

IDEAS FOR FULL-SERVICE RESTAURANTS

Restaurant

HOSPITALITY

OCTOBER 2014

Chef David
Bazirgan
assembles a
small plate
for bar-centric
Dirty Habit in
San Francisco

The **BAR** ISSUE

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A great bar menu is a powerful tool for driving sales, fueling drink orders and more. **By Megan Rowe**

BUILDING A BETTER BAR MENU

Despite tons of accolades and a history of headliners like Laurent Gras and Melissa Perello running the kitchen, in the end San Francisco's Fifth Floor wasn't clicking with younger generations, who weren't down with the tasting menu, the buttoned-up atmosphere, the whole experience. Early this year, Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants reinvented Fifth Floor as Dirty Habit, a playful bar-centric alternative with a fun, small plates-driven menu, shareable cocktails, a dynamic patio scene and checks less than half the size of its forerunner.

David Bazirgan, the former Fifth Floor chef who remained through the transition, says the more staid concept enjoyed a measure of success, but "we had our struggles." On the other hand, Dirty Habit, which opened in May, "has been packed since Day 1," he adds.

"We are getting a lot younger crowd on the weekends, particularly Thursdays and Fridays," Bazirgan observes. "But now we are getting hotel guests as well. It's definitely a see-and-be-seen crowd."

Not every upscale chef-driven restaurant needs such an extreme makeover to keep up with the times, but Dirty Habit's commitment to a less-structured experience that leans more heavily on drinks dovetails with a well-documented evolution in dining-out habits. More restaurant customers are gravitating toward the lounge, where they can sip their craft cocktails, wine and beer and snack on bite-sized versions of regular menu dishes or, better yet, sample their way through a menu created especially for relaxed dining.

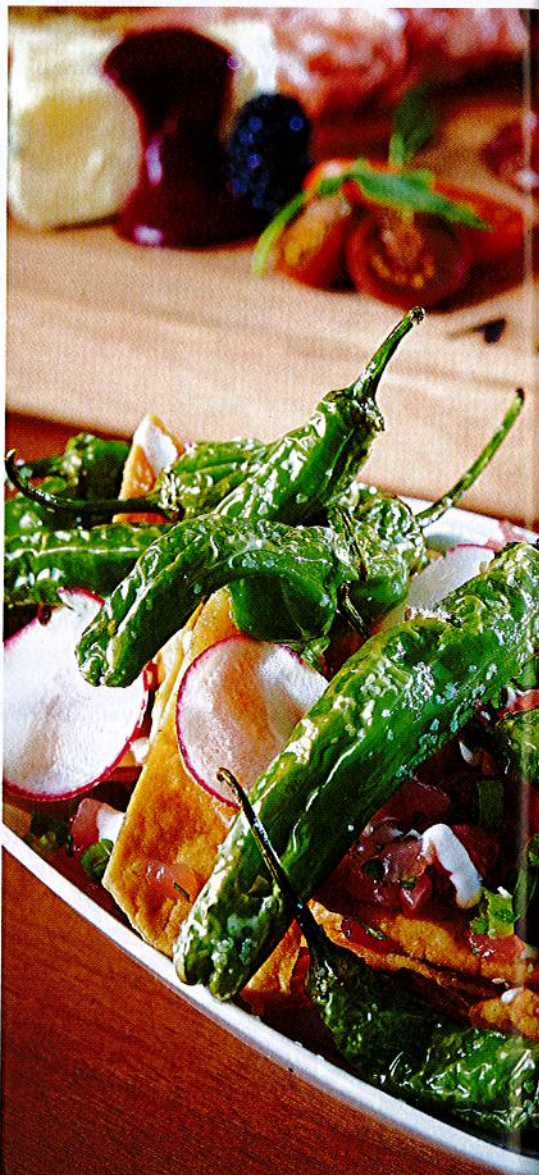
As restaurant owners figure out that bar food actually matters, they are rethinking bar menus in ways that have both subtle and more obvious impacts on the bottom line. Here are some of the things a well-conceived bar menu can do:

Give the people what they want.

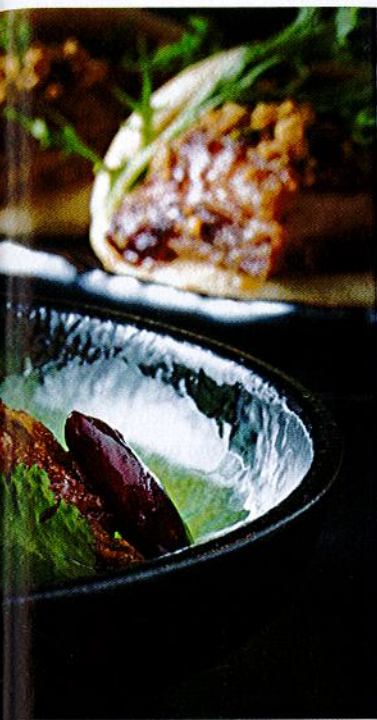
The 2008 global financial crisis hit many many high-end restaurants especially hard, forcing them to look at ways to provide more value.

In New York City, the owners of Oceana took over a new location right around that time and used the timing to incorporate a lounge and café with marble bars, high tops and seats for about 100. The original menu consisted of small bites—foods that didn't require a knife and fork.

"We found that a lot of expense accountants were not spending money,



MEAT MARKET SHRIMP CEVICHE: MICHAEL BISARRI / WINGS AND PATRONS AT DIRTY HABIT: ERIC WOLFFINGER



FUN FOOD, GOOD TIMES (clockwise, from top left): Chicken wings are bestsellers at Dirty Habit; Meat Market's creativity shines in shrimp ceviche and other bar bites; Dirty Habit's bar-centric menu appeals to a young clientele; Asador's "char bar" allows guests to customize their own charcuterie plates.



and budgets were still tight, so a lot of our customers would come into the bar and order snacks and drinks for their client meetings," says Paul McLaughlin, one of Oceana's owners.

The strategy has paid off: Most evenings the bar is packed, and bar revenue has grown 20 percent in less than two years. The menu has expanded to include classics, such as Chinese steamed buns, fish tacos, calamari and surprises such as octopus paella, along with a raw bar and ever-popular fresh oysters. Large groups and theatergoers also gravitate toward the space.

Get a foot in the door.

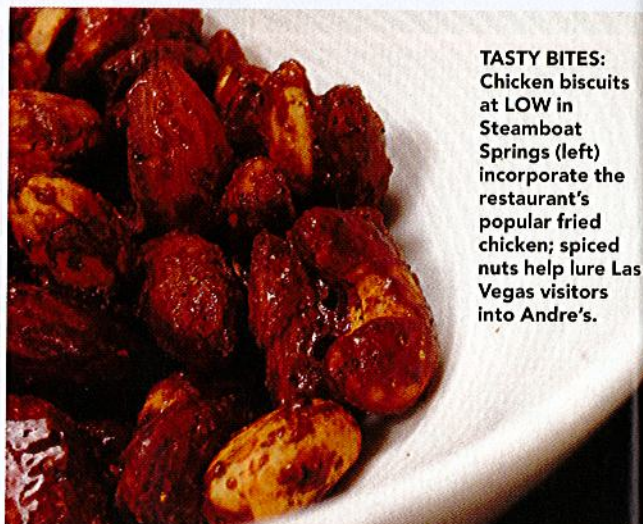
One way a fine dining restaurant can broaden its appeal is to present something different at the bar that previews what's in store in the dining room. That's the approach Andre's at the Monte Carlo in Las Vegas has taken with its 5-6-7 Happy Hour, which runs from 5 to 7 p.m. The numbers refer to prices: \$5 for beers, \$6 specialty cocktails and \$7 small plates and wines by the glass. But these are not just any small plates. Choices include French flat bread, beef sliders with Roquefort cheese

a meal." Items like Shrimp a la Diabla and the pizzas are the winners for Spaghetini's bar patrons.

Satisfy snack attacks.

Available from 5 p.m. until closing, Andre's bar foods appeal to the less-structured schedule many Las Vegas visitors follow, but it's also reflective of an overall trend toward more snacks and fewer formal meals. "A lot of guests don't make any meal plans, so it's really important to have something like that available for them," says Patrick Trundle, beverage director at Andre's. He's seeing more guests visit multiple locations in an evening, doing an informal dine around, and typically they are looking for smaller plates at each stop. And while that type of grazing is a no-brainer in Las Vegas—so many restaurants and bars, so little time, coupled with no pressure to be anywhere in particular—it seems to be happening more everywhere.

Copperwood Tavern in Arlington, VA, serves family-



TASTY BITES: Chicken biscuits at LOW in Steamboat Springs (left) incorporate the restaurant's popular fried chicken; spiced nuts help lure Las Vegas visitors into Andre's.

on house-baked brioche buns, a charcuterie and cheese plate and more.

Bourbon Steak, Michael Mina's steakhouse with multiple locations, has grown its bar business with help from an affordable bar menu. A bar-only lunch special, Business at Bourbon Steak over Burgers, is a \$21 fixed menu that includes a choice of burger, side, nonalcoholic cocktail and milkshake for dessert. "It's the best kept secret in the world," says Mark Politzer, g.m.

The lounge menu at Bourbon Steak is more playful than the dining room version. It features burgers, corn dogs, a cheese plate and other more casual and affordable fare. Bringing people to the lounge, Politzer says, is a way to inject more energy into overall space, including the dining room.

Spaghetini, a fine-dining restaurant in Seal Beach and Beverly Hills, CA, uses bar food to cast a wider net. "The food in our lounge is very serious and high-quality, but more playful," says executive chef Scott Howard. The small plates menu, offered during happy hour, includes a selection of cold plates, hot plates and pizzas, all priced in the \$8-\$22 range. "We want to bring in a different clientele to enjoy the lounge who may not want to spend \$100 on

style dinners created from locally sourced game, beef and fresh fish—not exactly something you might nosh on in the bar. But, "being that we are a tavern by design, we decided to offer a lighter-fare menu at the bar," says Jon Gardiner, g.m. Instead of a big spread, bar visitors can choose from sandwiches and smaller plates designed for someone who wants a quick bite and a beer, or finger foods such as duck confit corn dogs, fried pork rillettes and a variety of sandwiches and burgers, priced from \$6 to \$16.

Having two menus also helps bring a different dynamic to Copperwood.

"If we were to only offer the dinner menu, with its hefty portions and higher prices, we would lose out on an entire demographic that are essential to maintaining our all-inclusive community feel," Gardiner says.

Drive beverage sales.

Well, duh: Historically this has long been the ulterior motive behind offering any kind of food in the bar—

feed them so they won't leave or get too drunk, too fast—since alcoholic beverages nearly always have higher margins than food. But as the public gets accustomed to higher quality, "any food" will no longer cut it.

At Municipal Bar + Dining Company, a sports bar in Chicago, owner Sam Fakhouri opted to create a food menu featuring American classics elevated in a fun, more relaxed style. He admits that while beverage sales are the priority, the food wasn't an afterthought.

"We wanted this not to be just a place people would go because the Blackhawks are playing, but a place to enjoy a nice lunch or dinner," he says. The menu features shareable comfort foods, flatbreads, lobster rolls, fried chicken, prime rib and about a dozen types of sliders.

Dirty Habit's former incarnation was known for its food, and Bazirgan is keeping that reputation alive. The difference now, he says, is that "it's a combination of people coming in for the food and also our excellent cocktail program." Top sellers are chicken wings and fried lamb belly bao buns and, despite a 30-page wine list, cocktails are the drink of choice with the new clientele. "We are selling just as much booze as we are food," Bazirgan says.

Oliverio at the Avalon hotel in Beverly Hills, CA, this summer launched a new weekend poolside happy hour program that pairs bar bites like tomatoes and burrata bruschetta, grilled octopus with couscous and mini pizzas with signature cocktails and a DJ to create a buzz among guests and local businesses. Hottest sellers are the truffle mac n' cheese and mini burgers, says Allen Artcliff-Conrod, one of the managers. "These bar bites were designed to encourage drink sales and to perhaps inspire the guest to order off of the full dinner menu."

"If you want to stay relevant and have a business that will stand on its own that you don't have to keep promoting, having a great food program is important."



{BAR SPECIALS}

Social Media Monday



"Like" Filini Chicago on Facebook, Instagram a photo of your food or beverage or tweet @filinichicago and receive a complimentary mini dessert

Bartender's Choice Tuesday

Rotating weekly wine or spirit special - inquire with your bartender or server for today's selection



MIDWEST WEDNESDAY

All beer brewed in Illinois is \$5, includes bottle and draft

Bottomless Bites EVERY THURSDAY

Nosh on unlimited tasty Italian small bites for only \$18.00 from 5:00PM to 7:00PM

Industry Sunday

Present your Filini Industry Card and receive 1/2 off your total bill. Restrictions apply. See card.



all specials are subject to change without notice and cannot be combined with any other offer



PROMOS: Filini in Chicago runs regular bar specials (left), including bottomless small bites for \$18. Oceana lounge and cafe patrons enjoy Chinese steam buns (below) and other eclectic offerings.

Create a memorable point of difference.

"Everybody is trying to create an interesting beer and craft cocktail menu, and they all end up the same. But when you pair that with a really interesting menu that's not too fancy, approachable and the right combination of foods, that's what keeps people coming back," says Kenna Warner, an owner and partner with Corner Bar Management Group, which has three relatively new lounge concepts in Las Vegas—Commonwealth, Park on



Fremont and BLVD Cocktail Company—and two more on the way.

"At the end of the day, people are there to drink," Warner says. But she believes offering exceptional food to go with those drinks has a long-term benefit. As a result, food accounts for about half of sales at the company's concepts, and that's just fine by Warner.

"If you want to stay relevant and have a business that will stand on its own that you don't have to keep promoting, having a great food program is important," she argues.

Meat Market, a steakhouse concept in Miami Beach that recently opened a second unit in Palm Beach, uses the bar as a way to showcase the creativity of chef/co-owner Sean Brasel.

"We are always trying unique new offerings at the bar," Brasel says. "We have a complete crudo bar, so we are always trying new cev-

BITE BAIT FOR NIGHT OWLS: Kimchi quesadillas and other Korean-Mexican fusion foods are the right draw for a late-night crowd.

THE RAW AND THE COOKED: Bourbon Steak's burgers (right) bring in the bar business; Copperwood's lighter fare, such as steak tartare, appeals to guests who aren't necessarily regulars in the dining room.



ches and crudos out. We also offer some unique small bites that are very popular and perfect for perching at the bar and grabbing a bite," including kobe sliders with bacon, Gouda cheese, mushrooms, truffle Boursin and shallots, or short rib empanadas.

Asador in Dallas offers bar guests a "char bar," a build-your-own charcuterie and cheese board, every day from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. The rotating selection includes choices like housemade chicken liver pate, Texas wild boar salumi, heirloom prosciutto, cheeses, housemade smoked beer mustard, pickled red onion and cucumbers, smoked olive salsa, heirloom tomatoes and mesquite-grilled crostini. Each patron checks off the elements they want on a printed list, and the staff puts it together—three



survival in a seasonal destination like Steamboat.

"Cross-utilization of ingredients is the key to being able to price competitively at happy hour," Vaughn says.

Danny Wells, chef/partner at Republic in Washington, DC's Takoma Park neighborhood, cross-utilizes existing ingredients and prep work in a similar fashion. His restaurant offers a robust late-night menu in the bar that leans heavily on mise en place items from the dinner menu, and it's designed so that a single cook can produce it. There is also a full oyster bar, which is less labor-intensive than the regular menu.

Establish a new daypart.

Many restaurants have leveraged bar food's appeal to boost late-night or midafternoon traffic. Wells says he wanted to give people a reason to visit Republic throughout the day, not just at lunch and dinner. Discounted food draws crowds at happy hour, but late-night deals on drinks are more appealing, and having a varied menu is the icing on the cake.

"Cross-utilization of ingredients is the key to being able to price competitively at happy hour." —Brian Vaughn, LOW Country Kitchen and Bistro c.v.

selections for \$18, four for \$21, \$4 for each additional.

Even mundane ingredients can take on new intrigue if presented creatively. Francesco Tardio, g.m. at Filini Bar & Restaurant in Chicago, says aesthetics are important, even with bar food, and Filini makes use of slate, wooden boards, white porcelain and other materials to dress up individual dishes. A good example is Pollo Al Mattone. "The chicken is pressed with a brick, and the chicken is also served to the guest on a brick. The brick enhances the flavor and makes the piece of chicken look bigger in proportion," Tardio says.

Maximize product yield.

For restaurants that deal with expensive ingredients, small plates and bar bites are a solution to trimming waste. That's the approach Brian Vaughn, chef-owner at LOW Country Kitchen and bistro c.v. in Steamboat Springs, CO, is taking. His bar menu stands out at the latter with offerings like Wagyu beef tartare, seafood carpaccios and pates and dishes with foie gras leftover from the luxe main menu. The tartare, at \$5, has become a fan favorite on the happy hour menu, which is popular with locals—crucial to

"We have a large array of food, which most people appreciate," Wells says. "We tell people we keep the kitchen open just for them." He also recently tested fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies, which servers distribute to patrons 10 minutes before last call. "I think people will be surprised at first, but I figure if someone's kicking me out of a bar and handing me a warm cookie at the same time it can't be that bad," Wells says.

Mandu, a Korean concept in Washington, DC, has used food to build a late-night buzz at its second location, which has a more expansive lounge area and extended bar hours. While the dining room menu focuses on standard Korean fare, the bar-only offerings mix it up with Korean tacos, Korean quesadillas and bar snacks like dumplings and Korean fried chicken. In addition, chef/owner Danny Lee launched a guest chef popup every first Friday with a late-night menu that attracts lines out the door.

Bar food: your secret weapon? Perhaps. "People can drink anywhere, so how do you pull them in? The way we did it was with the food," says Lee. **R**