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Luring the Lunch Crowd – US Food Trends

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Efforts to attract noontime business lead restaurants to offer more for less.

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R&I is the USA's leading source of food and business-trend information and exclusive research on operators and restaurant patrons. Editorial coverage spans the entire foodservice industry, including chains, independent restaurants, hotels and institutions. [Visit the R&I website](#) to find out more about the magazine or to [search its recipe database](#).

By *Kate Leahy, Senior Associate Editor*

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Donald Trump's daughter may be the last person anyone would expect to see cutting back on dining out. But Ivanka has taken to the blogosphere to advocate the virtues of brown-bagging lunch. It seems that times are tough all over, and she's not the only one contemplating the economical, pack-it-yourself option.

Article continues below

A study from Port Washington, N.Y.-based research firm NPD Group showed that the consumption of home-packed lunches reached 12% in February, the highest it has been since 2001. With the U.S. Census Bureau showing a 1.2% decline in consumer retail and foodservice spending in September, it's likely that the number of people bringing lunches from home during the week will continue to grow.

Attracting diners at lunch requires more work on the part of restaurant operators, and many are now offering bargain-priced meals to get people in the door. Ten dollars will purchase the whole roasted striped bass with a side dish at Greenville, S.C.'s upscale restaurant The Lazy Goat. In Los Angeles, customers can indulge in an appetizer, entrée, dessert and glass of wine for \$20 at Blue Velvet. And in Miami, Chef Jonathan Eismann offers complimentary side dishes with entrées so that afternoon visitors to his restaurant Pacific Time can dine for less than \$15.

Even if these prices don't provide high margins, many operators acknowledge that some lunch business is better than none. If customers walk away satisfied, they may decide that going out to lunch on a weekday needn't be such a rare occasion. Moreover, they may come back in the evening when check averages are higher.

No Free Lunch, But Close

Unlike dinner where prices vary widely depending on the restaurant, lunch prices generally are less flexible. No matter the style of food and service, there's only so much consumers are willing to pay for a weekday lunch. Says Frank Lombardo, president of quick-service concepts Papa Romano's and Mr. Pita, based in Commerce Township, Mich., restaurants with counter service probably need to maintain a check average below \$10. Any higher, Lombardo says, and these establishments may lose customers.

Chefs at upscale, full-service restaurants hedge higher, but not by much. "If your average is over \$20 per person for lunch, you can plan on not having that much business," says Michael Fiorello, executive chef of Mercat a la Planxa at the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago.

What do customers get for the money? Quite a lot in some cases. More and more operators are offering fixed-price lunch menus, which resonate with customers because they can come in with a clear idea of how much they will have to spend on their meals.

At Mercat a la Planxa, the Catalan Express special includes a soup such as arroz a la cazuela (rice soup with chorizo and rock shrimp) and a bocadillo, a Spanish-style sandwich, for about \$15. "A lot of people are attracted to the lunch specials," says Fiorello. "It's a cheaper price, and you're in and out."

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When Mac's Steakhouse in Huntington, N.Y., came under new ownership, the upscale restaurant began offering a lunch special to get the word out that diners could eat at the new Mac's without spending a lot of money.

"It's a way to introduce the restaurant to people who might be intimidated to come in for dinner," explains owner and general manager Scott Young. The special focuses on lighter options and includes the choice of an appetizer, such as oysters Rockefeller; an entrée salad; a sandwich or wrap; and a nonalcoholic beverage for \$20.08.

Such lunch bargains aren't always easy on the bottom line. To keep Blue Velvet's food costs under control while offering a three-course prix-fixe lunch for \$20, Executive Chef Jonathan McDowell finds creative ways to make products go further. For example, he buys whole guinea hens and reserves the breasts for a chanterelle-stuffed roulade served at dinner. He then braises the legs and thighs in duck fat and crisps them to order for the lunch entrée.

"We're almost taking a hit," admits McDowell. But he reasons that the value-focused lunch will drive repeat business. "Once I get you through the door, you'll see the quality of the food, and I guarantee you'll be back."

Back to Basics

Despite a creative flair, many of the fanciest lunch specials are really just soup and a salad or sandwich at their core—and that's just what consumers want. According to R&I's 2008 New American Diner Study, 61% of respondents often order a hot sandwich or wrap for lunch during the week; 45% often select a cold sandwich or wrap. Pizza and salads were the next most-popular entrées for weekday lunches.

It follows, then, that for chefs who specialize in fine-dining fare, developing lunch menus may take some adjustment.

When Chef-owner John McClure decided to open Starker's Restaurant in Kansas City, Mo., for lunch, he intentionally created recipes that were more casual than those offered on his dinner menu in order to appeal to afternoon appetites. Although some dinner items, such as almond-crusted trout served with wild rice and brown-butter sauce, are available at lunch, most of the midday menu focuses on salads and sandwiches.

That doesn't mean he sacrifices quality or originality. Among the sandwich offerings at Starker's is a grilled-shrimp po' boy with Creole rémoulade sauce and a popular burger filled with brown-sugar bacon and Cheddar. "It's simpler food but with the same great ingredients," McClure says.

Pacific Time's Eismann has a similar philosophy. Though his lunch menu features a few of the eclectic, globally inspired dishes for which he is known, he also offers sandwiches, burgers and straightforward entrées such as pan-roasted chicken—all of which come with a choice of side dishes such as shredded raw collards with red onions, olive oil and lemon juice.

"Unless you are at what used to be called a white-tablecloth restaurant, it's your job to provide a no-nonsense, timely experience [at lunch]," Eismann says. "For the most part, we're serving the local workforce."

At Mercat a la Planxa, there's an additional reason that a simple menu is desirable at lunch. "It's a labor issue," explains Fiorello. "I have 11 line cooks on a Saturday night. I only have three on for lunches."

Labor and space constraints also were a key factor in how Executive Chef Lindsay Autry developed her lunch menu at The Lazy Goat. Because several dinner preparations demand the use of most of the kitchen's burners during the day, Autry created lunch entrées that could be cooked at the grill, the cold station or the brick oven in the dining room. With only three people on staff at lunchtime, the dishes also needed to be relatively simple to execute.

One of the top sellers, whole sea bass stuffed with preserved lemons and herbs, meets Autry's criteria with surprising ease. The dish is stuffed with ground caraway and fennel seeds and wrapped in banana leaves in advance and then roasted to order in the brick oven. The banana leaves also help simplify the presentation: The fish is placed on a wood board, the cook cuts the leaves open to expose the fish then tops it with a mixture of haricot verts, roasted tomatoes, shaved fennel and caper berries.

"It's very light; it's only \$10, and it also includes a side dish," Autry says.

On a Lighter Note

As important as offering familiar favorites, menuing a selection of healthful, lighter options also helps drive weekday lunch traffic. At Starker's, for example, McClure has noticed that fish entrées consistently outsell meat entrées during the day, while the two sell about evenly at dinner. At Pacific Time, Eismann says at least 15% of lunch customers order lean, simply prepared fish and chicken.

By opening a co-branded unit of Papa Romano's and Mr. Pita earlier this year, Frank Lombardo has been able to take advantage of consumers' growing preference for lighter menu items.

Whereas takeout-focused Papa Romano's tends to do more business at dinner with its heartier

offerings such as ribs and pizza, Mr. Pita—which serves rolled sandwiches in several healthful varieties such as a vegetable wrap with red peppers, cauliflower, tomatoes and feta cheese—is able to bring in more of the lunch crowd.

The co-branded units (there are now three) have a check average of \$7.50, about 50 cents more than the average check at single-standing units of Papa Romano's or Mr. Pita. Having Mr. Pita's healthier fare to choose from at these establishments also has boosted Papa Romano's pizza sales.

Lombardo reasons that menu variety attracts repeat business. "It increases the frequency of the customer [visits]," he says. "They will try different things, like a veggie pita one day and a slice of pizza the next.

Source: Restaurants & Institutions (US)

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