

Benchmark's Top 5 Dining Trends 2007

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Tasty Morsels for 2007!

Benchmark Hospitality International, which manages 30 award-winning hotels, resorts, conference centers and condominium resorts throughout the United States and in Japan, has just released its Five Tasty Dining Trends for 2007, as observed by its properties. The trends were announced by Bob Zappatelli, vice president of food & beverage, and his team of 18 food & beverage professionals.

'America's chefs are mixing it up in the kitchen and drawing on memories of hearth & home,' said Mr. Zappatelli, speaking for the Benchmark culinary team. 'And we mean ALL of the Americas -- from the top of Canada to the tip of Cape Horn, we've not been this 'blended' in 500 years! It's amazing what flavor and cuisine can accomplish!'

Trend #1 Dessert Downsizing ...

... in size only. Never in flavor! A tapas-style dessert menu is the trend. Who can possibly say 'no' to bite size desserts -- especially when they are bursting with flavor and cost only a buck or two per morsel per tasting?

How does a sampling of mini-crème brulee, pot au crème, pomegranate flan and tropical fruit spanakopita sound to your taste buds? Mighty flavorful and with considerably less guilt than larger dessert selections. No need to skip this finale!

Trend #2 America Goes Latin!

Or at least Latin American. Mediterranean, Spanish and Portuguese cuisine are still in vogue, but look out cause America has fallen hard for Latin cuisine.

Latin flavors and the incorporation of fruits, vegetables, meat and fish indigenous to the Caribbean, Central and South America with American sensibility is where cooking is headed. Acidity, marinades and one pot meals with a dash of peasant flair and the family legacy Latin chef's so often bring to the kitchen -- all set the stage for passionate, over-the-top flavor and presentation. And the infusion of Creole and Spanish techniques with local availability is no longer just a New Orleans's prerogative. There's beautiful Ceviche as translated with fish from Ecuador and Honduras. Vaca-Frita, Ropa-Vieja beef dishes from Cuba, and Chimichurri served with Argentinean grilled meats.

Just maybe for the first time in five centuries, the Americas are border free and one with flavor!

Ooh la la.

Trend #3 Grow Naturally, Harvest Locally

Ok, agreed, interest in organic foods and ingredients isn't new ... but today's consumers and restaurants are demanding food that is grown organically and that doesn't cost next month's mortgage payment.

Growth hormones and antibiotics in meat, poultry, eggs and dairy are mighty unappealing when you think about it. The elimination of pesticides, synthetic fertilizers and bio-engineering in produce necessitate seeking out local resources for produce, meat and more. Which is how it should be anyway, so food is the freshest possible and presented when in season at its peak flavor.

Oh, and get to know your favorite local producer. Chances are he or she shares your passion for fresh, flavorful and naturally grown ingredients for your table. Who knows what you might learn from each other.

Trend #4 Here's to the Memories

Cooking seasonally aside for a moment, more chefs create based on memories of mom's, dad's and grandma's cooking than anything else. As important as culinary school is, childhood memories influence the styles and techniques of many great chefs much more than anyone in the dining room imagines.

Memories of family gardens from childhood are responded to with chefs' kitchen gardens and seeking out local growers. Cooking techniques and flavor combinations learned in childhood find their way into the menus of some of the nation's best restaurants. Favorite family recipes are reinterpreted and updated by chefs and pastry chefs who associate hearth & home memories with every ingredient added in the kitchen or bakery.

So cooking seasonally makes sense for flavor and freshness reasons, but just maybe this has as much to do with chefs' memories of tending the family garden, harvesting the family's produce, helping prepare family meals and enjoying nature's bounty originating out of the back yard.

Trend #5 Food & Beverage, Quite Literally!

Lemon Verbena Cosmopolitans, Purple Basil and Mint Mojitos, MarTeaNis. Truffles and chocolate flavored cocktails, add superfruits like Goji Berries, Pomegranates and Mangosteens ... they are all making their way onto the beverage list. Or how about Bloody Mary Salad served with pickled vegetables and shrimp when in the Mid-Atlantic? The mixologists have taken center stage by mixing it up ... mixing it ALL up!

The popularity of premium beverages merged with fresh ingredients that might otherwise flavor a meal's starters and entrées - and the specialty drink menu have ushered in a return to the classic days when the cocktail was king.

Call it a 21st Century Renaissance: Manhattans, Rob Roys, Rusty Nails, Negronis, to name a few, are today joined with flavorful Mojitos with purple basil added, Cosmopolitans with lemon thyme, and Gibson's with garlic chives. A scrumptious renaissance at that!

After dinner, add chocolate, caramel, ice cream and sorbets to premium vodkas, gin and rum. Talk about finishing the night right!

Five More Quick Takes - From Benchmark's Bars

(And from Mary Watson, Sommelier at Benchmark's Lansdowne Resort in Virginia Wine Country. Ms. Watson also serves as company-wide Field Staff Support for Benchmark Hospitality.)

1. Consider a hearty Rosé for dinner. It's great with steak and seafood, widely available and guess what, it's delicious!
2. As more people rediscover Rieslings, they are reminded of how wonderful the wine pairs with an infinite variety of foods -- and how delicious it is when sipping with friends.
3. Sparkling Shiraz delivers a full-bodied red - chilled and bubbly. It's perfect when grilling on a warm afternoon.
4. Martinis continue to grow in popularity - and they are increasingly being made with non-traditional ingredients. It's no longer just 'Would you like vodka or gin...'
5. Torrontés from Argentina will soon be ''white' hot!' Tango anyone?

Benchmark Hospitality International, an independent hospitality management company based in The Woodlands (Houston), Texas, operates resorts, conference centers, hotels and condominium resorts both domestically and internationally. For locations of Benchmark Hospitality properties and for additional information, visit Benchmark's Website at www.benchmarkhospitality.com.

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