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New Flight Patterns

Pairing food flights with beverage flights can make guest satisfaction and profits take off.



Many operators merchandise flights of beer, wine and spirits. The more proactive ones also offer food flights, tastes of delicious dishes that awaken the palate and hint at the meal to come. Something I've seen abroad and now peg as the "Next Big Thing" in the U.S. is food *and* beverage flights merchandised together.

Starwood Hotels & Resorts has just launched the fourth version of its very popular "Wines of the World" program in Asia, but this time it incorporates food and has been renamed "Wine and Food Tastings of the World." The program presents a selection of small plate dishes paired with samples of various vintages for guests to explore, but it is not a one-size-fits-all approach.

"As our division covers 22 countries from India to New Zealand to Bangkok to Beijing, there is no way we can have just one food tasting menu or even a set of wines that is right for every country," says Starwood's Martin Jones, managing director, food and beverage, Asian Pacific. "So, we establish the common parameters and then select the wine partners and let our food and beverage directors and executive chefs create the perfect tasting menus and wines to match."

The origin of the small plate food revolution in the U.S. began with the tapas invasion of the early 1980s, started by Café Ba Ba Reeba in Chicago. What Café Ba Ba Reeba found—as have others who've since embraced the Spanish tradition—is that small plates deliver over-the-top profits and guest satisfaction. Perhaps the next step is offering flights of tapas-style plates paired with flights of select beverages, enabling guests to sample and dabble in the various ways different dishes complement different beverages on the menu.

The first step in developing a food and wine flight pairing program is to convene a meeting of your culinary and beverage teams. The agenda should begin with ensuring that your beer, wine and spirits flights are right on; the next step is deciding which of your best signature dishes

pairs well with your beverage flights.

Red and white wines may present challenges, which is why you have everyone putting their heads together. As for beer flights, those generally can tolerate far more heat in your dishes than even your most courageous wines. For mini cocktails, challenge your team to find just the right foods to create a lasting impression. And when it comes to dessert or sparkling wines, mini desserts and chocolates are sure to please.

Since food flights are tastes, not appetizers or main courses, the goal should be to offer mini portions of your most flavorful culinary creations that complement but do not overpower your beverage flights. Get creative and build upon some of your successful merchandising efforts. If you offer blind wine flights for your more adventuresome guests, for example, try offering a Mystery Foods flight, inviting customers to guess the identities both of the food and the beverages.

To be successful with flights, train servers to suggest them in place of an opening beer, wine or spirits order. Doing so immediately presents guests with something unique, and it whets their appetites both for your food and beverage offerings.

Several U.S. chains already are offering flights on the dessert front: Seasons 52 promotes Mini Indulgences desserts at its seven locations, offering nine varieties from which to choose. P.F. Chang's China Bistro launched mini dessert offerings at its 172 restaurants in February with eight choices: Mini Great Wall of Chocolate, Tiramisu, Tres Leces, Lemon Dream, Banana Split, S'more, Carrot Cake and Apple Pie.

Houlihan's has been offering just about everything in mini size for nearly two years to the delight of its grazing customers at its more than 115 restaurants. "People today like to explore and experience different tastes," says Dave Brown, vice president of operations support for Houlihan's. "Flights give them the opportunity to mix it up, to sample without breaking their pocketbook."

Mini desserts can be ordered in two different flight sizes, the Pick Three and the Fab Five, says Brown, adding that Houlihan's also offers mini burgers, as well as a three-dip appetizer flight consisting of white bean, roasted red pepper and artichoke dips served with chips and focaccia crisps. The chain's beverage flights can be ordered along with appetizer or dessert flights, although it's not a structured food and beverage flight program. And as for beverage flights, "you can try a flight of any three of our wines by the glass; we have mini Martini flights and even tequila flights," according to Brown.

Independents also are getting in on the action. Cru Café & Wine Bar in Chicago offers cheese flights along with wine flights, while that city's Bin 36 offers select bar bites to accompany its wine flights.

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One enticement might be offering combination discounts when a guest orders both a food and a beverage flight; this will greatly increase perceived value. And, as always, server enthusiasm and conviction that guests will be thrilled with their tasting adventure are priceless.

Pair your food and beverage flight programs and watch both guest satisfaction and profits soar. ●

Fred Tibbitts, Jr. is president and CEO of Fred Tibbitts Associates, a global wine, spirits and hospitality services consulting firm with offices in New York City and Bangkok. He can be reached at fredbev@fredtibbitts.com.