a healthy alternative to soda, offer a tall spritzer made with freshly squeezed juices and a dash of effervescent seltzer.

DESSERTS

This time of year is perfect for healthy, fruit-based desserts, and you don't need the skills of a pastry chef to take advantage. Fruits are naturally beautiful, both by themselves and in contrasting taste- and color combinations with other fruits, so they can stand on their own without much embellishment. Try serving sliced, perfectly ripe cantaloupe, dotted with raspberries and blueberries, and garnished with chocolate mint – the mint variety will be new to many of your customers, and they'll be pleasantly surprised by the wonderfully fresh taste. Fruits are also perfect for house-made ice creams and sorbets, as well as for sauces to use as dessert toppings. They're some of the *coolest* things about summer.

