

# HAWAII HOSPITALITY

## The Big Impact of Small Food

### INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- Hawaii's Renovation Boom
- 'Green' Technology for Hotels
- Mufi Hannemann Speaks Out

PRSR. STD.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
HONOLULU, HAWAII  
PERMIT NO. 583

# Big Hits From a Small Plate

By Lauren Conching

You work hard for your money, so it's understandable that you want more bang for your buck. Endless bowls of pasta for ten dollars. All-you-can-eat steak dinners for \$15.99. Scoops of ice cream the size of your head for only seventy-five cents more than the single scoop.

Financially speaking, it's not very wise to spend a considerable amount of money on a substantially smaller plate of food.

But it's happening around the country in every major hotspot.

After years of super-sizing and over-indulging, enters a new style of eating. Meet the small plate and mini-dessert.

What does small plates and mini-desserts really mean though and why is it such a big hit?

Well, to start off with, small plates are not pupus or tapas. Although they could certainly be eaten as appetizers, who's to say what a plate of food can or cannot be eaten as, but small plates are really more of a taste.

The idea not only embraces a new eating style but puts a heavy emphasis on what the dining experience should be like.

'The concept is in the dining experience,' says Master Sommelier Chuck Furuya, partner at restaurants owned by D.K. Kodama. 'Rather than you ordering your own appetizer and entrée and having your own corner of the table, the focus is the plates go down the middle of the table so people share and everyone is sharing. It creates more fun, more interaction and more synergy. I think it's a fun way of dining. We get rid of the territory. We get rid of the fact that you will only have two dishes by focusing on sharing.'

These are the reasons why, Furuya says, they decided to start doing small plates at their restaurants.

How many times have you ordered a meal, and looked over at your friend's plate, wishing you could taste that as well. And then, notice the waiter

servicing something that looks even better to the table on the right. The concept of small-plates eliminates this problem. Diners can now create a small buffet right on their table. 'The small plate is really good for the adventurous diner because it allows you to try many different dishes.'

At restaurants owned by Chef D.K. Kodama, customers can have tastes of all different types. *Vino: Italian Tapas and Wine Bar*, under head chef Keith Endo, serves plates that are contemporary Mediterranean fusion. 'Keith is one of the most creative culinary talents in our whole organization' Furuya says. 'His creations are so creative, so interesting and tasty, and wine-friendly.'

At *Vino's* sister restaurant, *Hiroshi Eurasian Tapas*, chef Hiroshi Fukui gives diners little tastes of Asian dishes with European influences. The wide variety of choices that these two restaurants offer gives the casual diner a large selection of food to choose from.

Small plates have also worked really well for *Indigo Restaurant*, located in Chinatown. 'To me, it's not about having a mass of meat any longer,' says owner and Chef of *Indigo*, Glenn Chu, 'it's about having little tastes of things.'

As Chinese restaurants go, sharing has always been the preferred eating method, but the small plates at *Indigo* are not your run-of-the-mill Chinese style family plates. 'My grandmother always said that balance is extremely important, and I've taken it upon myself to try and balance *Indigo*,' Chu says. 'Chinese food can sometimes be unbalanced. When you talk about small plates, you can have a number of different things, and that's the whole key. You have the ability to have a lot of different flavors and taste and not fill up on it.'

Thirteen years ago, *Indigo* started off referring to all the items on their menu as 'small plates,' which Chu is happy to see has turned into a trend. His local

background and desire to cook for the western palate allows him to create many 'East meets West' plates like *Goat Cheese Wontons with a Four Fruit Sauce*.

'The whole idea is to have each bite become a different flavor,' Chu says.

But while small plates are becoming a huge trend on the mainland, running a restaurant that serves them isn't so easy. One would think that it would actually be easier to produce smaller dishes for tables, as opposed to large entrée-sized plates, but in fact, it is just the opposite. Smaller plates equal more plates. Instead of a party of four having four entrees and an appetizer, they could order ten small plates, increasing the amount of dishes and the assortment of food that the chef must prepare in a small amount of time. 'In one night, we could go through four hundred plates,' says Furuya.

Another challenge of serving small plates, especially in Hawaii, is the target diners, as *Mala Restaurant* on Maui found out. 'We started out as tapas,' General Manager Lisa Chappel says, 'but now we're a broad spectrum of everything and mainly serve full entrees.'

Chappel says that the biggest obstacle they ran into when serving small plates was that there was only a small group of people who truly understood what it was about. 'Not everyone is from New York or Los Angeles where that (small plates) is a trend in food. I just think people wanted more,' says Chappel. So, as any business wanting to survive would do, *Mala* made their customers happy by including entrée-sized plates on the menu.

And although their original concept changed, the base of what their restaurant is about hasn't. 'We endorse anyone that's local here such as the local tomato farms, upcountry herb farms, things like that,' says Chappel. 'We are about sustaining life on Maui.'

Furuya agrees that for this eating style to become a huge hit in Hawaii, it's going to take a little bit of a lifestyle change. 'For Hawaii, people are used to going to a plate lunch place, so it takes some getting used to for people, to see a small plate with only two scallops on it,' Furuya says.

Like any good dinner though, it's not really complete until you've topped all that food with some sugar. And what would the small plate trend be, without bite-sized desserts? Because, if you're not going to be stuffing yourself with large entrees, then you should be able to find room for a little chocolate.

**Sugar Rush** by Frances is a dessert-lover's dream. While the company is currently only a private catering company that does weddings and company parties, owner Frances Pons is hoping one day she can turn her business into a retail store.

'Everyone deserves to eat great, affordable, miniature desserts,' Pons says. Orders should be placed a month in advance, however, Pons tends to take emergency cases, depending on how desperate the person sounds. Like small plates, miniature desserts has its fair share of challenges. For

one, the last minute orders have Pons and her one full-time assistant awake until the wee hours of the night baking their finger tips off. And instead of just cooking one or two giant cakes, they must make at least two to five pieces per person, depending on what the main meal is. With each dessert beautifully handcrafted, those three hundred little cakes could mean four days of work. Additionally, in order to stand out from other dessert trends like cupcakes or other chocolates, Pons only uses the best. That means getting the best chocolate shipped over from Germany, Belgium and France and buying the prettiest papers to put her desserts in, all the way from Italy.

'When I was a pastry chef at Ko'olau Catering Partners, I noticed that the most popular items that we produced were the dessert buffets,' says Pons. Struggling with the decision of opening up her own company or staying with her current employer, Pons witnessed a scene that gave her final decision confirmation.

'We catered a huge Hawaiian wedding with an enormous dessert buffet, and there were these big local

guys leaning against the dessert table, drinking cans of beer while popping mini desserts into their mouths.' The next day, she put her notice in, and the rest, as they say, is history.

The emergence of small plates and miniature desserts in Hawaii is a trend that solves several problems that true food lovers face at restaurants. No longer will people look on in envy of what their neighbor is eating or what the waiter brought out for their companion. The option to try little things here and there satisfies the cravings someone might be having. Can't make a decision on what you want to eat? Order it all! In society's gradual attempt to become healthier, small plates and miniature desserts no longer put people's will power to the test. Instead of having a slice of each cake, you can have a couple bite sized desserts, guilt free.

'The thing about miniature or small anything is that it's a trend,' Pons says, 'and it will continue to grow. Downsizing is the new upscale. It's evolved into a lifestyle and it redefines how we like to eat, what we want to be fed, and how we choose where to eat.'

