

A Grazing Ace: Tapping into Small Plates

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The last decade has seen an interesting trend in North American and Canadian restaurants to downsize the larger portioned entrée to the smaller tasting portion. Appetizers, hors d'oeuvres, tapas, canapés, antipasti, mezze, small food, amuse-bouche – these are all different names for the same thing: miniature taste sensations that delight the mouth and stimulate the appetite.

There are many reasons why tasting portions are great for the diner. First of all, for those of us who are more health conscious, smaller portions are easier to control in terms of quantity and ingredients. Diners who wish to eat lightly can do so, and at the same time, socialize with a glass of wine. More adventurous foodies can order a variety of different taste sensations to experiment with rather than satiate themselves on one large entrée. They can experience one or two bites from a selection of culinary gems rather than be bored and full after five or six bites of the same dish. Hungrier diners with hearty appetites can try a selection of tasters as a prelude to their main meal. Some diners have smaller budgets and would like to spend a little less money and yet still have a pleasurable dining out experience. By ordering tapas or tasting portions, they are able to savour a few luxurious items which become more affordable due to their reduction in size.

A menu which offers an interesting selection of smaller food portions is extremely beneficial to the restaurant. This style of dining encourages repeat business. Dining establishments, in which the clients are sharing, tasting, drinking and chatting are generally busy, noisy, social places which attract more customers. There is a congenial and friendly atmosphere which people like to participate in. This style of restaurant also offers a niche for the non peak hours between lunch and dinner or later on in the evening when diners would prefer to graze off a variety of little plates rather than a full meal. Typically clients tend to order 4-6 choices of delectable snacks in lieu of the traditional appetizer/entrée/dessert. Wine lovers enjoy matching unique dishes to complement their pricey wines-by-the-glass. In the long run, clients usually tend to spend more on small food than on traditional meals. This is because although each dish looks relatively cheap, diners tend to get carried away, or else they order pricier drinks, and the bill can add up quickly.

For the chef, tasting portions are a fabulous way to use the diners to test-market new signature items and recipes. Offering smaller portions can also give the chef a great opportunity to showcase his/her creativity, originality and personal style of cooking. There is a lot of room to

experiment or to highlight seasonal, regional, or cultural specialties. Any menu item can be altered to tasting portion size; the variety of offerings can be infinite and flexible according to the quantity and quality of ingredients on hand. Although little plates of food can result in more work for the restaurant, many of the cold canapés, soups, and desserts can be prepared beforehand and served at room temperature or quickly heated right before serving.

The number of restaurants which are serving tasting portions is increasing due to the demand of the contemporary consumer. Following in the tradition of Spanish Tapas Bars, Japanese Izakaya, or even Chinese Dim Sum Restaurants, all of which have been around for decades, these restaurants are offering a more social, casual, and adventurous dining experience. From family eateries to elegant dining establishments, less is more when it comes to keeping discriminating diners of all ages happy. After all, who doesn't like to graze?

Some Ideas for a Selection of West Coast Tapas

Spicy Seafood Salad	Asian style Fried Rice
Crab Claws in Black Bean Sauce	Fragrant Seaweed Soup
Smoked Alaskan Black Cod	Steamed Mussels
Steamed Fiddleheads	Marinated Grilled Veggies
Deep Fried Organic Chicken	Savoury Onion Tart
Cold Asparagus with Mayonnaise	Deep Fried Oysters
Barbecued Salmon Cheeks	West Coast Fried Rice
Deep Fried Croquette with spinach, ham or seafood	Gyoza with Dipping Sauce
Seared Ahi Tuna with Citrus sauce	West Coast Clam Chowder
Seaweed Salad with Asian dressing	Miniature Pizza
Crostini with Assorted Toppings	Seafood Bouillabaise

Virtually any meal can be adapted to tasting portion size whatever the cultural origin or method of cooking. There are no rules to small food. It is really up to the imagination of the individual chef and the availability of the ingredients.