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Appetizers | Less of more

Are appetites shrinking or is camaraderie increasing among diners? either way, it pays to eat more of everything and less of each

Arun Janardhan

When The Table opened in Mumbai in January last year, in a space neighbouring Indigo Delicatessen and Café Moshe's near the Gateway of India, the expectation was mixed. Would it bring much-needed respite in the south of the city, which had limited options, and would it have anything new to offer?

A year down the line, it remains one of the most popular eating destinations in this part, its relatively small space packed during weekends with people who are happy to revisit. It is not just the food that has brought repeat visitors—it is also the format that draws attention.



Versatile: Steamed Rawas from the table; Photographs by Abhijit Bhatlekar/Mint

The Table designed its menu to offer small and large plates, a seemingly synonymous interpretation of the appetizer-entrée formula, but there was a little more to it than that.

Over the last many months, this interpretation of portions has taken on a new meaning, with some restaurateurs calling it a global trend and others

considering it just another offering in different packaging. But what remains true—and most restaurateurs agree—is that small food is getting more attention for a variety of reasons. It's helping groups of people share food, it's becoming a more attractive accompaniment to alcohol than salted peanuts, it's giving hope to the health-conscious, it's helping diners experiment and get more "bang for their buck".



In its most recent café at the Palladium mall, Phoenix Mills, in central Mumbai, Café Moshe's has included a

section called small plates. At the popular watering hole, Dome, on the terrace of the InterContinental Marine Drive, a soon-to-be-introduced revised menu will have new appetizers. The restaurant Chulha, at Grand Hyatt Goa, which opened last year, serves food only in small portions, a breakaway for Indian restaurants.

"Everyone is taking appetizers to a different level," says Irfan Pabaney, corporate chef at the Oriental restaurant Hakkasan, Mumbai. "There's more thought being given to it. Ten years ago, the main course was all people talked about."

Sharing is caring



Soft Scrambled Eggs With Black Truffle
Served In Egg Shells from The Table

But The Table wanted to make the experience more casual, in some sense communal, and keep the service approachable.

"The point is," says Sanchez, "when you are going out, you are often doing it for the social aspect, to go out with people. I find the more social way to eat is to share."

Sharing is not new to Indian cuisine or to Indians, who dine differently from several of their Western counterparts. A *dal makhani* always comes in one large bowl for everyone on the table to share, as opposed to a roast chicken.

"We wanted to initially do it (the restaurant) as a street food concept," says Glenn Peat, executive assistant manager at Grand Hyatt Goa, "but changed it to this style (small portions) because we want people to try multiple things."

At The Table, for instance, diners have been known to order a few small plates, share them and be done with the meal without bothering to go through the formality of the rest of the courses. The same often happens at Neel, the Indian restaurant at Tote on the Turf in Mahalaxmi, Mumbai, with their kebabs.

"The concept of different courses, etc., is a fiction that



If I have a beet salad with goat cheese, orange and mint, if they take a bite, are they going to have mint because that's a key taste of what I intend the dish to be? FORM OVER FUNCTION IS THE NAME OF THE GAME HERE.



sharing, small plates also give the diner an option to try more of what's available. He recalls a trip last year to Shanghai—with its Chinese fare quite different from the Indian variety of the Oriental cuisine— where he was keen to discover as many flavours as possible. "Wherever you are, beyond the places you see, what's most important is food," says Sinha. "You have small stuff, it satiates your hunger, plus allows you to experiment."

The quest for more variety in smaller portions, says Akerkar, is also a reflection of our times, when we are bombarded with little packages of information which we have less time to assimilate, linger on and, therefore, digest. "To do the traditional format of dining, a three-course meal, a long leisurely bottle of wine... people don't have the time," says Akerkar. "There is something to be said about faster (not fast-food) dining than the lingering meal. What small plates do is give you a variety of choices in small doses—much like everything in our lives. It's the tapas concept, more evolved."

For several restaurants staggering under Mumbai rents and, therefore, forced to operate out of cramped spaces, small plates help keep the turnover quick. The Table, for example, was designed so that the first orders are sent out of the kitchen in 5-7 minutes, making the wait for the larger plate seem less long. The client is happy to get food on the table without waiting too long, while Sanchez and his team have the space to work on their larger plates.

has been created here," says Rahul Akerkar, managing director and director cuisine of deGustibus Hospitality Pvt. Ltd, which owns Neel, the Indigo restaurant in Colaba and the two branches of Indigo Deli, all in Mumbai. "It's a Western model applied to Indian cuisine and Indians, which does not necessarily work."

Small plates, even if considered different from appetizers, have existed in almost every cuisine. The Chinese dim sum, the Spanish tapas, the Greek mezes, the Indian kebabs have all been designed to be shared. What The Table and others have done—and several others will continue to do—is innovate.

Subhash Sinha, the executive chef at the Pune Marriott Hotel and Convention Centre, which has the Indian restaurant Paasha, says that beyond the feasibility of

Experiments in motion



Chef Alex Sanchez of The Table

Where small plates would differ from the traditional appetizers is in variety and presentation. A plate of dim sums would have just that, as also a plate of kebabs, unless they come in a platter in different combinations. "If I do something with arugula and balsamic, you would enjoy it. If I give you just 20 leaves, it would leave you with a bitter taste in the mouth," says Sinha.

"Sometimes it is more challenging to

plate a small one visually," says Sanchez, who was declared best chef at the first Time Out (India) Food Awards 2011. "If I have a component on one side with something on the other side, people are sharing, is one person taking a bite of one and the other of the other? I have to make sure all the components of each dish are compartmentalized so that when one takes a scoop, they have everything in it to complete the dish.

"If I have a beet salad with goat cheese, orange and mint, if they take a bite, are they going to have mint because that's a key taste of what I intend the dish to be? Form over function is the name of the game here," says Sanchez.

Chefs take great pride in the way they present food, a visual treat that might often escape the consumer. That bread pudding which came to your table with streaks of chocolate and what looks like marmalade, is the product of hours of experimentation in the kitchen. In a small plate, when multiple forks are likely to dig in for a share of the pie, the chef does not have to squirm at the possible destruction of his practised creation. For instance, Pabaney is particular about the pandan prawns served with crispies at Hakkasan to make sure they look the same, and elegant, each time.

"This way, the client does not massacre my presentation," agrees Paul Kinny, laughing. Kinny, the executive chef at Mumbai's InterContinental Marine Drive, who has finished working on a revised menu for Dome, calls this small-portion concept a global trend, which he is also following.

Size matters: Murg Malai Tikka from Chulha

There is also the challenge of flavouring the small plate in such a way that it does not deter the diner from ordering more of the same



or attempting the larger plates. Sanchez says the flavours have to be exciting to make an immediate impact, but not too assertive. Moshe Shek, founder of the restaurant chain named after him, keeps it light, without cream, cheese or butter, while Sinha would prefer starters with a mild flavour

so "your taste buds don't get blocked".

The portions would also have to be just right—not to kill the appetite, just satiate the initial pangs of hunger. It shouldn't be so small that the price offends people, and not so big that it is completely impossible for one person to eat more should they decide to do so.

"I feel more creative freedom with small plates because it does not need this balance of protein, sauce, carbohydrates and vegetables. In the small plate, you are not cornered into any one way," says Sanchez.

Less, but all the time

The all-day dining concept is a consequence of demand that goes beyond the noon-3pm hours. Shek calls them the 11am or 4pm visitor who is peckish but not looking for a full meal. "It's happening more often that meetings are over brunch or coffee instead of lunch or dinner. What options does one have if they don't want a sandwich?" he asks, explaining why his Colaba restaurant started small plates three years ago.



Tamatar and Sengada Chaat from Chulha

The small plate has also become a substitute for bar snacks, a more versatile option to the standard salty or spicy peanuts that are supposed to encourage more drinking. "What happens with smaller plates is you get more variety with your drink," says Farrokh Khambata, proprietor of catering company Catering & Allied, Mumbai restaurant

Joss, Amadeus, which opened last year, and the Cafe at the NCPA that opened on Monday. "With better food, you can drink, drink, drink."

It's another symbol of the times, says Pabaney, in that eating out is not easy on the wallet, and even if the younger lot now has more spending power than about a decade ago, the more frequent diners, especially at high-end outlets like Hakkasan and Indigo, are older. He says the people who frequent his restaurant, in the average age group of 45, also have smaller appetites. "We eat much less than we did when we were in our 20s," says 45-year-old Pabaney. "This bunch is also more discerning, well-travelled and, therefore, happy eating more varieties in smaller quantities."

"I have always had this philosophy," says Khambata. "You are only as good as your appetizer." Sanchez has the last word, and simple reasoning: "Small plates are just sexier."

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