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## Pasta Rules

Operators can expect solid pasta sales by menuing tried-and-true comfort standbys, such as lasagna, ravioli, stuffed shells and the ever-popular macaroni and cheese. But by creating variations on these themes, chefs can also add some occasional excitement to the menu-and stay at the top of their form.

Say "pasta" to Scott Timmons, regional executive chef at MasterCard, a Flik International account in Purchase, NY, and he'll immediately tell you it's a guaranteed sale whenever it's menued for his approximately 1,200 lunchtime customers. "Pasta is huge to my business, and the low-carb craze didn't affect it at all," he says.

Timmons and his staff stuff their own shells with fillings ranging from low-fat ricotta to those incorporating chicken or seafood. "You mix the ingredients in with ricotta and pipe it in the same way," he explains. "And I can't even count the varieties of lasagna we offer as a casserole off the hot line. It's good if you can pair it with a high-cost protein such as fish or beef, so you can even out the food cost."

For example, his Mexican lasagna alternates adobo chicken with layers of tortellini sheets and incorporates Monterey Jack cheese instead of mozzarella. It's always a sell-out-priced at \$3.50 a la carte-when it's menued on the six-week cycle.

It's hard to find a location in any sector that doesn't regularly offer mac-and-cheese, typically by-the-ounce as a side dish. At MasterCard, it's 30¢ an ounce and available every Thursday. "People know it and expect it-and I'll offer variations, such as smoked chicken or ham mac-and-cheese," says Timmons. "Also, a pasta and vegetable action station, run every Wednesday, is huge for me. It's basically the same every week. The customer fills a paper boat with as many cold raw vegetables as they want and hands it to the chef who sautés it on top of their choice of noodle."

The chef, keeping four sauté pans going on four burners, has an array of ingredients at the ready: olive oil, garlic, marinara, heavy cream, grated cheese, mixed herbs, peppercorns, crushed peppers, pasta, plus protein selections that change week to week. "It's basically a pasta dish," Timmons admits, "but it's a complete meal served on a china plate or in a to-go container, so I get \$4.29 for it-almost \$1 more than for other entrees. To me, that's fanfare."

Cold pasta salad is the real star, both on the salad bar and as part of almost all catering jobs Timmons and his staff produce. "Customers have many other cold salad choices, but pasta is No.1," he says. "They don't even care what's in it-simple, with vegetables and pesto, is best. Since it's also on the salad bar, prepared with olive oil, mixed herbs plus salt and pepper, I go through about 180 pounds of cooked pasta in one week."

Chef David Thomas, ARAMARK's manager at Legg Mason Wood Walker, Inc., in Owens Mills, MD, knows that baked macaroni and cheese topped with buttered breadcrumbs is a favorite among his 400 daily lunchtime customers. When it's an ancho chili and chicken mac-and-cheese or a pesto and tomato version, sales are even better.

But when blackened chicken mac-and-cheese, prepared with a blend of Monterey Jack and Cheddar, then topped with breadcrumbs, is on the menu, it's a sellout by 1 p.m.-an hour before closing-so the sous chef has standing orders to prepare more.

Thomas, who joined this location last March, hasn't yet introduced the live-action, build-your-own pasta station that he found to be so successful at his previous assignment: Verizon in Baltimore. There, 160 to 200 of the unit's 500 lunchtime customers would choose this option when it was offered each Thursday as an enticement to dine in-house on what is traditionally a slow day.

With four pastas, four proteins and four sauces to choose from, there was always something for everyone, Thomas points out. "Garlic cream sauce was the most popular, as well as a pink sauce of béchamel, marinara and a bit of red wine," he says. "Plus, we always offered one sauce of the week, pesto being the favorite."

Duane Keller, executive chef at Guest Services' Potowmack Landing Restaurant, a National Park Service location on the shores of the Potomac River in Alexandria, VA, likes to pair ingredients that elicit an appreciative 'wow' from his more than 500 daily lunch customers (600 to 700 at dinner). Keller's latest pasta innovation for the fall menu is eggplant and potato gnocchi with pancetta, which also includes diced mushrooms and grated Manchego cheese.

Keller is also passionate about mac-and-cheese, especially prepared with breadcrumbs on top, heated until it bubbles. "Keep it simple but with a little twist on things," he says. "Make it educational but not intimidating. It should be subtle, comfortable, but then 'wow.' We've done a lobster meat and oyster mushroom mac-and-cheese combo with gemelli pasta-like little pig's tails."

New this year, Keller is offering diver scallops with cauliflower, capers and toasted almonds tossed with pepper fettuccini. The scallops are pan sautéed with a dollop of butter; the pan deglazed with a splash of white wine. The nuttiness of the almonds adds a light and flavorful touch, while the pasta ties all the flavors together, Keller asserts. "I put cracked pepper in the pasta and cook the cauliflower with turmeric. It's a really light, rustic Italian pasta but robust for the fall."

To ease production pressures, Keller purchases pasta sheets to make fettuccini and ravioli, outsourcing his order for any flavor he can imagine, from pumpkin ravioli to squid, pepper or sun-dried tomato sheets. "It's like ice cream, cheesecake or mashed potatoes-you can make pasta in any flavor."

For the past seven years or so, Mike Milone, foodservice manager at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, has been running Tomassitos, a branded pizza/pasta station concept developed by the National Association of College & University Food Services (NACUFS).

"It's our busiest location in the food court, which seats about 900," he says. "We serve approximately 3,000 [of the total of 15,000 students] each day at lunchtime in this foodcourt. We're mostly a commuter campus with only about 1,000 residents."

Today, the Tomassitos station is basically the same as when it started, menuing homemade marinara and meat sauce daily with Alfredo and primavera sauce on a rotation. Homemade lasagna and pizza are also available each day. "We've used a variety of pastas and sauces over the years," Milone reports, "but we find that mostaccioli is easier to eat and the most popular, too. It's like a noodle with a hole in the middle. Spaghetti is also on daily, but it's messier to eat. The third type of pasta rotates and could be rotini, rigatoni, penne, the more expensive tortellini, or, once in a while, ravioli, a prepared product stuffed with cheese. Each week, we make two 60-gallon batches of marinara sauce and also use it to make the meat sauce."

Employees working the evening and weekend shifts at UCLA Medical Center no longer feel they're getting short shrift or leftovers at mealtime. For the past three years, a pasta and stir-fry cooked-to-order bar has served their needs, and it's been enthusiastically received, according to executive chef Mark Dyball.

The daily menu always includes yaki soba noodles in addition to two types of Italian noodles such as penne, bow ties, spaghetti, etc. "The sauces change as well, with one usually being Asian-perhaps Thai curry sauce or black bean," he says. "The second might be checca, a vodka and tomato sauce; tarragon/mustard sauce; puttanesca sauce or pesto cream sauce-but there's always marinara, Alfredo and an Asian sauce each day.

"We make the sauces from scratch," he continues, "and the chef can always incorporate leftover protein such as salmon or steak in the stir-fry or pasta dish, plus we always offer chicken and shrimp. The customer can mix and match ingredients [verbally], but the chef remains in control of the portion size, which is priced at \$4.99 a bowl or \$5.99 for a beverage combo."

At UCLA Medical Center, as in so many other locations, mac and cheese carries the day-typically Thursday. "The secret is that it's from-scratch, and they love it," Dyball contends. "We make it with a roux base plus a sharp Cheddar cheese and cream to finish. We make up to 200 pounds each time, cover it with extra cheese, then put it into the oven. We sell it as an entrée for \$2.99 or as a side for 79¢ with fried chicken and spinach."

SOURCE: *FoodService Director*, Sept. 15, 2005 ("Noodling Around," p. 32)