

MARCH 15, 2007

**ASBPE**  
American Society  
of Business  
Publication Editors  
2006  
Magazine  
of the Year  
TOP 10  
circulation  
\$3,000 or more



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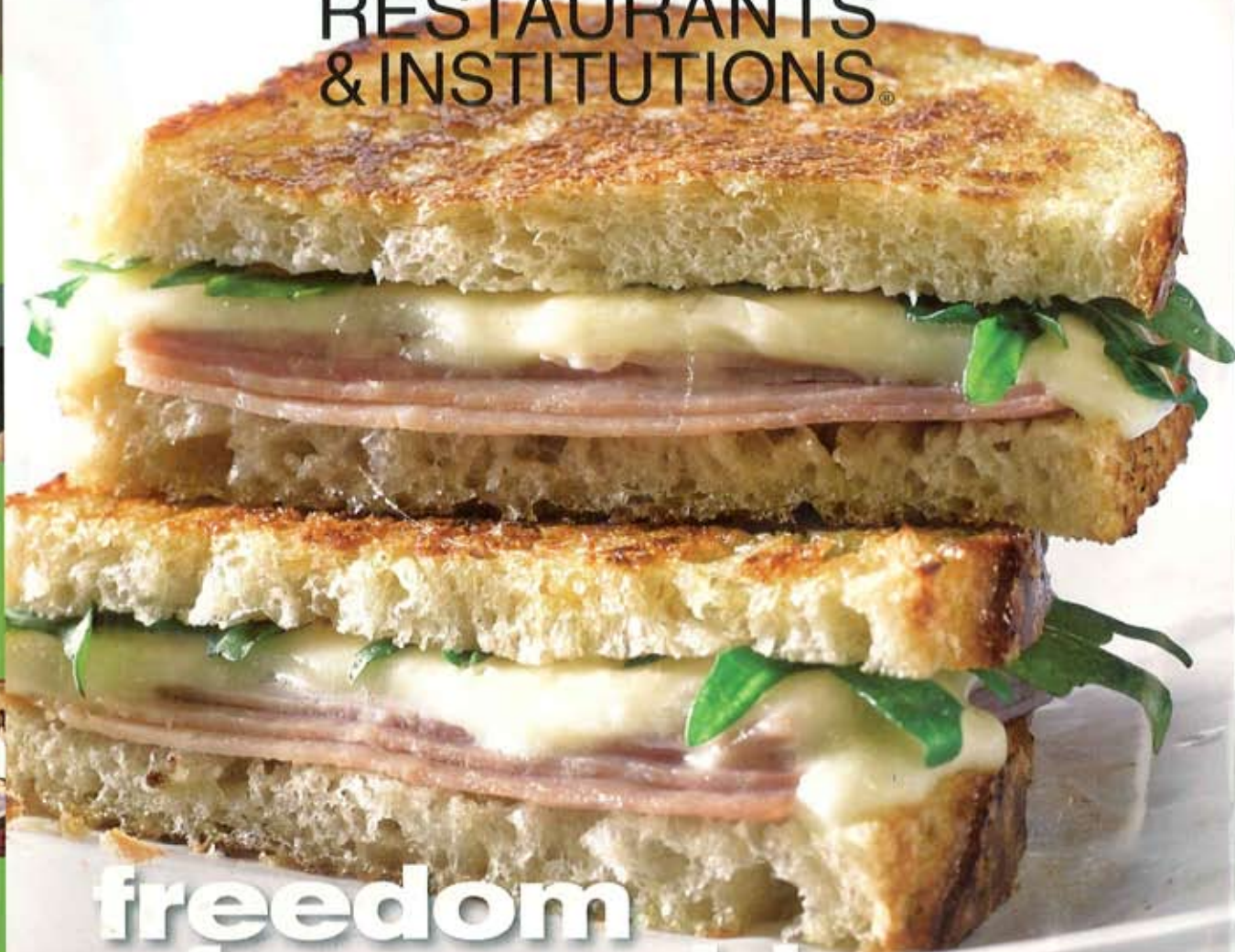
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Small World: Big Ideas for  
Bite-Size Foods Consumers Crave

Going Beyond Food and Service  
to Create Memorable Experiences





# the next small things

Bite-size foods invite customers to nibble and kitchens to experiment.

By **Kate Leahy**, Associate Editor

And, as consumers have made clear, what's missing is a selection of sizes. Guests have come to expect more choices, not just in taste but also in scale of foods. Small items such as mini burgers, bite-size appetizers and tiny desserts provide more options in fewer bites, enticing consumers to order more and per-

haps to return more often as well.

"We see people mixing and matching when they make up their lunch," says Bill Mitchell, senior director of national program development of corporate services for Gaithersburg, Md.-based Sodexo. The contractor has created a line of miniature desserts called Sweet Shots for grab-and-go service and is looking at expanding into scaled-down savory items.

There also can be seen some movement away from large portions. Calabasas Hills, Calif.-based The Cheesecake Factory is augmenting the generous servings for which it is known. Last summer it introduced smaller lunch specials and plans

to expand the portion-controlled line this year with smaller salads billed as weight-management selections. Minneapolis-based Buca di Beppo also is offering options other than its familiar family-size or two-person plates, rolling out the Buca Mio menu of individual portions.

Paul Luttmann, executive chef for Avera McKennan Hospital and University Health Center in Sioux Falls, S.D., thought he was playing it safe by serving generous portions at a new, 110-bed behavioral hospital with modified room service that opened last April. "Three months into it, we started hearing comments. The patients felt like we were wasting food," he recalls.

## SHRINK RAP

While the move away from large plates might have been spurred by enthusiastic acceptance of small plates, some restaurateurs are taking the trend further as they shrink menu items, letting guests select entrée size and make meals of first courses alone.

Aptly named Minnies, which

**A**s tasting flights, small-plate smorgasbords, ethnic eating trends and moderation-minded diets influence the ways foodservice customers dine, standard-issue meals of a single protein and two veggies are losing prominence on some menus.

"The main thing that entices people is variety," says Kevin Rathbun, chef-owner of Atlanta's Rathbun's and Krog Bar. "As long as I've been in the business, the menu formula has been 7-7-5: Seven appetizers, seven entrées and five desserts. People still do it, but what it lacks is variety."

## Micro Economics

Sure, small, scaled-down versions of familiar foods can be eye-catching and buzz-worthy. But producing these miniature versions often takes the same time and labor as larger portions. Meanwhile, guests are price-sensitive, and for them, less isn't always more—especially when menu prices are perceived as too high.

● When Sue McCown, chef-owner of Seattle's Coco La Ti Da, opened the dessert lounge last fall, she quickly figured out that guests aren't always willing to pay more for handcrafted, mini preparations. "The smaller you go, the more labor intensive items become. But it can be hard for people to accept that they have to

pay \$29 for nine sliders," she says.

● While larger size doesn't always indicate value, menu items need to strike a balance between quality, quantity and price point. Ann Dalier, senior director of product innovation and development for Oklahoma City-based Sonic, America's Drive-In, notes the difficulty in balancing portion size and value. "Value doesn't mean price point, it means feeling satisfied with what you purchased. Operators have to be careful to give people portions they can be satisfied with



at reasonable prices," she says.

● At Minnies in Chicago, Founder Jonathan Segal points out that making three mini burgers is more labor intensive than preparing one of standard size. Yet for Segal, that isn't reason to pause. "We feel that there's a price in the market for that," he says. He also notes that bundling items with a side helps boost the perception of value. Customers can purchase a selection of three small sandwiches with french fries and an 8-ounce carafe of wine for \$13. "We're very price sensitive," he says. "We're watching our cost."

opened in Chicago last summer, combines 1940s lunch-counter décor with a menu of bite-size burgers, sandwiches such as beef tenderloin with Dijon-cognac sauce and barbecued pulled pork, and butterscotch milkshakes.

"It's not so much that menu items are smaller," says founder Jonathan Segal. "It's more that guests have the freedom to

Patrons delight in bite-sized popcorn shrimp and whimsical presentation at Daniel's Broiler in Seattle (l.); The understated storefront of Minnies maintains that less is more (bottom).

order more things." Segal also notes that flavor and richness can be emphasized in small portions without being overbearing. Still, he does admit that much of the reason behind serving small foods lies in the novelty factor. "At the end of the day, people are having fun and it's cute."

Like Segal, Pastry Chef Sue McCown, who opened Coco La Ti Da in Seattle last November, thinks small when she serves savory items such as Candy Pork Sliders. Made with pulled pork braised with star anise and a splash of tequila and served

### SUCH A DEAL

# \$4

Menu price at Chef-owner Kevin Rathbun's Krog Bar for Basil Pesto & Tetilla mini-sandwich, one of six *tramezzini* (Italian cafe sandwiches), including a daily special, priced between \$4 and \$6. (Krog Bar)

on baby brioche buns with chile-orange mustard, the sliders are among the bite-size savory items on a menu that predominantly sells desserts. Her reasoning for serving smaller sizes is less about nostalgia and more about practicality: Offering a larger, more extensive selection of savory items would conflict with her positioning as a dessert restaurant and lounge.

"I think it's a dangerous territory for me personally. If it gets too complicated in that area, then it's beyond my capacity," McCown says.

For Brent Hammer, executive chef at The Restaurant at Platinum in Las Vegas, negotiating plate size had a lot to do with how he likes to eat when he dines out. "I tend to enjoy eating tapas-style," he says, explaining how he came to design a > 36

