

FLAVOR & THE MENU

Snacking On Seafood

Look to your bar bites and small plates menu as a seafood opportunity



A FUN WAY TO HAVE POKE: ON WONTON CHIPS AND TOPPED WITH THREE DIFFERENT SAUCES. YARD HOUSE'S CARLITO JOCSON WAS INSPIRED TO CREATE THIS SEAFOOD SNACK AFTER A VISIT TO HAWAII.

BY JOAN LANG | SEPTEMBER 1, 2016

There has been a sea change in foodservice recently, where fish and shellfish are being added to the modern flavor narrative. Newer menu development around seafood is edgier, more global, and often sees bolder flavor combinations. Consumers are responding eagerly, looking to expand their horizons on the seafood front. What part of the menu offers the biggest opportunity for seafood innovation?

Think small: bar bites, appetizers, small plates, snacks. For the culinary team, this menu category represents a great incubator platform for new ingredients, flavors and preps. And for the consumer, this way of eating has become more of the norm—easy, relaxed, fun and shareable.

Fish and shellfish are a natural fit with the island-food theme that runs strong at Tommy Bahama, with 16 locations in the brand's retail stores in the United States and Japan. "Seafood appetizers sell really well for us," says Don Donley, the brand's director of culinary. "They fit our theme well—there's a little beach sand in everything we do—and they carry a good price point that encourages people to share and try new things. On

the flip side, appetizers can be the most challenging section for introducing new items because the ones that are already on there are so popular that they can't be removed."

That's certainly the case with the World Famous Coconut Shrimp, tossed in a housemade beer batter with flaked coconut and served with a papaya-mango chutney that's ramped up with Dijon mustard and mango purée—it's the most popular starter on the menu.

But it's the Seared Scallop Slider appetizer that still amazes Donley, who introduced the appetizer 10 years ago as his first menu addition when he joined the company. "There are people who would never touch a scallop, but it's a different ballgame on a slider that eats like a burger," says Donley. He's unabashed that the treatment of two U-10 dry scallops on specially sized mini brioche buns dressed with chipotle aioli, fresh basil, Roma tomatoes, crispy onions and signature Island slaw (shredded cabbage and jicama with cilantro, red onion, lime vinaigrette and fried wonton strips) "masks the texture and flavor" of this less-popular product. "You don't see the scallop," he admits. But people like it and he thinks it may lead people to try the Thai Shrimp & Scallops entrée next time.

"Seafood as a small bite is an opportunity to increase check averages because it can support a premium price," says Rob Corliss, executive chef at fast-casual Sheridan's Unforked in Overland Park, Kan., and founder of the consulting firm All Things Epicurean. "It can also increase volume because people tend to talk it up to their friends—"Hey, you have to try this; I really liked it."

Seafood has been an increased focus of recent menu innovation at Unforked. "Vegetables, plant-based proteins and seafood seem to be the culinary darlings of menu development now," says Corliss. Having already stacked the menu with flavor-forward vegetables and other plant-based foods, he's devoting more attention to seafood as a natural evolution into the realm of menu-driven health and wellness.



Seafood appetizers are a natural offering for island-themed Tommy Bahama. Ahi tuna tacos stand out with Asian slaw and wasabi-lime-avocado sauce.

TACO TIME

The current menu features tilapia in two of Unforked's signature Crafted Tacos: the Cali (seared chile-spiked tilapia with creamy avocado-cilantro sauce and pickled red cabbage slaw) and the Tilapia Tango (crispy tempura fish with creamy napa slaw and fresh cilantro).

"Tacos are an easy point of entry for us," says Corliss, thanks to the small portion size of protein (2 to 3 oz.), customer recognition, and the ease with which they can be treated to builds that emphasize flavor, texture and uniqueness.

The popular Tilapia Tango Taco began last year as an LTO, but was such a home run that it became part of the core menu. The Cali Taco, meanwhile, has been a perennial top seller for several years.

Not surprisingly, many seafood items have started as Lenten specials, "when customers will give you an extra pass just for trying," according to Corliss. The Nom-Nom Shrimp Taco, consisting of seared shrimp, Korean lettuce-cucumber salad, fresh cilantro, Sriracha-honey and miso mayo on a choice of tortilla or lettuce, tapped

into the almost universal love of shrimp, as well as fascination with Asian flavor profiles. Surf & Turf Taco, with its combination of shrimp and tri-tip with blistered onions and poblanos, fresh pico and warm chipotle queso, played off the mainstream appeal of surf and turf.

The Crispy Ghost Taco was a real envelope pusher, even for Unforked's relatively sophisticated audience. It took advantage of growing interest in calamari (in this case strips) and all the buzz around the ghost chile, jacked up with OP Sauce (puréed pico with hot sauce), ghost pepper sea salt, and pickled banana peppers. It's then gentled with creamy Unspread (a combination of mayo and smoked Spanish paprika that's a staple on Unforked's menu) and fresh spinach.

The taco platform allows for deeper seafood exploration, too. Customers didn't even blink at the fact that the Awesome! Ahi Taco LTO showcased seared-rare tuna with mango, mung bean sprouts, lettuce ribbons, cilantro and pickled ginger with splashes of ponzu-sesame honey and wasabi cream.



Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute

The shift to more shareable seafood formats means diners are free to sample and experiment. A cod brandade invites scooping when served with warm olives and grilled bread.

Tasting and Sharing

The successful seafood strategy at Bourbon Steak, Michael Mina's steakhouse located in the Four Seasons in Washington, D.C., keeps it primarily on the appetizer menu, which boasts an entire selection of seafood: Ice Cold Shellfish, Crudos & Caviar, as well as Portuguese Octopus and Stone Crab Bucatini.

"Having seafood on the menu is a natural evolution for me," says Joe Palma, Bourbon Steak's executive chef, who spent eight years working with chef Eric Ripert. "Plus we're a pricey steak restaurant in a hotel, so we get a lot of celebrations with larger tables. I wanted to meet the needs of vegetarians and pescatarians as well as carnivores."

Interestingly, Bourbon Steak's entrée section started out with half a dozen fish selections from the wood-burning grill, but these were pared back to three. "Most people eat steak here," says Palma. Diners choose from more than two dozen cuts that all pull their weight in the meat mix.

Now, fish and shellfish do the heavy lifting as a light, fresh, seasonal place to start off a meal, with an expanded and elevated selection of raw bar items, including oysters and clams on the half-shell and the elaborate Bourbon Steak Seafood Tower.

Pickled Shrimp Cocktail offers a case study of Palma's approach, taking a familiar dish and making it stand out. "Shrimp cocktail is a traditional steakhouse starter, but we saw this as an opportunity to put our stamp on it," says the chef. "Ours really stands out, and it generates word of mouth and repeat business."

The shrimp cocktail is a twist on a favorite in Charleston, S.C., where Palma spent more than three years cooking at High Cotton restaurant. The shelled shrimp are poached in a court-bouillon of beer, Old Bay seasoning, bay leaves, garlic and lemon peel. Palma advises starting the shrimp in cold liquid and bringing them up to temperature to keep them tender, then tossing them in a pickling liquid of apple cider vinegar, thyme, basil, more lemon peel and Old Bay. They're then vacuum-sealed for a flash-pickling process of no more than two days, "so you can still taste the shrimp, not just the pickle," he explains.

The shrimp are served with a housemade Old Bay rouille made with lots of crushed garlic to offset their richness, along with housemade chow-chow relish and crackers. "Southerners like to eat their pickled shrimp with crackers, so the pastry chef came up with a housemade 'Ritz' cracker topped with Anson Mills benne seed to continue that Southern reference.

“People who order shrimp cocktail are usually pretty traditional folks,” adds Palma, “so we knew we were taking a bit of a gamble with this presentation, but it really paid off. This has become a real signature for us.”



Bourbon Steak

The Pickled Shrimp Cocktail has become an in-demand signature at Bourbon Steak in Washington, D.C., holding its own alongside a more steak-oriented menu.

PAY IT FORWARD

At Yard House, the 76-unit, beer-focused Darden concept, the menu philosophy of borrowing ideas from fine dining to connect to a more mainstream audience pays off in spades with seafood. “We like to be a bit ahead of the innovation curve for our segment, but only once fine dining has broken the ground,” says Carlito Jocson, Yard House partner and corporate executive chef. He says that Instagram has helped immensely in building familiarity and revving up demand for new food items among customers who might not be sampling trends at their point of inception. “Then it’s our job to create something that provides an experience that’s unique to Yard House.”

When Yard House introduced ahi tuna 20 years ago, it was only being seen in white-tablecloth dining on the West Coast, but Jocson took it on in the form of Ahi Sashimi, seared rare with toasty blackening spices and finished with a sesame, soy and green onion dressing that made the item different from both the Japanese version of sashimi and from the ubiquitous California-style ahi tartare.

“It took awhile to take hold, but with ideas that are new for our guests you need to be patient and give it a little time—within reason,” says Jocson. Now the fish appears in multiple guises all over the Yard House menu, from an Ahi Poke Bowl snack to a Spicy Tuna Roll, Ahi Crunchy and Ahi Kale Caesar salads, and seared ahi in a sandwich and as an entrée. “There’s a ton of ahi on our menu.” Not only is ahi on the menu, but it’s presented in flavor-forward ways that give it an on-trend, urban swagger.

As he does go through so much volume, it helps justify Yard House’s practice of butchering 20- to 30-lb. ahi loins in-house to fabricate the various cubes, blocks, steaks and sushi that utilize every scrap of what Jocson describes as “this beautiful fish.” Training for this key kitchen position includes all the safety and quality steps involved in sourcing, receiving, storing and handling a highly perishable and valuable product.

New to the Yard House menu as of spring: Poke Nachos, which Jocson sampled during a trip to the Big Island of Hawaii and decided to bring home for his customers. “This is a perfect example of our strategy of not getting completely ahead of the trends, but still bringing something new and different to our guests,” he explains.

What’s different about Yard House’s version: three distinct sauces on top of the marinated raw tuna, including a soy-white truffle aioli for its luxurious flavor profile; lemon-Sriracha with a hint of garlic; and a sweet soy glaze made with soy, ginger, mirin and green onion. In addition, avocado, cilantro, Serrano chiles, green onions, sesame seeds and nori seaweed share space with the tuna on the crispy wonton chip “nachos.”

“It’s sweet, creamy, spicy, crispy and cool,” says Jocson. “Everyone’s putting poke on the menu now, but taken together, those sauces give guests a unique experience when they eat ours.”



Unforked

Looking to do more with seafood, Sheridan's Unforked has added innovative shrimp dishes to the menu, such as this playful Gazpach-oh! topped with hot seared shrimp.

SURF BOARDS

Cured at Pearl in San Antonio is known for its extensive selection of housemade charcuterie: terrines, pâtés, sausages, salumi and more. But Chef/Owner Steve McHugh wondered, "Can we do charcuterie without pork or beef?" The opportunity to find out happened this past summer with a menu promotion coinciding with the Discovery Channel's popular "Shark Week" series. "We've always called our humidity-controlled curing room the 'Charc Tank,' so it seemed like a natural to start experimenting with seafood charcuterie," says McHugh. What resulted was the three-item Surf Board: Gulf Shrimp Pastrami, Smoked Salmon Rillettes and Crawfish Sausage, accompanied with mustards, pickles and marmalade, plus housemade crackers. Following a tradition of donating one dollar per board to charities, Surf Board contributions went to the Coastal Conservation Association.

Working with seafood was a fun challenge for the kitchen staff, says McHugh. "The proteins are so different from what we normally work with. If you just put pastrami spices on shrimp and left them to cure for a couple of months, the result would probably be awful. Traditional charcuterie works because of all the fat in the meat."

For the shrimp pastrami, the shrimp were poached in a traditional spiced shrimp boil, then chopped and tossed with pastrami spices, mixed with meat glue (an enzyme that allows proteins to bind) and stuffed into a sausage casing. A few hours later, the sausage is sliced to reveal a beautiful pink mosaic of shrimp and whole spices.

The crawfish sausage proved to be the most challenging. "It's hard to make a sausage with absolutely no fat in it," says McHugh. "We made a classic seafood mousseline with eggs and cream, which is something most members of the younger generation have never seen before."

McHugh expects that the shrimp, in particular, will probably stay on the menu, and the whole experiment has piqued his interest in other seafood possibilities.