

Food & Beverage - Food Cost and Portion Size - By Joe Dunbar

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Would your restaurant guests welcome smaller portion sizes for a similar check average? After a week on the road dining out each day, I believe the answer is yes. The weakening economy and rising commodity costs have everyone talking about costs.

Before the trip, I ran a few errands. After picking my car up from the garage, getting a haircut, filling the gas tank and picking up some groceries, I was out over \$200. My mother spent the better part of \$20 stopping for milk, bread, eggs and produce. Costs for gas and every day staples have skyrocketed. People across the country are tightening their budgets and cutting out many extras.

My brother likes to go out to eat each week and has shifted from weekends to mid-week. He mentioned a recent check for \$93 for a simple steak dinner for 2 with a couple beers. The portion size was huge and he would have been happy with 25% less meat. The excellent bread basket and great salad (included with the meal) would have been perfect with a smaller steak.

I paid a visit to an old friend who owns a pub. One of the waiters joined the discussion with the restaurant owner. He mentioned his tip income was down. His diners are spending less and ordering fewer extras. The tip percentage is lower and the number of diners has dropped. He now works with the guests to deliver a satisfying meal within their budget.

I brought up the portion size issue at each meal. The unanimous opinion is today's portion sizes are too large. We asked one waitress if there was a smaller rib eye steak option. She checked with the kitchen and explained the meat was pre-portioned for the menu item. They could have served us 1/6 less meat for the same price. With no refrigerator at the hotel, we left between 2 and 3 ounces on our plates.

In New York's Grand Central Station, I sat next to a couple splitting an omelet at breakfast. They ordered the special with a second cup of coffee and left satisfied. A diner nearby left 1/3 of his omelet uneaten. With the heightened awareness of dietary cholesterol, most people would appreciate a two egg option.

If your patrons were served smaller portion sizes at the current menu prices, your food cost would decline for the same sales level. This strategy may achieve better guest retention than a 10% menu price increase. Timid menu planners may want to assemble these smaller portions on a single page "Value Menu" to properly gauge popularity.

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