

Two menus double the dining experience at Savona and Bar Savona in Gulph Mills, Pa., where diners can opt for fine dining or share fried artichoke hearts and other informal dishes in the bar.



# BIG DISH Redux

The small-plate approach has changed dining patterns forever,  
but some chefs prove that bigger is sometimes better

BY JOAN LANG

Savvy diners may get ready to duck and cover when the server asks, “Are you familiar with how our menu works?” The need for a tour guide through the friendly prices on small and medium plates sounds good until diners realize they need to order at least two of those before the large plate, or entrée, arrives. Designations like “nibbles,” “tastes,” “cold plates,” “firsts” and “side dishes for the table” can make the tariffs mysteriously multiply.

“What began as a felicitous trend of the aughts has turned into a method for running up the check,” snorted Adam Platt, the restaurant reviewer for *New York* magazine, explaining why “The Small-Plate Explosion” was one of the 10 “Trends We’re Tired Of” in his annual year-end dining guide.

But there’s no doubt that the old menu structure has been changed forever, from the standard appetizer-entrée-dessert progression to a more free-flowing “have it your way” approach. The need for value intensified just as rigid menu-course, daypart designations and stuffy fine-dining concepts fell by the wayside. Menu manipulation is one of the successful restaurateur’s greatest weapons, and this perfect storm of trends has spurred some interesting menu-based responses.

## COMFORT TRUMPS CONFUSION

“People need to be able to figure out what they’re spending,” says John Tunney, co-owner of Honu Kitchen & Cocktails,

Huntington, N.Y., who recently changed the menu concept back from small plates to a more-traditional service of American-style comfort food with family-style sides.

“I found that a lot of my customers were frustrated or confused with small plates, because they didn’t know how much to order and couldn’t be sure what it would cost them. This is no time to be doing that, so we put back the traditional, predictable menu.”

In fact, Tunney, who also owns the Mexican restaurant Besito and American Roadside Burgers, was early to the small-plates party when he introduced it three years ago with a menu change at Honu. Now, he believes, “people want comfort in every way,” and while making a meal of small plates once in a while can be fun, many people find it difficult.

“They may not understand the concept; they may not like to share; they may think it’s too much work to have to think about how many plates they need to order,” Tunney says. With the new menu, people can drop in more often and always be assured of a good value.

It’s not so much the items themselves that have been changed, notes Tunney, but the way they’re portioned and packaged. Pumpkin tortellini, short ribs and mac and cheese are still on the menu, but they’ve been regrouped as appetizer, entrée and shareable side, respectively. Tunney took a single, long list of plates, for which relative price was the only indication of what might be a first course and what might be a main, and organized them into two

# The FLAVOR PAYOFF

## Focusing on the New Frugality

Our latest bump on the road to prosperity has spurred changes in consumer behavior, with Americans getting creative about having their cake and eating at least some of it. A recent survey from the Culinary Visions Panel program, led by Chicago-based Olson Communications, shows consumers are continuing to enjoy eating out but ordering differently to satisfy pocketbooks and palates. The online survey polled 210 consumers who identified themselves as frequent patrons of casual-dining restaurants, and their responses reflect a “new frugality” mindset. More than half of participants reported changing their dining choices in the past 12 months as a result of the economy; another 81 percent are paying closer attention to menu prices. Here are some of their spending strategies:

**Deal Hunting:** 72 percent of respondents noted researching the best dining values and using coupons. Operators report specially priced dinners — \$23 three-course lunches or daily “meal deals” — are increasingly popular.

**Share Alike:** 40 percent of those surveyed said they have split an entrée with a dining partner more often than a year ago; a third reported patronizing restaurants with larger portions that can be shared or taken as leftovers. Respondents also noted sharing appetizers and desserts.

**Swap & Save:** Instead of ordering a slew of appetizers, cocktails, main dishes and desserts, many consumers take the “either/or” route, choosing either appetizers or desserts or cocktails to keep a lid on expenses.

Consumers may be looking to cut costs, but many say they don't want operators to cut back on quality and service in their own effort to rein in expenses, such moves are perceived as leading to a decline in value. That perception is not lost on operators. Culinary Visions panelist Nancy Brussat, of Convito Café and Market in Chicago, explains, “We would not consider cutting the quality of our ingredients or skimping on service staff, because those relate directly to our customer's experience.”

Notes Sharon Olson, president of Olson Communications, “People still enjoy going out to eat and are finding creative ways to stay within their budgets. Whether or not we see a pullback in consumer concerns later this year or next year, it seems that some of these emerging and evolving behaviors are here to stay.”

SOURCE: CULINARY VISIONS/OLSON COMMUNICATIONS

principle categories (appetizers and entrées), plus steaks and sides. Entrées include one choice of side, and customers can order extra for the table. There's also a Plate of the Day: Tuesday, fried chicken; Friday, corn-crusting halibut; and so on.

He's added more comfort classics, such as a chopped salad, onion soup and a cheeseburger. After first testing contenders as specials, he's also added two different cuts of Cedar Ridge beef and the now-signature grilled swordfish with oven-roasted tomatoes, capers and olive oil.

“Making the menu change was a comfort thing, and it's working very well,” he reports.

### FULL-PLATE APPROACH

At Fish & Farm in San Francisco, the menu showcases “New American seafood and artisan meats” and has reverted from a high-fallutin,' multi-course tasting-menu format to straight-up plates of farm-to-fork classics.

The restaurant opened in 2007 with a selection of starters grouped under “Appetizers, Soup, Salads;” entrées in the “Fish, Pasta, Artisan Meat” category; and a half-dozen “Side Dishes.” Two months later, the opening chef departed, and owner Frank Klein hired a whiz-bang Michelin-starred chef who garnered a lot of press coverage but, by last June, had halved the restaurant's volume, from 120 to 60 covers a night on average, while simultaneously raising prices and sending food costs spiraling.

“The food was just too intricate, and customers were fed up,” says Klein.

He fired that chef, wrote a specific new menu showing exactly what he wanted and hired his new chef based on that. Chad Newton arrived in June 2009, and now Fish & Farm has the lowest price point and the highest revenues it's ever seen, with an eight-point improvement in food costs and a 45-minute-shorter table turn.

“It's a better fit with both the times and the neighborhood,” says Klein, “and people are actually spending more on extra courses, wine, etc., because it's all at a price they want.”

### RIGHT FOOD, RIGHT TIME

The food is classic American with an ingredient-driven spin: house-made gnocchi

with ham hock, peas and favas; slow-roasted pork ribs with honey-harissa barbecue sauce and vinegar slaw; Liberty Ale-battered fish and chips with malt salt; Southern-fried Petaluma chicken; a Niman Ranch cheeseburger with upgraded accompaniments; seasonal fruit crisps; and Cheesecake in a Jar for dessert. Appetizers and sides are very shareable, which adds to the homey, welcoming vibe.

“It’s the kind of food that people want to eat now,” asserts Klein, “simple to understand, not intimidating, and when you see the plate, you say, ‘Wow, that’s a great value!’”

The restaurant is also back to attracting its original target market of young couples, families and Tenderloin neighborhood locals — the kind of folks who can be counted on as regulars, in other words. And the adjacent American Box “lunch-takeaway” appeals to the busy working class with box lunches, which can also be taken into the restaurant to eat. These include under-\$10 favorites like the Juicy Lucy Cheeseburger with local organic potato salad and “secret sauce;” Bacon Tater Tots and Slaw; Line-Caught Tuna Sandwich; and San Francisco “Chop” Salad.

### COMFORT 2.0

“I like to put a few upper-scale touches on classic, comfort-food items,” says Gregory Denton, executive chef of the hot, new “refined yet rustic” contemporary American restaurant MetroVino, in Portland, Ore. He’s putting it mildly. In his hand, humble potato salad comprises pork belly braised in Pabst Blue Ribbon, maple syrup and smoked paprika, roasted, sautéed to order and served over fingerling potatoes, topped with flaked, house-cured smoked trout, brunoise of shallots and celery and garnished with lemon-mustard vinaigrette, diced cucumbers house-made crème fraîche and fried dill.

“This is the best potato salad you ever tasted,” Denton assures.

Entrées, meanwhile, include slow-roasted pork shoulder with mushrooms, heirloom beans, broccolini and chimichurri; ravioli of butternut squash and goat cheese; and Brussels sprouts, fingerling potatoes and hazelnut-sage-pesto broth. Selections are at the low end of the \$20 range, with the

exception of a grilled rib-eye with fried potatoes, Gorgonzola-creamed mustard greens and Oregon truffle salad — a clear play on the juggernaut steak-frites with creamed spinach and sautéed mushrooms.

Welcome to the new face of comfort food. Because when you think about it, \$13 for potato salad might sound outrageous, until you see the prep list.

“The crème fraîche alone takes 12 hours to make,” explains Denton. “The pork belly cures for three days before it’s even cooked.”

Menu items like the smoked-trout potato salad can support a premium price, points out the chef, and they’re nothing someone would make at home. “What we do is really reflected in increased labor, adding value to familiar ingredients and upgrading iconic flavors.”

This is also the kind of hearty, stick-to-your-ribs food that diners don’t necessarily get when taking a small-plate approach. Denton, like a lot of chefs, bases many of his menu items on favorites from his own life experience. Originally from Vermont, he grew up in the family restaurant, feasting on Salisbury steak, club sandwiches and chowder. MetroVino’s New England-style seafood chowder references that past, thick with oysters, mussels, clams, Kampachi (Hawaiian yellowfin) and halibut — all trim from other items — garnished with parsley oil and freshly crisped, house-cured bacon and its fat.

The Alpine cabbage-and-bread soup is based on a rustic dish he enjoyed in Chamonix, a ski resort in France. With brown chicken stock as the base, it’s topped with garlic-rubbed bread, Gruyère and Parmesan. “It’s just like onion soup on the setup, with a ‘fancier’ of strips of smoked pork cheeks.”

### BUNDLE UP

Offering different versions of value is certainly what the current economy requires. At Ben Pao, Lettuce Entertain You’s contemporary Asian restaurant in Chicago, the menu has always been a work in progress, according to partner Ed Culleen, as both the marketplace and the customers have changed. The latest round of revisions kicks off with the lunchtime addition of “dim sumwiches,” Chinese-inspired sandwiches that share



QDOBA

At Qdoba, pairing new and old menu items and offering guilt-free selections spur customers to branch out with their orders.

prominent menu real estate with the existing \$10.95 Lunch Bundles combos.

Priced at \$8.95 to 10.95, new bundles include hot-and-sour soup and spiced wonton crisps, plus a selection of Bang Bang Chicken

(scallion pancakes filled with shredded chicken, tamarind-peanut sauce and spicy pickles), Braised Pork

with Buns (served with house-made sesame buns and spicy pickles), and Spicy Moo Shu Shrimp

(Sichuan shrimp with fresh moo shu pancakes). Each represents better utilization of

existing product, as well as a desire to add speedy, value-priced options and to simplify production.

At the same time, the menu

has been downsized significantly, from an eight-page compendium to a more-manageable, two-pager.

“It’s a menu style we tried five years ago, but it was too ahead of its time,” says Culleeny. “Now we’ve taken it out, dusted it off and relaunched it.”

Customer convenience was top of mind: the left-hand side of the new menu features starters, soup and new salads, as well as the dim sumwiches and existing Lunch Bundles (combo plates). The right-hand side touts a limited selection of classic entrées and a Group Share menu. Average checks have been deliberately downsized as well, with all early indications confirming that sales will be strengthened through volume.

Qdoba Mexican Grill’s new Craft 2 menu is all about customer choice. The 480-plus-unit Colorado-based chain, known for its handcrafted fresh-Mex food, had been testing the new mix-and-match menu concept, says Ted Stoner, director of strategic product development, when the recession fueled the need to offer affordable variety and less-guilt-inducing menu options, including the chain’s signature Naked Burrito and Naked Taco Salad options.

Craft 2 lets patrons order two, smaller versions of a number of different existing menu items for under \$6 — a direct response to feedback that customers wanted to experiment with new tastes but were too hooked on their favorites to vary their usual order — a nice problem for an operator.

“It’s a natural fit with the trend toward offering more options and dynamic new flavors but still allowing our customers to have the food they come to Qdoba for,” Stoner says. “We also are discovering that they’ll come here more frequently if they can eat with less guilt, and many of the smaller portions, combined with a salad or a Naked Burrito, come in at under 500 calories. It’s the best of both worlds and represents a real point of differentiation for us.”

Included in the Craft 2 program — introduced with a limited-time, online game called Craft Your Life that earned players coupon winnings — are smaller versions of items showcasing many Qdoba signature products, including slow-cooked, hand-pulled pork, tortilla soup and the chain’s unique sauces, such as Ancho Chile BBQ and Poblano Pesto.

“We found that people are so focused on ordering the things they love at Qdoba that they wouldn’t even look at the menu board for something else they might like,” explains Stoner, “so we really had to go out of our way to encourage them to try something new.”

## TWO MENUS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

At Savona, an awarding-winning, upscale restaurant in the affluent suburb of Gulph Mills, Pa., owner Evan Lambert created a second menu by recasting some areas of his historic building, a former home with many smaller dining rooms and an intimate dine-in wine cellar, as the more-casual Bar Savona.

“For 13 years, we’ve been a successful restaurant, with a single-menu program for 12 of them,” says Lambert. “Then two things happened: The economy started to decline, and that really affected both fine dining and private dining, and in the last several years, people have been looking for more-casual, bistro-like dining experiences.”

With the writing on the wall, Lambert enlarged the bar, added a patio and allocated one dining room to the new Bar Savona, with

“Dim sumwich” lunch bundles helped streamline the menu, better utilize existing product and increase volume at Ben Pao in Chicago.



BEN PAO



a second, more moderately priced menu of antipasti, pizzas, pastas and simple Italian-style entrées. Leaving the more-formal Savona intact was a let’s-see-what-happens decision, but over the past year, business has grown dramatically overall.

Sales are split 50-50 between the concepts, and the two-menu format is meeting customer needs.

“We’re making the same amount of money, and it’s what the world needs right now. And, in addition to keeping our regular clientele, we’re bringing in new customers,” notes Lambert.

Although ingredients are cross-utilized as much as possible, there is little actual overlap between the two menus. The signature dish on the Savona menu, in fact, is still the Dover sole, served tableside and accounting for some 25 percent of that concept’s sales.

At Bar Savona, patrons have embraced the likes of house-made mozzarella with prosciutto and roasted peppers; polenta with fricassee of seasonal mushrooms; daily risotto or farrotto (farro, risotto-style); pappardelle Bolognese; classic pizza Margherita; veal Milanese; and chicken under a brick.

If there’s one thing that rivals value among today’s harried diners, it’s convenience. Another stroke of genius on Lambert’s part is that the entire Bar Savona menu is available to go; patrons call ahead, charge to their filed credit cards, and the valet parking attendant shuttles the order out to them.

“People absolutely love it,” Lambert says. “People can pick up food on the way home from the gym and not even have to get out of the car.” ☺

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### TAKE-AWAY TIPS

**MAKE IT STICK:** Full-sized, stick-to-your-ribs plates are the comfort people need in hard times

**AVOID STICKER SHOCK:** Small plates still sell; just be clear about the size-price ratio

**DO THE MATH:** Offering dishes in different sizes and price points scores with more people

**DECLUTTER:** Simpler menus and build-your-own meals add up to convenience and value for customers

**MAKE NEW FRIENDS:** Bundle smaller versions of new dishes with old favorites or promote mix-and-match choices to introduce new ones

**MAKE IT MOVE:** Curbside convenience and boxed lunches are value-added incentives for time- and cash-strapped customers