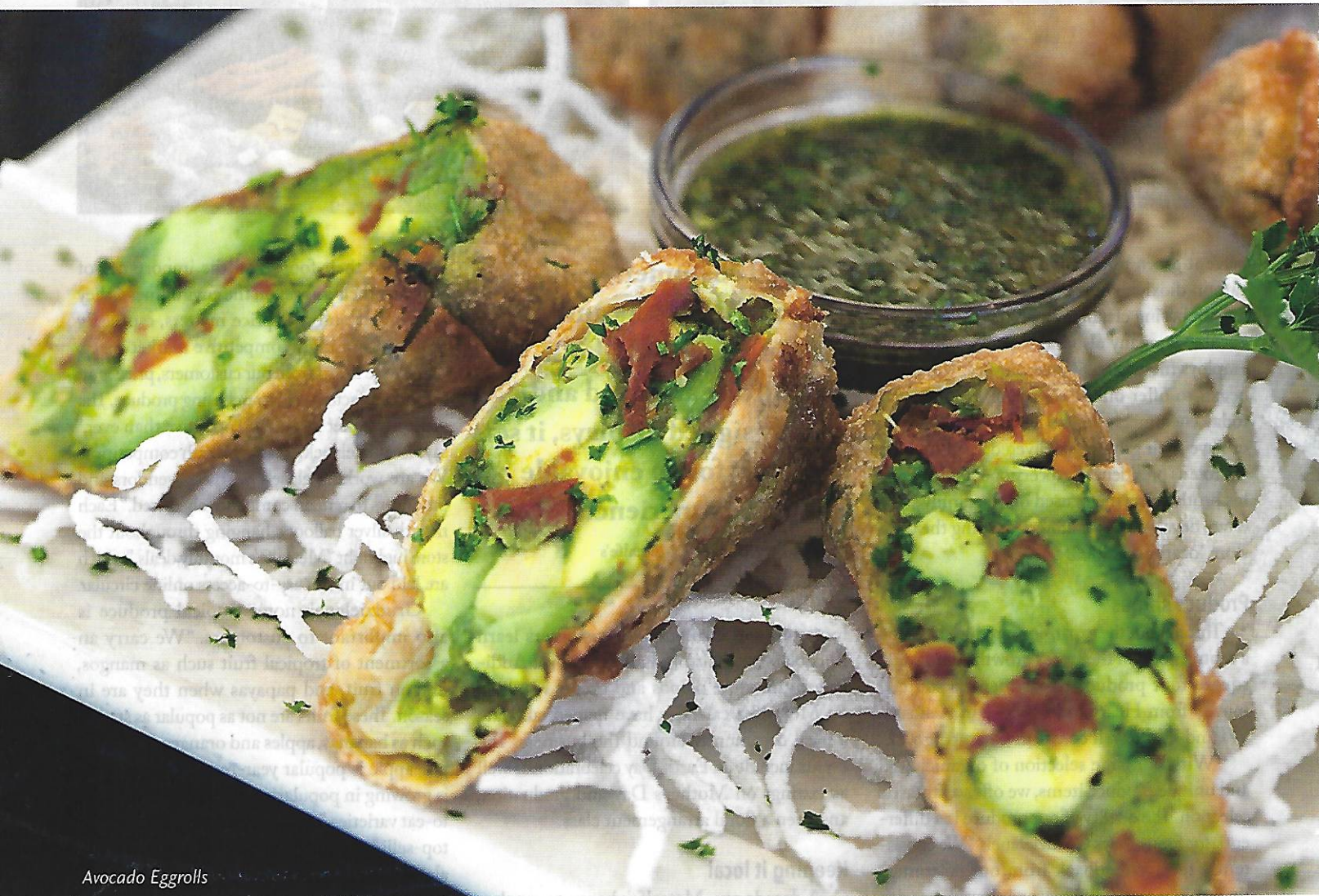


Innovative, Cutting-Edge Appetizers Turning Heads

Fresh produce converges with small plates to add excitement to the menu.



Avocado Eggrolls

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CHEESECAKE FACTORY

BY MINDY HERMANN

Not long ago, the appetizer portion of a restaurant menu was not particularly exciting. Lackluster salads, old-school standards and fried options were the norm. Today's starters and small plates can be among the most vibrant and inspired options, designed to make a statement and earn the loyalty of diners with the first bite. Appetizers are the part of the menu that allows chefs and diners to experiment, and fresh produce frequently plays the starring role.

"Guests want something different, new and exciting," says **Marcos Seville, chef at the Omni Scottsdale (AZ) Resort & Spa at Montelucia**. "Being able to hold the attention of a guest is a full-time job, and it starts with the first part of the meal ... appetizers."

SHIFTING TRENDS

Changes in produce-centric appetizers are quite nuanced, observes **Brian Kaywork, lecturing instructor and chef, American Bounty, Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, NY**. "More niche items are showing up on menus, often popularized first by 'celebrity' chefs, as with jackfruit and René Redzepi at Noma (in Copenhagen, Denmark). An independent restaurant may introduce an item like avocado toast that catches on quickly. At American Bounty, our star appetizer ingredients include 8-row corn, the small honey nut squash, beets roasted in a salt crust and sliced thin like carpaccio and a hummus made from leftover carrot pulp.

Produce-centric dishes are more prevalent in some types of restaurants than others. **Charley Orwig, marketing director,**

Datassential, Chicago, reports casual restaurants offer the most choice, followed by fine dining and then midscale; appetizers are not prevalent in QSR. According to the Datassential menu adoption cycle, expect to see shishito peppers, vegetable-friendly ethnic appetizers, crudité and cauliflower joining the well-established asparagus, Brussels sprouts and kale.

WHAT'S OLD IS NEW

Crudité plates are making a comeback in ways that showcase beautiful vegetables. "Vegetable crudité is one of our most popular vegetable starters," says **Taylor Domet, director of culinary standards for Phoenix-based True Food Kitchen**, a health-driven concept now in 12 states. "It is full of raw and lightly cooked vegetables, served on ice, and with a black olive dip

radishes, peppers – in a simple salt solution, particularly when we have an abundance of vegetables to preserve and use," says **Stephen Barber, executive chef of Farmstead at Long Meadow Ranch, St. Helena, CA**.

Some chefs also are elevating common vegetables that typically play a supporting role, for example, onions. The onion stars in such dishes as polenta-stuffed grilled onions with tomato basil coulis from Chef Aran Essig of University of Northern Colorado, and cipolla carbonara, served by Chef Cameron Grant, Osteria Langhe, Chicago.

ONE POTATO, TWO POTATO

A menu classic across all restaurant categories, potatoes maintain a strong and evolving presence on appetizer

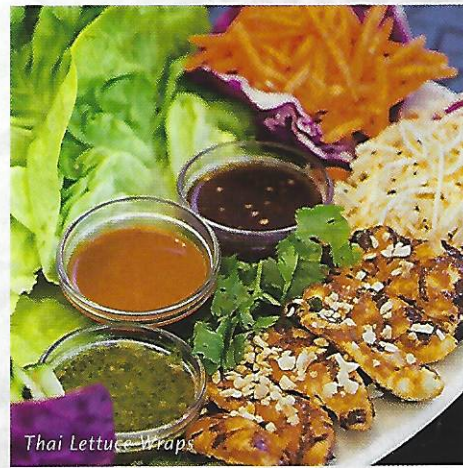
menus. "Ethnic influences are strong in such dishes as *skordalia*, a Greek potato dip; fries with Indian masala seasoning and mango chutney-aioli dip; potato-stuffed Indian dosas; Peruvian fried potatoes with chipped beef, egg and aji amarillo; and South American empanadas," says **Chef Dave Woolley, a Denver-based consultant to the Idaho Potato Commission**. "Expanded cooking techniques drive new dishes like smoked potatoes, *sous vide* fingerlings, butter-poached baby potatoes and fried green tomato and potato grilled cheese."

"Traditional fries and tots are the foundation of limited-time offers in casual and midscale restaurants," observes **Maeve Webster, president, Menu Matters, Arlington, VT**. "These need to be updated with interesting produce as a way to



Asparagus Salad

PHOTO COURTESY OF FARMSTEAD AT LONG MEADOW RANCH



Thai Lettuce Wraps

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CHEESECAKE FACTORY

and tzatziki sauce."

"We are looking into things that don't require cooking, like raw fresh-cut vegetables marketed in a different and better way," says **Robert Okura, vice president, culinary development, and corporate executive chef, The Cheesecake Factory, Calabasas, CA**. "Fresh vegetables have to be top notch and beautiful, like the watermelon radish, for example."

Marinating and pickling also are popular. "Rather than cooking produce, I like to marinate it for a long time to modify its texture and add flavor," says **Carlo Bigi, executive chef of Gemma in the Bowery Hotel, NYC**. "I typically use vinegar, salt and mint for my marinades in dishes like our *asparagi freddi* made with jumbo asparagus, Tuscan farro, pickled red onions, Gaeta olives and Parmigiano Reggiano."

"We ferment almost anything – turnips,



Polenta-Stuffed Grilled Onions

PHOTO COURTESY OF NATIONAL ONION ASSOCIATION

increase nutrition and health without sacrificing indulgence. Consumers have opened up to the idea of produce, and they want to feel better about what they are ordering.”

A SENSORY EXPERIENCE

A well-crafted, produce-centric starter should appeal to the senses with visual beauty, a luscious aroma, great mouth-feel and well-paired flavors. **Wolfgang**

Puck Catering, West Hollywood, CA, constantly looks at fruits and vegetables through a sensory lens. “If using citrus, a nice orange zest can bring out an enticing aroma,” says **Eric Klein, vice president, culinary**. “When I want texture on the plate, I might use Romanesco for its versatility and complex appearance or fresh hearts of palm to make textured, flavorful ravioli.”

Domet works toward a “proper balance

of flavors and textures by mixing and matching cooking methods within the same dish. For example, we might pair a roasted vegetable with a crunchy garnish.”

“Food is about textures and opposites, like balancing the bitterness of a charred parsnip with some acidity in lemon or yogurt and then the creaminess of the interior of that parsnip with the crunch of various seeds,” says **Daven Wardynski, executive chef, Omni Amelia Island Plantation Resort, FL**. “The contrast delivers a pleasing moment of surprise.” Colleague **Joshua Hasho, executive chef at Omni Chicago Hotel** looks for different ways to use a fruit or vegetable to combine flavor profiles and textures. Among his favorites – a grilled heirloom baby carrot salad with local goat cheese, sprouts and seasonal pickled ramps.



Potato Rosti Cakes with smoked trout and avocado salad

PHOTO COURTESY OF IDAHO POTATO COUNCIL



CarroGrill Heirloom Baby Carrot Salad

PHOTO COURTESY OF OMNI CHICAGO HOTEL

Incorporating Core Values – Creativity, Authenticity And Sustainability

Chefs demonstrate their appetizer creativity in different ways. The Playground DTSA (Downtown Santa Ana), CA, changes its menu every day with exciting dishes such as “land and sea” hen of the woods and lobster mushrooms; and a “green” salad of green strawberries and green almonds, jackfruit curry, elderflower fritters and watermelon kimchi.

Authentic dishes either stay true to their original cuisine or add a twist of fusion. At Guelaguetza in Los Angeles, dishes call for specialty squash, squash blossoms, huitlacoche and regional herbs; True Food Kitchen’s new miso eggplant consists of a miso-soy glazed and roasted Japanese eggplant served with roasted peppers and lentils over a minted tahini sauce; Sweet Chick, NYC and LA, appetizers bring in

Southern greens and pickled vegetables; the Omni Scottsdale appetizer menu offers berenjena — eggplant roasted with herbs and tomatoes served on fresh sourdough while The Bistro at Topsail, Surf City, NC, calls on unique yet familiar Southern flavors in its boiled peanut and mushroom paté.

Manfred Lassahn, executive chef, Hyatt Regency Huntington Beach, CA, melds culinary creativity with sustainability. “Taking something you normally wouldn’t even consider and turning it into something over-the-top cool, and zero-waste, is rewarding. For example, I created a shaved, mixed radish flatbread with radish top pesto. When your menu is zero waste or root to fork, sustainability sells itself.”

Chef Vikram Vij of My Shanti and Vij’s Restaurant in Vancouver, BC,

exemplifies the successful combination of creativity, authenticity and sustainability. “At My Shanti, we make all the chutneys with local berries plus our own Indian spices. We prepare our sauces first, then add produce and cook them down to the right heat and flavors while maintaining nutrition value. At Vij’s, we’ve become known for our blend of Indian ingredients and West Coast produce. We also use our platform to draw attention to sustainability issues when we can – for example, by naming a dish after the endangered Monarch butterfly.” **pb**



PHOTO COURTESY OF GUELAGUETZA

San Francisco-based Firefly SF caters to a client base that prefers vegetables to meat. “Different cooking methods are great for different ingredients,” explains **Haley Sausner, chef de cuisine** of the restaurant. “We love to roast our beets, braise our Romano beans, marinate our fruits and grill our green tomatoes. We particularly love to roast because it concentrates the juices and intensifies flavor.”

FLOWERS AND FRUIT

At Omni Amelia Island Plantation Resort, charred produce, activated charcoals and burnt flavors are giving way to the lightness of blossoms and floral notes. “I use whatever is in bloom in every aspect I can,” says Wardynski. “When the elderflowers were in bloom in mid-April, I turned them into elderflower vinegar, elderflower honey and a crushed powder to use on our small plates.”

Wolfgang Puck Catering incorporates flowers in its Sphere of Rose and Lemon Grass Gazpacho and Hibiscus Flower Filled with Lobster Salad with White Balsamic and Rhubarb, both of which were served

Millennial Appeal

Millennials have become the target market for many restaurants. US Foods reports Millennials spend more on dining out than any other demographic, and the demographic prefers local restaurants. The company helps local chefs and independent restaurants create products and food experiences specifically targeted to Millennials — globally inspired appetizers such as guacamole deviled eggs and avocado caprese salad with authentic ingredients, international flavors and high-quality products that are both responsibly prepared and satisfying for the taste buds. The National Restaurant Association suggests engaging Millennial guests by explaining food sourcing, telling stories about farmers and chefs and demonstrating authenticity.

“Our Millennial guests want to eat more vegetables,” says **Chef David Burke, of Tavern62 by David Burke.**

“As a chef, I really enjoy the challenge of designing a vegetarian or vegetable-driven dish that they can get excited about. It’s a fun challenge to make produce the star of the show rather than falling back on a protein garnished with vegetables.”

“Appetizers are fun for Millennials, who like to dine in groups and share the experience of a variety of dishes, ingredients and flavors rather than a full plate of one dish,” says **Miki Hackney, corporate chef, Melissa’s World Variety Produce, Vernon, CA.** “Shishito peppers can be interactive, as usually one in 10 is hot. Kale sprouts add a flavor twist and can be amped up with spicy, sweet, vinegar or charred profiles. Seared slabs of king trumpet mushrooms evoke smoky, meaty satisfaction in a vegan dish, and refreshing watermelon chaat offsets the bite of crunchy, raw onions and crisp mint for a punch of flavor.” **pb**

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EAT ORGANIC

at the City Market Social House’s opening event in Los Angeles.

Berries are among the most rapidly growing produce items in both conventional and organic formats. Tulalip Resort Casino, Tulalip, WA, includes in its Summer Berry Bliss menu offerings a berry, chicken and cheese appetizer featuring crispy wontons stuffed with fresh blackberries, fire-braised chicken, creamy Brie and fresh jalapeño, complete with a raspberry jalapeño dipping sauce. A mixed greens salad is garnished with fresh and local strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, blueberries and dressed with a house-made blackberry vinaigrette.

PRODUCE-PROTEIN PAIRINGS

Not all diners embrace an all-produce starter, so chefs can ease the way with flavorful protein pairings. Gemma’s Bigi has offered Burrata with grapes marinated in yuzu juice, pepperoncino, shiso mint and walnuts, and carpaccio with corn, goat cheese and red sorrel. “It’s all about balance and presenting a vast array of offerings in the hopes everyone can find something that appeals to them.”

“We make our own country ham, which we sear on a plancha and serve with blue



Rose Gazpacho

PHOTO COURTESY OF KASEY POTTS WOLFGANG PUCK CATERING



Red Wine Braised Beet Salad

PHOTO COURTESY OF SYSCO

cheese, fig and arugula,” says Farmstead’s Barber. Other pairings can include char siu pork loin lettuce wraps with herbed salad, and asparagus salad with country ham and lemon Ricotta.

“Our produce-forward appetizers include a watermelon-asparagus-Burrata salad with toasted almonds; artichokes, leeks and ramps in the spring and summer; and a butternut squash, mushroom

and goat cheese tart,” says **Chef David Burke, Tavern62 by David Burke, NYC.**

“Produce-centric appetizers often do need to be amped up with the addition of non-vegetable ingredients like cheese or egg, or anything a bit more familiar that will attract diners.”

VEGETARIANS AND VEGANS

On the opposite end of the spectrum

are vegetarian and vegan starters that may mimic animal protein. Wolfgang Puck Catering slow-cooks ingredients toward a texture similar to the protein it is replacing, as in its pan-seared “scallops” of mushroom, cauliflower puree, golden raisin, sorrel and vadouvan, a French-style curry powder. Kurt Kwiatkowski, corporate executive chef, Michigan State University, offers walnut-stuffed dates inspired by the

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Guacamole Deviled Eggs

PHOTO COURTESY OF US FOODS FOOD FANATIC CHEF, JOHN BYRNES



Tomato Salad

PHOTO COURTESY OF SYSCO

classic Spanish tapas dish with chorizo, making tapas accessible for vegetarian and vegan diners.

SHOWCASING SEASONALITY

The appetizer menu is particularly well-suited to seasonal dishes. In the spring, Wolfgang Puck Catering offers menu items with citrus that highlight their beautiful color and texture, “for instance, a gastrique or reduction from citrus to get away from heavier vinaigrettes,” says Klein. “We make falafels with English peas; serve white asparagus with tomato, baby beets, watercress and shiro miso vinaigrette; compress watermelon and pair it with wild rocket, Feta, mint and chili; and pair fresh and freeze-dried melon with goat cheese meringue and raspberry.

“Seasonality is at our core because we grow most of the food we put on the

plate,” says Farmstead’s Barber. “When we have a lot of carrots, we might make a salad with roasted carrots and crispy pickled pig ears, carrot leather to crumble for garnish and carrot top pesto.”

“Local seasonal is more powerful than organic here on the West Coast because customers want their food to come mainly from local sources above anywhere else,” says **Greg Meeker, chef for Sysco Seattle.**

Seasonality also inspires appetizers in the Northeast. “We constantly change our menu to reflect the seasons so that we can serve the best possible product,” says **Charlie Foster, chef at Woods Hill Table, Concord, MA.** “This past spring, we ran an artichoke appetizer consisting of artichokes barigoule, local Mozzarella, green and Marcona almonds and charred spring onions.”

Omni’s Wardynski keeps some appetizers on the menu year-round, changing the fresh produce garnish with the seasons – citrus in winter, baby beets in the spring, mangos in the summer and sweet potato in winter. “Some commonalities are present, but a new dish is created each time.”

Chef Vikram Vij of Vij’s Restaurant and My Shanti, Vancouver, BC, calls out the importance of strong relationships with suppliers. “We are constantly in touch with our suppliers – some of them we have worked with since we opened Vij’s nearly 25 years ago. They keep us informed about their current and upcoming crops and produce so we can be ahead of the game for planning our appetizer offerings based on what’s available.”

THE “WOW” FACTOR

“The wow factor can attract non-vegetable appetizer eaters away from starters like cheese curds and pork belly,” notes **Matt Starcher, chef for Sysco Hampton Roads, Suffolk, VA.** “Chicken wings sell themselves; cauliflower doesn’t unless it is well thought out. Bring in the bling with descriptions of local or seasonal, smoked or seared, a shared flight or cooked three different ways. And remember that plates have to be Instagram-friendly.”

“To intrigue guests, produce has to be both pretty and interesting, that is, so small or very colorful and also something you wouldn’t find in the market,” says **Manfred Lassahn, executive chef, Hyatt Regency Huntington Beach, CA.** Among his suppliers is Babé Farms, Santa Maria, CA, whose beautiful produce he uses in dramatic appetizers such as compressed watermelon salad with baby striped beets and purple ninja radish; mizuna pancakes with sriracha mayo; and black radish chips with housemade salbitxada spread.

Preparation method, too, can wow customers. “What captures the attention of restaurant guests are appetizers that use unconventional methods, like fruits that are smoked and grilled to pack intense flavor, unusual hybrids of conventional favorites such as multi-colored cauliflower and compression through vacuum packing to hyper-increase juiciness and flavor intensity,” says Sysco Seattle’s Meeker.

Chef Barber maintains a garden in front of Farmstead to grow new varieties for the restaurant chefs to try – bullseye beets,

chiogas, borage flowers, dragon carrots, scarlet turnips, red spinach and herbs have been among the many items cultivated.

A CHAIN STANDS OUT

"Our new dishes in smaller plates open up dozens of ways to enjoy greater variety in vegetables," says Cheesecake Factory's Okura. "People love the fresh vegetables in popular small plates like our Thai Lettuce Wraps. Because we cater to middle America, our dishes are "authentic enough" in honoring and respecting their ethnic roots." The chain encourages guests and staff to communicate their ideas for new dishes, monitor trends and observe what goes mainstream.

DELICIOUS MEETS HEALTHY

"Smart marketing around health is important," notes The Cheesecake Factory's Okura. "Diners get excited about delicious vegetable dishes, but they do not respond to good-for-you messaging. That's why we offer a range, including fried zucchini and (oven-finished) stuffed mushrooms."

"Nationwide menu labeling for chain restaurants requires calorie counts, and those have an impact on consumer choices," says Amy Myrdal Miller, founder and president, Farmer's Daughter Consulting, Inc., Carmichael, CA. "Instead of starting a meal with fried onion at 1,500 calories, a diner may opt for the tempura green beans instead as a better choice."

"One way to limit portion size and calories is to order healthier vegetable-based appetizers," suggests Dr. Lisa Young, a registered dietitian, nutritionist and author of *Finally Full, Finally Slim: 30 days to permanent weight loss one portion at a time*, to be released January 2019.

Another healthful strategy involves substituting fresh produce for less-healthful ingredients. At New York City's Tavern62, a broccoli "mops" appetizer serves broccoli rather than tortillas for scooping up guacamole.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Appetizers often are the lowest-priced items on the menu. Chef Okura observes customers might order one or more appetizers in place of an entrée at lunch. "Or they can order a bunch of them for the table. We have about a dozen small plates on the menu, including smaller portions of

salads that sell like crazy, better than our large salads."

Farmstead and Omni patrons sometimes order a mix of appetizers to share at the table, and that often boosts the average check, even if they skip the entrée altogether.

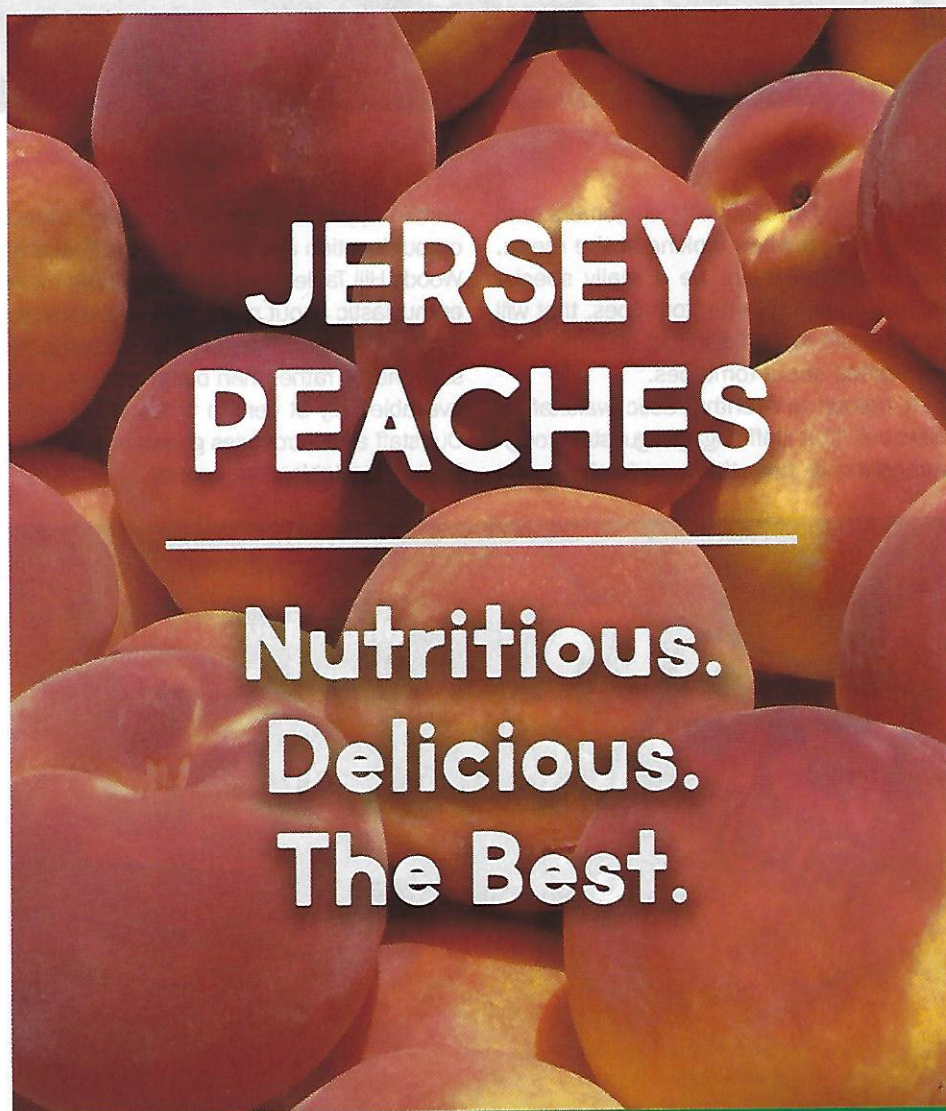
SALES STRATEGIES

Success starts at the top of the menu. "The more complex a dish sounds, the less likely it is to sell," advises the Omni's

Wardynski. "For that reason, we name ingredients rather than intimidating cooking processes."

Menu language can evoke an emotional response. Farmer's Daughter Consulting's Miller asserts terms like "crispy, crunchy, spicy, savory, juicy, succulent" draw in consumers. "It's also important to use terms that are familiar, for example "creamy garlic dipping sauce" rather than "garlic aioli."

Firefly SF's Sausner notes, "If a descrip-



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Spring Asparagus Toast

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tion is boring or confusing, customers tend to skip over it when looking at the menu. The exception might be a really special ingredient, like summer tomatoes, that will draw people to that dish just because they are excited about tomatoes.”

A trained and enthusiastic waitstaff is essential. “Our staff engages guests through storytelling to help them understand why

certain appetizers are being offered based on our location and season,” says Foster of Woods Hill Table. “Our guests become more enthusiastic about menu changes because they understand that they are dictated by seasonality, rather than being arbitrary, and available only at certain times of the year. Our staff also introduces guests to less well-known vegetables, like celtuce.”

“The main strategy for moving the needle is to teach staff to sell, sell, sell on the uniqueness and benefits of the appetizer,” advises Sysco’s Meeker. “Grass-roots marketing methods like table tents, menu inserts and slammers also work.” Omni’s Seville offers this advice, “One thing I have learned is, if your servers like the dish, it will sell.” **pb**

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