

Reinventing the Classics

There may be only so much new under the sun, but that doesn't mean there isn't still plenty of room for innovation. Take classic menu favorites, the enduringly popular dishes that customers are happy to eat again and again, from Caesar salad and hamburgers to shrimp cocktail, roast chicken, and crème brûlée.

The ubiquitous slider, for instance, is nothing more than a hamburger in miniature form, which is now being reinterpreted in everything from little skirt steak sandwiches and to bite-size crab cakes on mini-rolls. Caesar salad can be grilled or deconstructed, take a Spanish turn with Manchego and marinated anchovies, or support toppings as diverse as rotisserie chicken or lobster salad. And a "grilled and chilled shrimp with housemade mango cocktail sauce is nothing more—or less—than a very creative shrimp cocktail.

There's a reason chefs are taking proven favorites and putting their own stamp on them—from comfort foods like macaroni and cheese to such upscale classics as steak Diane. In doing so, they're creating new menu ideas that have both built-in appeal and signature potential. The service staff would have to bend over backward to explain Korean barbecued bulgogi or sweetbreads, but what consumer doesn't already "get" the idea behind lobster mac and cheese?

Starting with a familiar classic means that a lot of the customer education and marketing has been done for you already. And as anyone who's renovated a house rather than built one from scratch already knows, a certain number of preexisting parameters can make the job easier—and the results just as spectacular.

Small wonder that some of the biggest names in chef business are retrenching into proven concepts like steakhouses. Boldface chefs like Wolfgang Puck, Laurent Tourendel and Todd English have all gotten into the signature steak game, offering up classic steaks and chops—often accompanied by mix-and-match sauces and upgraded appetizers and side dishes.

Lots of well-known white-tablecloth chefs and restaurateurs have been opening accessible little French-style bistros and brasseries, peddling country French classics like coq au vin and escargots, including David Myers of Los Angeles' Sona (who recently launched Comme Ca) and Philadelphia multi-concept operator Stephen Starr has launched Parc Brasserie. And when the French Laundry's Thomas Keller launches the build-your-own Burger Bar, you have the makings of a trend that's impossible to ignore.

Even before the current financial crisis and its attendant stress, savvy menumakers were retrenching to comforting foods and other well-known classics—perhaps in part as a reaction to the high-flying, 19-ingredients-on-a-plate that has characterized many trendy restaurants in recent years. Then, too, the back-to-the-land menu movement that focuses on local, organic, artisanal and seasonal ingredients rewards a simple approach to cooking—roasting a delicious free-range Amish chicken to perfection, tossing pristine new salad greens with a light dressing, playing up the freshest fish with an understated flash in the pan.

But take a look at how creative all this can be. A recent article in the *New York Post* lauded a list of "new classics" on local menus that included The Smith's Crab Hush Puppies (crab cakes meet Southern corn fritter); Matsugen's Tokyo Clam Chowder (clams and wheat gluten in a soy milk base); and Forge's popular dessert trio of American classics (miniature servings of chocolate cake, root beer float, and butterscotch pudding).