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# FLAVOR & THE MENU

## TOP 10 TRENDS

2017

Influencing Flavor and  
Menu Development

FLAVOR TRENDS, STRATEGIES & SOLUTIONS FOR MENU DEVELOPMENT

## Small Potatoes Go Big

Little spuds are becoming a go-to for modern flavor exploration

At Bar Tartine in San Francisco, a small plate features mini potatoes roasted and smoked, smashed and deep fried, then tossed with herbs and a black garlic vinaigrette. A dollop of ramp mayonnaise ratchets up the craveability factor even more. In Reston, Va., Vinifera Wine Bar & Bistro serves a side of salt-roasted patatas bravas, which stars whole baby Yukon potatoes roasted in a salt crust, deep fried then tossed in paprika oil and caper relish and accompanied by a saffron aioli. At Old Glory in Nashville, a bar snack of smoked baby potatoes sports tasso ham, paprika butter and herbs.



Something wonderful is happening in the world of potatoes. Minis, marbles, fingerlings, young, new—chefs are tapping into their menu potential, understanding that they are a safe platform for flavor innovation. They practically cry out for techniques like smoking, smashing, frying, roasting, blistering—offering up all of themselves for textural play and flavor-carrying.

There's an elegance and an eatability that comes with small potatoes. Modern small potato dishes offer portion control to diners, packaged in a more manageable, shareable and approachable presentation. Propelled by the veg-centric movement, chefs are leveraging the glorious qualities found in these small gems. With as much attention to flavor, technique and presentation as granted to the Brussels sprout, the cauliflower and the carrot, small potatoes are showing off the ability to wow as bar bites, shareables and sides. "Few things are better than a perfectly salty, crispy-on-the-outside and creamy-on-the-inside taste of potato goodness. Mashed, boiled, fried or baked, the potato is one of the kitchen's most adaptive and familiar ingredients," says Louis Maskin, strategist with The Culinary Edge. "It is no wonder that the mini potato is making its way into the limelight, lending itself as a wonderful platform for creativity."

Another driver propelling menu innovation around small potatoes is the momentum on the retail side, both in varieties offered in the produce section and new convenience products. "Have you seen the grocery store aisle lately? Little potatoes are popping up everywhere," says Rob Corliss, chef and founder of ATE (All Things Epicurean), a foodservice consulting firm. "In addition to the miniature varieties of Red Bliss, Yukon Gold and purple potatoes, there are now microwaveable platters and to-go cups of mini potatoes. It seems that the snacking lifestyle is now becoming ingredient-specific, hence small potatoes. Eating patterns have shifted to clockless meal periods."

That growing snacking category—which keeps getting more inventive as consumers look for flexible options according to their schedules—is key in helping position small potatoes as a bar snack and appetizer. "Among the products winning innovation awards at the recent SIAL global food conference was a new fresh convenience product—small potatoes in a microwaveable cup with sauce in the lid," says **Sharon Olson, executive director, Culinary Visions Panel**. "The potatoes are already washed and ready to eat with the skin on, and they are available with a variety of different sauces. These products are fast, fun and fresh—the trifecta of consumer appeal."

# Mindful On A Mission

Being thoughtful and intentional in all aspects of menu development makes a big impact

## The Back Story

Led by demand from younger generations coupled with the growing prevalence of fast casuals delivering on these demands, the need for transparency in sourcing, community outreach and fair labor practices shows no signs of abating. It's no longer sufficient to tuck a mission statement in a dusty corner of the website. It needs to be tangible. "It's so important for operators to let diners know what they're doing," says Nielsen. "Millennial consumers are so savvy about finding out what they want to know about brands."



The modern back story, then, is driven by transparency. It's about clean labels, suppliers, community. It's about telling a compelling story that resonates with today's diners.

"We spend a lot of time building relationships with suppliers," says Dan Long, chief culinary officer and co-founder of Mad Greens, a fast-casual salad concept based in Golden, Colo. "Our marketing is built around showcasing the relationship between our brand and suppliers of our food. We're in Colorado. We can't grow lettuce year-round. But we can still have valuable relationships with suppliers who aren't local. We can tell their story of sustainability, water usage and labor."

Long says the foundation of Mad Greens, which now has 29 locations, is transparency. "That's our approach. We're not everything to everybody but we want to tell you what we're doing. It's that openness and mindfulness around what we do that lends authenticity and is important to consumers today."

Clean labels are a big part of the back story in this new mindful menu mission. Panera has laid down the gauntlet, helping to frame what clean means and why consumers should care. Modern Market is close to claiming all of its products as clean label. "There's been a lot of research and a lot of time formulating an opinion," says Weir. That thoughtfulness is built into this trend. He maintains a living document with three columns under these headings: "This is Fine," "Prefer to Avoid" and "Hell No." "We started with that third column of firm no's and then worked on the middle column," he says. "It's a core value for us, so we're investing our time and resources in it."

Ensuring a long-term outlook on mindfulness in menu development, culinary education programs are placing a greater emphasis here, influencing the future generation of chefs and menu developers. "This is something we are taking to heart," says T.J. Delle Donne, assistant dean of Johnson & Wales College of Culinary Arts. "In our new bachelor's degree in culinary arts, we are looking at mapping outcomes such as sustainable sourcing and elevated craft skill in a new set of labs we are referring to as 'chef-driven fast casual.'"

**"Mindful dining is a mega-trend, and forward-thinking chefs are responsible for raising consumer consciousness about many issues. Consumers like to patronize restaurants that they believe share their values." - Sharon Olson**



# Seafood's Modern Hook

Seafood is turning heads with its flavor-forward, casual vibe

## Innovations & Strategies

One of the main hooks into the seafood trend is sustainability. It lends a meaningful narrative that resonates with diners. "Many of these operators make sustainability and ethical sourcing a core component of their messaging strategy, aligning with a general consumer desire to know more about where and how their food is sourced," says Amanda Topper, associate director of foodservice research at Mintel. Brown Bag's messaging touts "lean and clean;" Soulfish Poke in Las Vegas claims community, health and environment; and Slapfish calls out "sustainability in practice."



"Consumers are craving clean, healthful proteins, and chefs are excited about the creativity seafood affords them," says Rob Corliss, chef and founder of ATE (All Things Epicurean) who also serves as executive chef at the fast casual Unforked in Overland Park, Kan. "The consumer connection to food with a story reflects the allure of seafood. From endangered species, best fishing practices, health and wellness to regional favorites, seafood can deliver a compelling and genuine story."

Donna Lee, founder of Brown Bag Seafood Co., opened the fast casual in 2014 with a focus on providing flavorful, sustainable fresh fish. Currently with two units in Chicago, the brand is in growth mode, opening two more locations this year. "We saw a need in the fast-casual format for fresh seafood," she says. "My goal was to create a user-friendly approach around a healthful lifestyle. I wanted to change the old-school mindset of either getting a fast-food lunch of pulverized fish sticks or a thirty-dollar grilled salmon at a white tablecloth. This is a different option."

At Brown Bag, diners can customize their seafood experience, choosing from sandwich, salad, taco, "straight up" or Powerbox options. Protein choices include a daily catch, crispy fish bites and salmon with teriyaki scallion. Curry fish cakes are a newer item, served with a side of fresh ginger-lime sauce. "We sell out faster than we can make them," says Lee. The most popular item, she says, is the rotating daily catch. "It gives us flexibility in offering what's fresh, available and sustainable, and it helps us tell our story," she says.

**"Sustainability is a concept consumers are beginning to really understand, and when it comes to seafood, restaurants have a real opportunity to add romance to the message by telling the story of the source, or even the fisherman."**

- Sharon Olson

# Chickpeas Go Chic

The humble chickpea emerges as a menu superstar

## Falafel and Other Fritters

Crispy, craveable and versatile, it's no surprise falafel is now making moves on U.S. menus. Seen traditionally ensconced in fluffy pita with tahini, maybe with white onions and the fiery hot s'chug, it's now getting a more Americanized treatment, borrowing from the fish taco build—without losing any of its craveable cred. The falafel taco at Bartaco, with multiple locations on the East Coast, serves a cigar-shaped falafel in a corn tortilla, topped with tzatziki. Domo Taco in New York offers a Kimchi Falafel Taco, with miso slaw, pico de gallo and cheddar-Jack cheese. In Los Angeles, Ihsan's Falafels adds a Sudanese touch, subbing out tahini with a spicy peanut sauce, while Gjusta, in Venice, Calif., serves a falafel sandwich on a toasted baguette.

Bar bites and sides are also taking a look at chickpeas, understanding how well they take on texture and flavor. "The authenticity and relevancy of chickpeas for many on-trend world cuisines is a benefit," says Webster. "Various preparations can significantly change the texture—whether the chickpea is mashed, roasted, spiced, candied or battered."

The chickpea fries at David Burke Fabrick in New York, consist of chickpea flour cooked in milk, seasoned with fennel pollen, salt and pepper, set in a deep pan, then cut and deep fried. "The slightly salty, crispy outside of the chickpea fries mixed with the nutty, creamy interior makes these craveable" says Michael Franey, Fabrick's executive chef. They're served with chipotle aioli.

At Urban Farmer in Cleveland, a seasonal Harvest Tomato Soup is served with chickpea fritters, cilantro and cumin oil.

"I think there's big opportunity with the chickpea burger," says Schlotzsky's Morales. "It's got a neutral flavor that you can build on, from a Middle Eastern profile with tahini, garlic and lemon to a Mexican profile with chile peppers, lime and cilantro." The chickpea burger holds potential for creative interpretation. As evidence, look to Fare Well in Washington, D.C., where a mushroom-chickpea burger is adorned with walnuts, sunflower seeds, aioli and caramelized onion.

## CHICKPEA FRIES ARE ON FIRE

By Sharon Olson

Chickpea fries may be giving the ubiquitous french fry a challenge. Flavorful menu examples abound, showcasing a range of global and regional profiles.

- Chickpea fritters make the menu at Burmasphere, a food-cart concept in Portland, Ore., featuring Burmese cuisine. The fritters are made with creamy chickpea polenta, deep fried and served with tamarind dipping sauce.
- Park Kitchen, a Northwest American restaurant also in Portland, Ore., offers a small plate of chickpea fries with a roasted squash dipping sauce.
- Piccolo Sogno in Chicago menus Cecina Fritta (chickpea fries) with Parmesan and rosemary—as craveable as it gets.



# Next-Gen Nachos

An “anything goes” approach fuels innovation in this fan favorite

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## Safe Adventures

Combining the unfamiliar with the familiar is a common theme in food-service today, in response to the tendency for consumers to go with what they know while looking for something a bit different. “Nachos are a casual gateway to adventurous ingredients,” says Slavin. “If I want to introduce blood sausage, rather than putting bangers and mash on the menu, I’m going with the easy entry point. Nachos are reliable. They put the guest at ease.”



Data from global research firm Mintel reinforces this instinct, reporting that 35 percent of diners would try menu items with unique flavors or ingredients if they were in familiar dishes. “Nachos are a dish that many consumers are familiar with, so using that as a base is a great way to introduce diners to unique flavor combinations,” says Amanda Topper, associate director of foodservice research at Mintel. “With the popularity of fusion cuisine, operators have the opportunity to incorporate international components to this dish. The pickled and spicy elements of nachos are primed for experimentation. Instead of pickled jalapeño, include kimchi, or use a gochujang hot sauce instead of salsa.”

Nachos offer a safe platform for global flavor discovery—and with that comes a premium upgrade, too. The excitement around modern nachos hails from the creative, sometimes daring flavor combinations that springboard from such a simple base. And underpinning that adventure is a shared experience of indulgence.

**“We hear so much about consumers’ interest in healthfulness, yet the majority of consumers we survey say they **love restaurants that offer ‘over-the-top’ menu items,**”** says Sharon Olson, executive director of Culinary Visions Panel. **“There is no denying the excitement of sharing something that is just a little bit wicked when dining out.”**

Maneet Chauhan, chef-owner of Chauhan Ale & Masala House in Nashville, Tenn., makes Indian flavors less intimidating with Lamb Keema Papadi Nachos, layering spicy lamb keema, papadi chips, tamarind chutney, Provel cheese and cucumber-tomato kachumbar.

Bollywood Theater in Portland, Ore., offers a nacho dish every night on its menu. One is Chaat and ‘Cho, inspired by an Indian street snack, starring a base of wheat-and-nigella-seed crackers with boiled potatoes, tomatoes, black chickpeas, sev (tiny fried chickpea noodles), yogurt, green chutney and tamarind chutney. At Komodo in Los Angeles, an Asian fusion concept, the Kimchi Nachos feature fried corn tortillas, cheese, Sriracha aioli, kimchi, chicken and bacon. “It’s our version of the entire food pyramid in one bite,” says Erwin Tjahyadi, executive chef. “Our nachos are wonderfully messy, spicy and full of flavor.”