

Raise the Bar

Bar and lounge menus are where chefs can unleash fun, exciting food that helps plump bar tabs and utilize product.

By Katie Ayoub

The days of beer nuts and pretzels are numbered. Chefs are taking a closer look at their restaurants' bars. They're seeing a canvas, albeit a polished-wood canvas, for high-quality, fun food served with minimal pomp and circumstance.

So, beer nuts are being replaced with spiced nuts, toasted and spiced in-house at Sierra Grille in Northampton, Mass., and served for \$2. Stale pretzels with salt crystals as big as ballparks are being supplanted by fontina-stuffed pretzel bread at Table 8 in Los Angeles and South Beach.

These Carpetbagger Oysters bring whimsy and panache to Olives bar menu in New York.

Chefs who offer a distinct bar menu say they reap a trio of rewards. First, it draws a crowd into the bar—one that will sip and snack its way to a higher check average. Second, a good,

approachable bar menu brings in a different crowd—one looking for a casual, but quality, quick bite. And third, well-crafted bar menus



allow for cross utilization. Yesterday's entrée of smoked pork tenderloin in the dining room can be today's pork-tenderloin stuffed *empanadilla*.

What are we heavy on?

That aforementioned pork-tenderloin stuffed *empanadilla* is on Sierra Grille's bar menu, which boasts more than 20 items for \$5 or less. "The *empanadillas* are the most popular thing at the bar," says culinary director/owner O'Brian Tomalin. "We change up their filling daily—depending on what we have a lot of in the kitchen."

These puff pastries may be stuffed one night with basmati rice, smoked cheddar and salsa. The next night might see them filled with black beans, corn and smoked cheddar. Whatever's inside, the pastries are filled, closed, then brushed with olive oil and baked at 400°F for 5-7 minutes. Each serving sports two 2½-inch *empanadillas* and sells for \$3.

"The bar menu is a great place for me to offer fun, relaxed food, but it's also where I make sure none of my ingredients go to waste," says Tomalin.

Sierra Grille's two-ounce wine pours echo the small-bites theme. "Diners get to come in, try different fabulous wines at lower price points and eat lots of different little dishes," Tomalin says.

Govind Armstrong, chef/co-owner of the ultra-hip Table 8 also sings the praises of his lounge menu's talent for cross utilization.

"In the dining room, I'll serve a formal dish with duck breast," says Armstrong. "For the



bar menu, I'll use the tenders that we trim from the breast."

For his grilled duck tenders with hummus and pomegranate salsa, he skewers the tenders with rosemary, brushes them with extra-virgin olive oil, seasons them, then grills them until medium rare. Bar customers get five skewers per order for \$5. "That little fillet on the breast is so tender. The bar menu gives me a good place to showcase it," he says.

Enjoy a fling rather than a commitment

"The lounge menu gives diners another option. If they don't want to commit to a full-course meal, then they'll be happier eating the lounge food," says Armstrong.

Rob Evans, chef/owner of Hugo's in Portland, Maine, agrees. "We're a prix-fixe restaurant. If our guests don't want to make that course commitment, then we have this other option for them," says Evans. "They still think of us when they're looking to dine out."

Black truffle and Parmesan cheese puffs is one of the bar-snack options at

At Table 8, the traditional bar snack of pretzels is turned into a fontina-stuffed pretzel bread.

Hugo's. For \$9, guests receive a large spiral of Evans' version of a deep-fried gougère. He adds chopped black truffles, Parmesan and truffle butter to *pâte à choux*. Using a pastry bag, he pipes the dough into a spiral on a pan filled with simmering water. Once it floats to the top, he cools it, then cuts it into portions and freezes them. For service, he deep-fries the spirals at 325°F until they're puffy and golden.

At Lucques in Los Angeles, one of the objectives of the bar menu, says chef/co-owner Suzanne Goin, is to "bridge the gap between being a destination restaurant and a neighborhood restaurant"

"We wanted to make the bar menu casual and not intimidating. Our bar menu is basically a collection of food that I like to eat when I'm peckish, or it's late at night and I want a great snack," says Goin, who is also chef/co-owner of A.O.C. in Los Angeles and co-owner of Hungry Cat, with two locations in California.

FLAVOR

One of her favorites? The jamón Serrano and butter sandwich, an open-faced sandwich that starts with in-house baked country-style bread slathered with butter then topped with thinly sliced seasonal radishes and jamón Serrano. The \$9 plate is garnished with arugula and radishes dressed in olive oil and lemon juice.

At Y Ultralounge, the upscale lounge bar of the Karu & Y complex in Miami, the bar menu was designed to offer a more casual environment than the formal dining room. “We wanted to make more of a social menu for the lounge,” says Alberto Cabrera, Y Ultralounge’s executive chef. “Our goal was to get people to socialize, drink, and eat enough to consider it a meal,” he says.

For his take on beef jerky, Cabrera serves a Kobe beef *chapqui* with green papaya salad. “It’s a huge hit—especially with the guys,” he says.

Overnight, he marinates Wagyu flank steak in soy, cilantro, honey, red-pepper flakes, garlic and ginger. He lays it out in a dehydrator for 24 hours, and serves it for \$14 with a side of papaya salad.

“You can really have a lot of fun with a bar menu, and interpret bar classics in new, exciting ways,” says Table 8’s Armstrong. For his fontina-stuffed pretzel bread, he hollows out the bread and fills it with sautéed yellow onions, roasted red bell peppers, Berkshire ham, Wisconsin fontina cheese, parsley and thyme. He then bakes the stuffed bread at 375°F for 10-15 minutes. A 4-inch portion sells for \$8.

“It’s got great flavor and texture, and the fontina is gooey, but still has some integrity, holding the other ingredients in place,” says Armstrong.

Bring ‘em in and keep ‘em comin’

A great bar menu, one that changes often, or features theme nights, generates buzz that reverberates beyond heavy-traffic weekends.

“Every restaurant’s made on who comes in during the week,” says Sierra Grille’s Tomalin. “You have to keep them wondering what’s going to be on the bar menu from one night to the next.”

At the Harbor View Hotel on Martha’s Vineyard in Edgartown, Mass., getting locals excited about a restaurant that thrives on seasonal tourism can be a challenge, says Joshua Hollinger, executive chef. “Our bar menu is more approachable, and it’s fun,” he says. “I see it as a playground of what I might later do in the restaurant.”

One of the more popular features is the slider menu, from a short-rib and creamed-spinach slider to a pressed jambon fumé one. Hollinger uses potato rolls for the \$6 sliders, which diners can polish off in three bites. “The sliders are a great place for me to use up product and make money,” he says. “People really see value in a \$6 slider, and they’ll order a side of truffle fries, and I’m up to a \$20 plate at the bar.”

The pressed jambon fumé is the most popular slider at the Harbor View Hotel. Hollinger spreads Dijon cut with mayon-



The National Onion Association

These crispy microbrew onion rings are matched with three convivial dipping sauces.

naise on the potato roll, then adds Le Fougerus Brie and black pepper. He wraps the slider in foil, presses it and bakes it for 10 minutes in the oven. “We serve it still wrapped in the tinfoil, which keeps a rustic feel at the bar,” he says.

At Prime in Huntington, N.Y., a fine-dining restaurant in the tony Hamptons, executive chef Richard Farnabe stresses the importance of the bar menu. “I wanted a signature bar menu—one that’s exciting and representative of my cooking. Your goal is to get people into the bar and eat your bar food and drink more than one drink. If you’ve got a great bar menu, then you’re doing it right.”

Crispy Microbrew Onion Rings

National Onion Association
Greeley, Colo.

Yield: 12 servings

1 each large yellow, red and white onion, sliced into $\frac{3}{4}$ inch rounds
8½ oz. tempura batter mix
12 oz. microbrew ale, very cold
12 oz. panko breadcrumbs
3 T. Italian parsley, minced
1½ t. whole celery seed
1½ t. dried thyme

1) Separate onion slices into rings; soak in cold water for 2-3 minutes. Pat dry; peel membranes from each ring. 2) Whisk batter mix and beer in stainless steel bowl until smooth. 3) In separate bowl, toss breadcrumbs with parsley, celery seed and thyme. 4) Dip rings into batter; coat well. Let excess batter drip off then place in breading. Gently press breading onto rings to help it stick. Transfer breaded rings to parchment-lined sheet pans that have been lightly sprinkled with panko breadcrumbs. Refrigerate until ready to cook. 5) Deep-fry at 375°F for 2-3 minutes until golden brown. Drain well. Serve with dipping sauces, recipes follow.

Grain Mustard Aioli

Yield: 2 cups

1¼ oz. minced yellow onion
8 oz. mayonnaise
¼ t. salt
2 oz. Dijon mustard
2 oz. whole-seed mustard

½ oz. lemon juice
2 t. minced garlic
1 t. honey
¼ t. fine-ground black pepper

Whisk all ingredients together in stainless steel bowl.

Wild West Sauce

Yield 2 cups

8 oz. barbecue sauce
8 oz. steak sauce
8 oz. ketchup
1 t. Tabasco
2½ oz. white onion, minced

Whisk all ingredients together in stainless steel bowl.

Roasted Onion Ranch Dip

Yield: 4 cups

8 oz. white onion, diced
1 T. olive oil
16 oz. sour cream
8 oz. mayo
4 oz. buttermilk
½ oz. (1 package) ranch-dressing mix
1 oz. red bell pepper, minced
¼ oz. Italian parsley, minced
1 T. lemon juice

Method: Place onions in small baking dish; toss with oil. Bake at 375°F for 25 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove from oven; cool. Whisk together remaining ingredients in stainless bowl. Add roasted onions; stir until well combined.

For his popular Scottish langostine, a \$17 dish of four 2-ounce langostines, he marinates them in Sauternes, butter, toasted almonds and pumpkin seed. He then pan-sears them, and serves with pickled peach.

“Your bar menu has to be as good as your restaurant menu,” says Farnabe. “It brings them in when they want a casual experience or a more formal sit-down dinner.”

Olives, a Todd English concept with six units nationwide, has just unveiled its first bar menu, designed to encourage gourmet social snacking. At Olives in New York, the bar menu features a \$16 appetizer called Carpetbagger Oysters.

“It’s sexy—it’s got all the right chemistry to make it a fun bar snack,” English says. Fisher’s Island oysters are dredged in semolina flour, then fried in canola oil for 90 seconds. The oysters are then wrapped in beef carpaccio. To plate, four oyster shells are bedded with truffle whipped potato, then each is topped with a fried oyster. A dot of truffle aioli punctuates each oyster.

“Our bar menu brings in a great bar crowd,” says Lucques’ Goin. “It’s a great place to expand a loyal customer base.”

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