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Culinary Nutrition News: Small Plates for Healthy Appetites

Provided through a partnership between ACEF Chef & Child Foundation and Clemson University, and sponsored by French's Foodservice.

Italians have antipasto and *cicchetti*, Spanish have tapas, French have hors d'oeuvres, Greeks have *meze*, Chinese have dim sum and Americans have appetizers. Although they all vary slightly in their offerings and usage—whether served before or as a meal—they can all be grouped as smaller courses of food that are shared among a group.

For most of America's brief culinary history, we have utilized the appetizer as a sort of foreshadowing of bigger things (i.e. portions) to come. Now, it seems as though appetizers may be becoming the

new entrée, with restaurants popping up across the country that offer a wide variety of small plates for group enjoyment.

As chefs, you predicted this trend when approximately 60 percent of you labeled small plates as a “hot” trend in the National Restaurant Association's 2011 What's Hot Survey. While the idea is splendid, if not quite novel, the execution may be trickier than one presumes. There is a reason that this idea of small plates is taking off though. If done correctly, small plates can benefit everyone, from the customer to the chef to the restaurateur.

Good things come in small packages

In terms of culinary nutrition, small plates could very well be its poster child. Culinary nutrition boils down to balance, moderation and variety. Coincidentally, this mentality is also the formula behind successful small plates. Since the idea of small plates usually entails a variety of smaller-portioned dishes that are split amongst guests at a table, moderation can easily be achieved.

Small plates also specialize in variety since chefs can offer a much larger selection of small courses with less of the hassle and time involved in offering only a few main dishes. The balance element of small plates is presented in terms of flavor and texture achieved in one or two bites. However, by taking this idea one step further, balance can also be addressed in terms of nutrition by using more healthful ingredients. Beans and whole grains make an excellent foundation for nutritionally-succinct small plates. Fruits and vegetables also heighten the balancing act of small plates by adding color, taste and texture, as well as vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals.

During a time when portion distortion is running rampant in our nation, the concept of small plates offers a little light at the end of the culinary nutrition tunnel. With each serving costing less than a main course, small plates allow the customer to



If done correctly, smaller portions, such as these mini burgers, can benefit customers, chefs and restaurateurs.

mix, match, share and graze in what could be a more affordable and healthier way to dine in groups.

Smaller waistlines, bigger bottom lines

Not only are small plates perceived as a pocket- and waist-friendly approach for customers, but they provide greater flexibility for you, the chef. Since small plates are served on an as-needed basis (rather than time-sensitive entrées), you are granted the flexibility that allows you to save time and to continue cooking and serving more food, thereby selling more food. Selling more food, even in terms of small plates, can mean increases to your bottom line. Though small plates sell for less than entrées, they can still range in price, so there's a greater potential for upselling the more costly small dishes. Also, customers will be more inclined to step out of their comfort-food zone and be more adventurous in sampling a variety of small plates rather than suffering through the potential of one disproportionately large and possibly disappointing entrée. Providing the customer with a satisfying array of foods in smaller quantities is not only good for the customer's waistline, but also for your bottom line.

Switching to small plates—literally

The “small plate” we have been referring to is an informal name for the type of cuisine growing in popularity in the U.S., not the literal size of the plate. However, the Food and Brand Lab at Cornell University,



Bite-size or mini desserts, such as these cupcakes, remain a popular culinary trend for 2011.



The Food and Brand Lab at Cornell University's Small Plate Movement™ urges Americans to eat off a 10-inch plate for the largest meal of the day for one month to reduce calorie consumption.

Ithaca, N.Y., is implying doing just that with their development of the Small Plate Movement™. The goal is to encourage all Americans to consume fewer calories by simply switching to a smaller plate, with the general idea being, “plates can control calories better than we can.” Their challenge is to “eat off a 10-inch plate for your largest meal of the day for one month.” Although serving food on smaller plates helps in providing a less-is-more perspective for calorie reduction, the size of your plate is really up to you. For more information, visit <http://smallplatemovement.org/>.

Don't think too small

There are several important things to remember when serving small plates. For starters, just because they are deemed “small plates” does not mean you have to serve tiny portions. Make sure you provide sensible samplings of different foods. When using more fatty and rich ingredients, remember a little goes a long way, so use them in moderation. On the other hand, maximize the use of fruits, vegetables, legumes and whole grains since these ingredients are cheaper than lavish meats and cheeses and great for filling up your customer without weighing them down.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's and Health and Human Services' “2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans” also encourages the notion of smaller portions of foods in restaurants, as well as offerings of health-promoting foods that are low in sodium, limited in added sugars, refined grains and fats. To read the complete guidelines, visit www.dietaryguidelines.gov.

Another thing to remember is to strike a balance between offerings that your customers love and unique dishes that allow your own personal culinary ingenuity to shine and keep guests interested. By diversifying your offerings, you will keep customers returning for more and wanting to try new items, as well as indulge in old favorites.

Lastly, make each small plate worthwhile, and strive for each to be a stand-alone dish when it comes to both taste and nutrition.

Dr. Margaret D. Condrasky, RD, CCE, is an associate professor of Food Science and Human Nutrition at Clemson University. She leads the CU CHEFS® program for improving culinary nutrition skills.



Using smaller plates doesn't mean you have to serve minuscule portions. Decrease meats and cheeses and increase good-for-you ingredients such as vegetables, legumes and whole grains.

Marie Hegler is a graduate of the Food Science and Human Nutrition department with a culinary science emphasis at Clemson University, which operates the CU CHEFS® program for improving culinary nutrition skills.

About the American Culinary Federation and the Chef & Child Foundation



The American Culinary Federation, Inc., established in 1929, is the premier professional organization for culinarians in North America. With more than 20,000 members in 225 chapters nationwide, ACF is the culinary leader in offering educational resources, training, apprenticeship and accreditation. In addition, ACF operates the most comprehensive certification program for chefs in the United States. ACF is home to ACF Culinary Team USA, the official representative for the United States in major international culinary

competitions, and to the Chef & Child Foundation, founded in 1989 to promote proper nutrition in children and to combat childhood obesity. For more information, visit www.acfchefs.org.

About Clemson University



CU CHEFS® (Clemson University's Cooking and Healthy Eating Food Specialists) instructional program, led by Dr. Margaret Condrasky, associate professor in Food Science and Human Nutrition, is a registered trademark of Clemson University designed to promote changes in menu planning, food purchasing, food preparation and food consumption behaviors with a goal of fostering good health through healthy nutrition. 'Culinary nutrition' is the application of nutrition principles combined with food science knowledge displayed through a mastery of culinary skills. The results are healthy eating behaviors grounded in culinary confidence and nutrition alertness. CU CHEFS® promotes an awareness of the latest trends in foods and nutrition

through the demonstration of proficient culinary skills to produce flavorful, health-inspired menus for schools, churches and restaurants. Clemson University, located in Clemson, S.C., is ranked 22 among the nation's top public institutions. Since 2001, Clemson has doubled external research funding, raised the academic profile of the student body, increased retention and graduation rates, launched high-profile economic development and earned national accolades, including being named *Time's* Public College of the Year.

About French's Foodservice



French's Foodservice is proud to sponsor this series of nutritional articles authored by Clemson University for the American Culinary Federation's Chef & Child Foundation. At French's Foodservice, we believe that "you are what you serve," and have built our reputation by providing the highest quality ingredients to meet the ever-changing needs of the foodservice industry. As chefs, restaurateurs, educators and nutritionists, you positively impact the health of our nation by advocating the positive impact of healthy eating, especially among children. We are proud to support this worthy cause.

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