

Love at FIRST BITE

Although small in stature, bar bites are poised to dominate menus

REMEMBER WHEN TAPAS were a new phenomenon? Today, patatas bravas and marinated olives stay tucked neatly under the Mediterranean trend, but what has made serious headway with American diners is that convivial style of dining: small plates, meze, minis, snacking, shareables. And how we, as a nation, interpret this “new” way of eating is wholly American.

Bar bites are to the United States as tapas are to Spain. They allow us to adopt the social norms of small plates while branding them with American flavors and traditions. Hamburgers find a comfortable spot at the bar as sliders, hot dogs as mini corn dogs. Funky and global sidle up here, too, in the likes of snackable sea-salted edamame and kimchi deviled eggs. Sophistication in bar bites is definitely not an oxymoron. Fries get dressed up with truffle oil. Wisps of prosciutto are draped with local honey. And so bar bites — pulling from street food, cocktail culture, menu casualization, nostalgia and the new “snackification” of everything — is a trend that will dominate in the coming years.

“This is likely the most impactful of all the trends as it is literally shifting the way in which we eat as a culture,”

says Melissa Abbott, director of culinary insights at The Hartman Group. “We are placing much greater emphasis on snacks over traditional meals now.”

With that emphasis comes expectation. That point cannot be underscored enough — bar bites should set the heart alight. Appoint them as ambassadors, proffering your restaurant’s brand and culinary vision while hopefully installing loyalty and patriotism to your restaurant nation.

“

Bar bites are where adaptability and flexibility shine. Sending out small bites is cost effective and limits the risks.

”

CHARLIE BAGGS

BUSINESS SOLUTIONS

It’s not rocket science, really: Adding a revenue stream generally adds revenue, so mounting a bar-bites menu should increase incremental sales. But many worry that a snacking menu will cannibalize the restaurant menu. Will diners skip salad or dessert because they ordered a few small bites? Will they abandon the restaurant experience entirely and just graze at the bar instead?

“I would much rather have someone come in twice a week — once for dinner and once for bar noshes — than only have them come in one time,” says Rick Tramonto, executive chef/partner at Restaurant R’evolution in New Orleans. “Little plates are a huge

SoBou in New Orleans promotes flavor-forward bites on its distinct “Snacky Things” and “Small Bites” menus, which include nibbles like these Duck Debris and Butternut Beignets.



SOBOU

Why Now With the evolution of cocktails comes the need for new snacks. Today's imbiber is not okay with just hot wings and nachos – after all, what do they have to do with a handcrafted Negroni or a classic Manhattan? Offer unique, tasty bites and nibbles that are not typical, heavy bar food – from house-marinated olives to fun-flavored popcorns. Ideate around what makes sense for your menu: What would *you* want when drinking your featured cocktails? – KATHY CASEY



AMERICANO/JOIE DE VIVRE

At Americano Restaurant in San Francisco, simple but signature bar bites like nuts and olives keep customers satiated and imbibing, while still leaving room for dinner.

draw. You just have to reinvent them a bit, like lobster nachos versus traditional, for instance.”

Like most elements of culinary, if executed well and marketed well, people will follow. “Bar bites may drop check average that may result in loss of revenue,” says John Critchley, executive chef of Urbana Restaurant and Wine Bar in Washington, D.C. “Or you can look at them differently and understand that they are very popular and

“ Bar bites are my favorite way to eat! The possibilities are endless and the margins of profit can be wonderful. Think of meatballs stuffed with fresh mozzarella and served with a tomato marmalade, or dates stuffed with chorizo wrapped in bacon, in a spicy tomato sauce (my all-time favorite, at Avec in Chicago). How about hot housemade chips served with small paper bags and different spice-salt-and-cheese seasonings and a trio of sauces, for guests to make their own creations? ”

TODD DOWNS

people will buy a lot of them. They will come back for more and they'll likely spend more money on wine and cocktails while they're at it."

Bar bites give customers an opportunity to guide their own culinary adventures. No commitment. No strings attached. Just one bite. They are the bachelors of the foodservice world. That free-loving, easy breezy vibe matches perfectly with today's revved up cocktail culture. A \$3 two-bite Korean taco? No risk, no problem. Let's try it with a muddled mojito.

"With the continuing popularity of featured cocktail menus, it is only natural for restaurateurs to provide accompanying food," says Steven Goldstein, a partner at The Culinary Edge. "This only works in their favor as booze and salty/savory foods work as a veritable echo chamber of purchasing, making it an easy business strategy to grow ticket totals."

But can high-volume operations succeed here? If they boast a full-service bar, the answer is yes, says Technomic's Darren Tristano. "You have to step out just a little bit. Try some items that are on the bar menu only,"

“ There is an opportunity to boost traffic between dayparts with bar bites/snacks. This snack-type category will continue to mature in its flavors and quality of offerings. There is no limit to the creativity that can be put against this. There may even be room for expansion into full-time snacking menus. ”

ROB CORLISS

Chef Michelle Bernstein's creative take on patatas bravas transforms them into a craveable handheld nibble. Crispy fried potatoes are stuffed with an aji amarillo sauce, crisped serrano ham and cilantro sprigs.



GIO ALMA

ON THE MENU

Bar Bites

- CRISPY RISOTTO BITES** ~ Meyer lemon and crème fraîche
 “BAR BITES” MENU, CEDAR, WASHINGTON, D.C.
- BALSAMIC POPCORN** ~ Red onion, red and green pepper, arugula, sun-dried tomato, balsamic vinegar, Asiago, fresh basil and balsamic syrup
 HAPPY-HOUR “GET CROPPED” MENU, CROP, CLEVELAND
- CALABRESE FLATBREAD** ~ Brushed with basil pesto and topped with mozzarella di bufala, cherry tomatoes, Kalamata olives, roasted peppers and capers
 “PRIME BITES” MENU, THE PALM RESTAURANT
- ROASTED NUTS** ~ Rosemary, thyme, sage
 “BAR SNACKS” MENU, THE COUNTING ROOM, BROOKLYN, N.Y.

“ This trend is driven by Generations X and Y and will continue to be driven by today’s Generation Z — the palates of the future and the consumers of tomorrow. A generation born into technology, and more connected than ever through the web and social media, they will prove to be more ambitious and more mature than any other. And so will their palates and dining styles. No other style of eating fits into their busy lifestyle more than tapas or bar bites. ”

ANDREW HUNTER

he says. “Increase check average or get those starters on the check before they get into the dining room. Drive bar business with happy hour menus, late-night menus and well-executed bar-bites menus.” He points to The Cheesecake Factory as a success story here. “They have done extremely well with their bar bites. And we’re talking about the home of the gargantuan entrée.” Indeed, the chain’s “Small Plates and Snacks” menu is impressive, featuring diverse items such as edamame, sweet corn fritters and Vietnamese tacos.

Red Robin is currently road testing a bar bites menu. “Casual chains are looking for incremental sales at the bar,” says Dave Woolley, executive chef at Red Robin Gourmet Burgers. “We’re looking to give our customers options. Cost does come into play, so we’re putting less expensive items at the bar.” He also points out that adding bar bites increases reach with customers. “As is, we’re a great burger joint and we don’t want to move from there,” says Woolley. “But giving them another reason to come in has nothing but upside for us.”

CREATIVE CREATIONS

Bar bites should be craveable, memorable and delicious. “Don’t muddy your bar menu with generic additions,” says The Culinary Edge’s Goldstein. “And keep it simple. Offer an edited, concise selection with a point of view. A curated menu is always better than a kitchen-sink menu.”

Randy Zweiban, chef/owner of Province, approaches his Bar Bites menu with careful consideration. “Bar bites should represent the cuisine of your restaurant, but be a



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JOHN CRITCHLEY

At Urbana in Washington, D.C., John Critchley's sumac-spice-rubbed lamb ribs make for an enticing, upscale bar bite.

little different than your regular menu," he says. "As a chef, you should have fun with what you're putting on your bar menu." At its Chicago and Phoenix locations, Province features a separate Bar Bites menu with most items running at \$6 (\$4 from 4 to 7 p.m.). Recent dishes include a beef slider with aioli, housemade pickle, Wisconsin cheddar and poached egg, and a barbecued lamb taco with pickled cabbage. "Entice people with well-crafted cocktails, craft beers, good wines by the glass. It's the whole package that will make them come back often."

Urbana is in D.C., which hosts a lively happy hour scene. "Happy hour is a must for us," says Critchley. From 4 to 7 p.m., he serves \$1 oysters, \$8 wood-fired pizzas and \$4 Peroni beer. One of his most enticing bar bites is the American Lamb Short Rib — sumac rub, molasses glaze, served over whipped carrot lardo. "The lamb flavor is wonderful and earthy. Sumac

How to Work It If you have a bar, small bites in bowls for sharing or customizing for meal, snack or accompaniment occasions will help boost beverage sales, sampling and base building. If not, these make festive pre- or in-between-meal foods for two or more, and terrific mix-and-match options for the ever-increasing single, picky or non-sharing diner. Either way, check average increases!

– ROBIN SCHEMPP

has raspberry notes and is also earthy. It's a really nice match," he says.

At Restaurant R'evolution in New Orleans, Crabmeat Beignets and Andouille Black Salt Potato Chips punctuate an extensive bar menu. "I love the one-bite nugget; the flavor explosion," says Tramonto. "Bar bites should do that — just knock them back with flavor."

Around the corner, SoBou (the latest venture from the Brennan family) serves "Snacky Things" ranging in price from \$1 to \$8 and including such snack-friendly nibblers as Creole Beer Nuts (sweet and spicy roasted pecans) and Cracked Olives marinated in cayenne and charred chiles. In addition, its "Small Bites" category ups the nosh element to items like a Sticky Pork Belly and a 1/4-lb. SoBou Burger. Both menu categories are featured on the restaurant's lunch and dinner menus, giving diners plenty of options in terms of appetite and cost.

"The majority of people today are really busy; they're on the move," says Gerard Craft, chef/owner of St. Louis' Niche, Pastaria and Taste by Niche. "We don't sit down to eat big meals anymore. We snack. We socialize and graze. Bar bites present a huge opportunity with this new restaurant dynamic." ☺

“Bar bites are an American term for tapas/small plates/small bites. They've evolved from cheese sticks and jalapeño poppers to smaller versions of today's most popular dishes. We'll continue to see this as a popular trend, as they offer lower cost to the consumer as well as the opportunity to try many different items.”

CHRIS CASSON

TOASTY Bites BY GERRY LUDWIG

Toasted bread-based bar bites are appearing on menus across the country. As they are basically miniature open-faced sandwiches, it is easy to understand their popularity. The key is to keep the bites light, flavorful and not too filling.

At New York's Vinatta Project, bite-sized grilled cheese sandwiches are filled with artichoke, asparagus and Gruyère. Chef Jean Joho of Chicago's Paris Club turns the classic croque madame sandwich into a bar bite, cutting the ham, béchamel and Swiss cheese-topped toast into fingers and serving them in a rocks glass with an egg yolk in the bottom for dipping. And at GT Fish & Oyster in Chicago, chef Giuseppe Tentoni's olive oil-poached shrimp crostini are one-bite wonders, topped with avocado, pickled chile, chopped pistachios and a squeeze of fresh grapefruit juice.

Toast-based bar bites are an easy menu addition, and most any kitchen should be able to create signature offerings with ingredients that are already in-house.