

# PRODUCE

*at its* **PEAK**



Bringing more creative fruit and vegetable ideas to the table helps leading menu developers differentiate their concepts and build flavor brands.

## Leading multi-units use fruits and vegetables to set their menus apart, bringing great texture, flavor and nutrition to the table

BY KATIE AYOUB

From roasted, stuffed dates at The Cheesecake Factory to golden-fried asparagus spears at Burgervilles throughout the Northwest, multi-units nationwide are increasing their menus' value proposition with fruits and vegetables, prepared in enticing ways that make the most of the varied texture, color, flavor and balance produce provides.

The number of farmers' markets nationwide has nearly tripled since 1994, according to consumer research group Mintel's February 2009 Local Procurement study. This statistic speaks volumes about consumer expectations for produce and shows the value of farm-to-fork connections on all menus.

Consumers are seeking out farm-fresh fruits and vegetables for their own kitchens, and they expect to see more produce wherever they dine. Here are more numbers that prove the point: San Jose, Calif.-based 240-unit Togo's goes through 800 cases of Hass avocados a week. That's 2.5 million avocados a year, most of them used in the Turkey and Avocado Sandwich, the top-seller out of the 30 sandwiches the chain offers. This signature item features oven-roasted turkey, mayo, two scoops of hand-carved and mashed avocado, plus tomato, red onion, green pepper and pickle on honey wheat and has been on the menu since Togo's inception in the early '70s.

"We're a West Coast chain," says Renae Scott, vice president of branding and marketing for Togo's. "We have a health-conscious customer base. We're constantly looking for ways to keep them happy. We have to deliver fresh produce to stay above our competition and, apparently, our customers are quite enamored with how we menu our fresh Hass avocados."

More smart operators are heeding the call for produce that sets them apart.

### IT'S ALL IN THE PREPARATION

Boston-based Au Bon Pain, with more than 200 units nationwide, takes a flavor-forward approach to menuing interesting produce.

"We can't just put out slices of vegetables without adding flavors," says Thomas John, senior vice president of food and beverage and executive chef. "We build great-tasting sauces that go with the overall profile. We're not masking the flavors of the vegetables, just boosting the craveability factor."

Au Bon Pain's Turkey, Apple and Radicchio Sandwich features what John calls an underrated lettuce. "Radicchio is slightly bitter but has a nice, nutty flavor and, obviously, beautiful color and crunch," he says. "The green apple brings in a tart acidity."

He spreads a bold, creamy blue-cheese dressing on the sandwich. "It adds pleasing mouthfeel and builds on the flavor profile. We could have added just lettuce and tomato to the turkey sandwich," notes John. "But we are offering a completely different experience with a lot more interest and flavor complexity, and you know what? The sandwich is doing well, surprisingly. I think sometimes we underestimate people's palates."

"Produce brings a nutritional balance to the menu. We are in the business of serving lunch and breakfast. Especially with lunch, we look at our sandwiches as a whole meal, so we try to incorporate vegetables as best we can," explains John.

### DESTINATION SIDE DISHES

The most popular side dish at 64-unit Fleming's Prime Steakhouse & Wine Bar is the Sugar Snap Peas with carrots, red onion and a soy-chile glaze.

"The glaze brings in that crave factor," says Russell Skall, executive chef for this Newport Beach, Calif.-based chain. He sautés onions in brown butter for a nutty background flavor, then finishes with the snap peas and carrots, along with the soy-chile glaze.

"Of course, the vegetables are colorful, so that brings a good visual to the table, but the glaze gives them a nice sheen, and that's the best part," he says.

Also on the menu are side dishes, such as sautéed sweet corn, sautéed mushrooms and grilled asparagus marinated in fresh-herb vinaigrette.

"People come in because they love steak and potatoes," says Skall, "but what separates us from our competition is our fresh produce." Vegetables make up approximately 35 percent of sales.

### KEY TO CUSTOMIZATION

Dallas-based Which Wich?, with 85 units and 40 more under construction, distinguishes itself on the sandwich-



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— Donald Moore, *The Cheesecake Factory*

shop horizon, says Jeff Sinelli, founder and president, by offering all sandwiches at the same price point.

“We won’t charge you extra if you order fresh avocado, so our cost/value is really appealing,” he says.

Customization is the key to Which Wich’s concept. Produce choices, including standard

extra options like hot peppers, onions and tomatoes, can be added to any sandwich, allowing customers build their own flavors.

Sinelli also uses fresh produce as a flavor enhancer with the concept’s signature Olive Salad, a mix of black and green olives, cauliflower, mild green pepper, carrot, olive oil and spices. Folks can add this condiment to any sandwich, enhancing texture and bringing a warm element to their sandwich experience.

### CASE STUDY

## Micro Unit Blazes a Produce Trail

When it comes to produce, Scottsdale, Ariz.-based Wildflower Bread Co., a local chain with nine units, is worth a closer look. It features unique menu items pulled from familiar ingredients and hovers around the \$5 to \$8 mark for entrées. The menu uses produce as integral building blocks, rather than as garniture or extras, and invests the time in roasting, marinating and confiting to coax out the most flavor possible.

“Fresh produce is a key component to creating menu interest and keeping our fresh, made-to-order perspective,” says Louis Basile, founder and CEO, who built a menu filled with clover sprouts, jicama, artichoke hearts, marinated mushrooms, tomato-bread salad and butternut ravioli, among other flavorful and nutritious treats.

For its Roasted Sweet-Potato Sandwich, Wildflower layers slices of roasted sweet potato, fennel marinated in balsamic vinaigrette, fresh mozzarella, tomato and arugula on herb focaccia spread with a viscous fig confit. “This is our textural piece,” says Basile. “You get a nice crunch from the fennel and a soft, rich mouthfeel from the sweet potato and fig.”

In the Wildflower Chopped Salad, arugula is topped with Israeli couscous, red pepper, roasted corn, toasted sunflower seeds, dried cranberries, feta cheese and salmon flakes. Pesto vinaigrette finishes the salad tableside.

“Our menu development comes from fine dining,” says Basile. “We’re intrigued by the challenge of doing what we’re doing at a price point we can afford.”

### FITS ALL SIZES

Small-bites menus allow diners to indulge in mini flings with out-of-the-ordinary dishes and take chances with new ingredients. On its Small Bites & Snacks menu, The Cheesecake Factory, based in Calabasas Hills, Calif., offers its customers value and something more; with produce-heavy treats like fried zucchini, mushroom pizettes and Thai lettuce wraps, veggies help load on the indulgence factor.



Piled high with vegetables, Wildflower Bread Co.’s unusual roasted-sweet-potato sandwich is held together with sticky fig confit.

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**bright color and a nice, soft texture.”**

— Tony Seta, *Bonefish Grill*



“In some markets, like Omaha or Des Moines, we might be introducing our customers to certain ingredients,” says Donald Moore, senior vice president of kitchen operations for this 148-unit concept. The chain’s Roasted Stuffed Dates, which you might expect to find in fine dining, features five dates wrapped around batons of Parmesan cheese, then wrapped in applewood-smoked bacon, then roasted.

“We use Medjool dates, which have caramel notes with hints of cinnamon and honey,” says Moore.

Beets with Goat Cheese, another small-plate offering at The Cheesecake Factory, also takes its cue from a combination popular in many white-tablecloth settings.

Fresh beets are served with chunks of tangy goat cheese, sprigs of arugula and candied pecans, all lightly dressed in fresh vinaigrette.

Keeping size in mind as a selling point also works at Au Bon Pain. As part of its Portions menu, with dishes of 200 calories and under, the bakery-café chain features a watermelon-and-feta salad.

“Obviously, diners are familiar with watermelon, but perhaps not treated this way,” says John. “In a salad, the watermelon needs a bit of pungency to counteract the sweetness.”

The salad is tossed in a honey-mustard dressing, which John says changes the kind of sweetness put forward. “We run this seasonally, when it’s cheapest and at its best,” he notes.

Other Portions options include simple, fresh pleasures like a chickpea-and-tomato salad and green beans with almonds. John explains that this menu was designed so that customers could either snack without guilt or add a food group to balance other meal components.

#### REACHING NEW DEMOGRAPHICS

Jeff Harvey, CEO of Burgerville, describes the chain’s clientele as aged 30 to 60, affluent and educated.

“With our limited-time-offer (LTO) strategies, we’re consciously targeting a younger demographic while staying true to our core,” he says.

Because a sense of place is an important value to this Pacific Northwest brand, a natural offshoot came in the form of a locally inspired LTO menu: Yukon Golds in February, rosemary in March, spinach in April, asparagus in May and strawberries in June.

“We are trying to design products that would surprise people at the quick-service level,” says Harvey.

Burgerville’s Golden Fried Asparagus Spears, made with lightly battered Yakima Valley asparagus and served with an aioli dipping sauce, and its Balsamic-Strawberry Goat-Cheese Panini do just that.

What the concept grapples with now is a happy dilemma: Its LTOs, featuring fresh, seasonal, local produce, are wildly successful, and customers want to see them as permanent fixtures. Harvey recognizes that moving them to its core menu would take away their “get-it-now” value. Instead, he’ll keep the seasonal specials coming, building brand loyalty and repeat visits.

The dining services at Washington, D.C.’s American University campus, provided by the sustainability-focused Bon Appétit Management Co., provide a gauge to what the younger generation wants when it dines out.

“It’s not just pizza anymore,” says Mary Soto, executive chef at American University. “These kids love the whole farm-to-fork thing. They’re looking for fresh produce but want it presented to them in familiar ways.”

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— *Louis Basile, Wildflower Bread Co.*



To that end, she mixes up her menu with new sizes, shapes, colors and techniques. As a side dish, she serves mashed Jerusalem artichokes or, perhaps, roasted baby Gold Ball turnips or roasted Peruvian purple potatoes. If the farmers and co-ops she works with provide something else, she'll menu that instead.

“We buy directly from the farmer. We serve food within 48 hours of being harvested,” says Soto. “That's becoming more and more important to this generation. The trick is getting your line cooks not to overcook produce.”

That might be a tall order for a kitchen that serves about 1,000 covers at lunch and 1,600 at dinner, but one that she says is doable with the right procedures in place.

She recently used Earth Day as an opportunity to get students to reach beyond their comfort zones with her produce offerings. Her Farmers' Market Salad featured French sorrel, mesclun mix, purple napini, rapini and silver turnips. For the dressing, she blended cress flowers and arugula flowers with olive oil and a little bit of French sorrel.

“They might not be familiar with all of the ingredients, but there's a leap of faith, counting on the freshness and local-ness of the salad,” says Soto.

#### BRINGING IN AN ETHNIC VIBE

“We're not serving lychees or star fruit,” says Stephen MacManus, vice president and COO of Austin-based Mama Fu's, an Asian-inspired concept with 12 units. “We're Americanizing the experience and using produce that is familiar, like lime, mint, basil and ginger.”

Produce is both familiar and abundant in Mama Fu's Pan-Asian-American mix, with

lettuce, cabbage, edamame and sprouts forming the base for many appetizers and stir fries. Its Asian slaw features recognizable and readily available ingredients — green and red cabbage and carrots — tossed in a ginger-raspberry vinaigrette.

“We keep our dishes approachable but give them Asian flair,” says MacManus.

At Yard House, an Irvine, Calif.-based upscale-casual eatery with 22 units nationwide, a green-papaya salad with carrot, fresh mint, cilantro pesto and sweet chile served with the coconut-shrimp appetizer keeps the dish decidedly Asian.

“We love the green papaya for its texture and fresh flavor,” says Carlito Jocson, corporate executive chef. “We use produce not to round out our menu but to harmonize with what else is on the plate,” he says.

“We have different frontiers than the ones in fine dining. Our challenge is getting consistent, high-quality produce across all units, but we're forming direct relationships with our farmers to facilitate that.”

At 151-unit Bonefish Grill, Tony Seta, master chef and vice president of innovation and product development, adds a “Floribbean” touch to the menu with produce. The Florida Cobb Salad sports Walkerswood-Jerk chicken, greens, avocado, mango, tomato, Danish blue cheese, pine nuts and citrus-herb vinaigrette.

“The mango calms down the heat from the jerk chicken,” says Seta. “It also adds bright color and a nice, soft texture.”

Tampa-based Bonefish Grill also offers warm mango salsa as an option to finish its grilled-fish dishes. Grilled red onion, fresh cilantro, green onion, chiles and lime juice play against the sweetness of the mango.



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“We take the chill off the salsa, because we don’t want too much contrasting temperature against the fish,” says Seta. “The little bit of heat softens the mango a bit and opens it up.”

**SALADS MAKE THE CUT**

Growing salad options continue to bring about flavor innovations for multi-units, where chefs combine the exotic with the familiar, in search of wow factor, textural play and, of course, flavor. Right now, chopped salads are helping deliver the wow.

Yard House serves a chopped-salad appetizer that Jocson describes as a “Bloody

Mary with a fork.” The added interest here, besides the gazpacho vinaigrette, is the use of celery leaves in a salad that also sports avocado, tomato, sweet corn, cilantro, red and green onion, bacon and cucumber.

The Cheesecake Factory’s Vegetable Chopped Salad boasts roasted beets, asparagus, green beans, tomato, apple, radicchio, edamame, romaine and cheddar in a pomegranate vinaigrette.

“We’re really fond of beets,” says Moore. “We mellow them — take the earthiness out a bit — by poaching and then roasting them. The important thing to consider with the chopped salad is the size of the cuts. What’s going to eat right with the other ingredients?”

“When folks order salads, they’re looking for cold, fresh, wholesome ingredients with great textures.”

The Cheesecake Factory’s Luau Salad bursts with color, an important selling factor for produce, says Moore. It features grilled chicken breast layered with green beans, mango, green onion, red and yellow peppers, cucumbers, mixed greens, wontons, macadamia nuts and sesame seeds.

“It’s got a nice, subtle shallot vinaigrette,” he says. “We just let the flavors and textures of the produce take center stage.” ☺

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Cultivating More  
**PRODUCE OPPORTUNITIES**

**TAKE A CHANCE:** Radicchio on a sandwich, green-papaya slaw, watermelon paired with feta — some of the more daring menu ideas are also the most popular

**LITTLE LUXURIES:** Small plates and snacks up the indulgence factor, pairing produce with rich ingredients; think berries and mascarpone, bacon-wrapped figs or root-veggie tempura

**ADJUST THE HEAT:** Play with temperatures to surprise your guests; warm up a fruity salsa or chill and skewer roasted potatoes for dipping in aioli

**BRING ‘EM BACK:** Seasonal specials keep people coming back for that “get-it-now” imperative; inspiration comes in all sizes, from a sprig of rosemary to a bumper crop of fall apples

**CUSTOMIZE IT:** Nothing says “build your own flavors” like a long list of fruit-and-veggie options for sides, noodle bowls, sandwiches and entrée salads; don’t forget produce-heavy condiments like chutneys and relishes

**MAKE THE MENU WORK:** Produce packs a lot of textural punch; use descriptors that convey all that crispness, crunch, creaminess and chunkiness to your guests



Local-produce specials help reinforce Burgerville’s position as a Pacific Northwest brand.