



Food Presentation

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Presenting beautiful food is as much an art as painting a picture, composing a song, or taking a perfect photograph. There's a reason the food business is referred to as the culinary arts.

Presenting food is also a science. It incorporates elements of design as well as architecture, and principles of engineering and physics.

There are no hard and fast rules when it comes to presenting food, as creativity and personal preference are involved. Yet there are some universal principles we can use

to set standards that most everyone would agree make our presentations look more appealing.

PERCEPTION OF VALUE

We all come from different backgrounds, work in different types of facilities, and in different parts of the country. Our perception of what is valuable varies from person to person. To someone who is spending a hefty amount on a meal and values clean lines and bright colors, a plate of biscuits and gravy with chicken-fried steak won't be very appealing. On the other hand, if that person was coming



TIPS FOR MAKING MEALS LOOK THEIR BEST

in from a long day of hard labor, they may prefer that big plate of comfort food. Food presentation has a lot to do with knowing your clientele and serving them accordingly.

Let's look at some of the things we can do that generally increase the perception of value to all of our guests.

Color

Bright colors show off food in a way that attracts us to it. Think about vegetables. When was the last time you were excited to eat withered, olive green-colored vegetables? Compare that image to a brightly colored carrot that looks

like it's just been picked and is neatly washed for your consumption? What about meats and seafood? Do you know anyone who has ever sought to buy meat that was dark or seafood that was gray? Not only is the raw food we pick critical, but when it is cooked and presented it's important that it's as close to the natural color as possible. This is a perception of value to me as a chef. I know when someone understands what they are doing in the kitchen when the food comes out to the table and it's colorful. It means they started cooking it when I ordered it, paid attention so it wouldn't be overcooked, and served it when it was ready. Garnishes like chopped herbs or small diced vegetables are an important part of providing a contrast in colors and they offer a burst of color that might not otherwise be there.



The same goes for setting a table or setting up a steam table. Colors can not only tell you how long the food has been sitting out deteriorating in a hot well, they can also tell you how much time, thought, and effort went into displaying the offerings properly.

Numbers

When it comes to how many of something to present, there is a long and a short answer. The short answer is odd numbers. Odd numbers look more appealing to our eyes. That's why you'll see items plated in quantities like one, three, or five. The longer answer is, when plating a single serving make sure it's just that – a single serving.

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Many times we overload plates with certain items and underutilize other components. It's important to have everything in harmony, which makes your dishes more cohesive from both a nutrition and presentation standpoint.

Textures

Presenting different textured items is another way we create a perception of value for our customers. The French dessert Crème Brulee is a good example of contrasting textures in one dish – the rich custard is silky smooth, the sugar layer is burned – bruleed – so it caramelizes and hardens, offering crunch.

Height

Building a dish or stacking is another way you can highlight different components of a dish and increase a customer's perception of value.

Placement

A mistake that many cooks make when plating dishes is simply putting items on the plate without having a plan. Here are a few guidelines for utilizing the concepts we just addressed and placing each component on the plate. Use multiple colors. Create a focal point (usually the most expensive or interesting item on the plate). Keep the plate rim clean.

BASICS OF FOOD PRESENTATION

We outlined some principles to use when presenting food to increase a customer's perception of value. Now let's incorporate those principles and put them into practice



by discussing the basics of food presentation for various dishes.

Passed Appetizers

One of the challenges with passed appetizers is they are not sitting in a heating vessel, so they get cold quickly. To help alleviate this, a best practice with passed appetizers is to keep them mostly as cold or room temperature options. Another challenge is they have a tendency to slide around on the tray or platter. To avoid this, place something underneath them – like a paper doily or napkin.

Tossed Salads

Tossed salads on a buffet should be served with the dressing on the side to avoid a soggy mess. Plated tossed salads should be dressed just prior to leaving the kitchen, or have the dressing available on the tables in a banquet setting. On a buffet, when tossed salads include many ingredients, be sure to layer those ingredients within the salad so they can be more equally dispersed among the guests.

ANFP ONLINE COURSE

Learn More About Food Presentation

ANFP offers a 5-hour online course titled **Food Presentation: Tips for Making Meals Look Their Best**. This course shows you how to look at food presentation and create a strategy for your events and meals to help you really stand out. You'll learn basic tips, techniques, and secrets used by high-end hotels and restaurants to really make their food "pop." Lots of color images are provided to augment the text.

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Hot and Cold Buffet Dishes

Provide variety and keep in mind the principles described above—good color, neat placement, and overall appeal. On a hot buffet, be aware that if meats or vegetables are cut too thin, they will overcook if left in a chafing dish or hot well.

Cold Desserts

Although you want to keep them cold, it's also important to recognize that the flavor of food is best around room temperature. So instead of serving cold desserts straight out of the fridge, allow them to “temper” by sitting out at room temperature for about 30 minutes before service. This keeps them out of the temperature danger zone, while allowing the flavors to show through. Every item is different, so understand the melting point of certain components such as whipped cream and chocolate, and at what point condensation starts to show on them.

PRESENTING BEVERAGES

Here are a few ways we can take advantage of current trends and give our customers an increased sense of value for the beverages we provide.

- Use unique, customized, or novel cups or glasses when serving beverages.
- Garnish your beverages.
- Add fresh herbs or spices.



CENTERPIECES AND DÉCOR

A beautifully set table can make as much of an impact on the first impression of a meal as the meal itself. You can almost immediately tell the quality of the experience that you are about to have when you look at the table.

Here are some questions you should ask yourself when preparing a menu and planning décor for your special event:



- Will the meal be served inside or outside?
- Is electricity available?
- Is water or a sink available?
- Is the event casual or upscale?
- Is it a buffet or a plated meal?
- Are you serving on china with stainless flatware? Or using paper and plastic?
- Is there a motif or theme?
- What quality of food do attendees expect? High end, organic, or cheap and easy?

SUMMARY

Proper presentation begins with the end in mind. Keep consistent standards and stress your expectations with others. Know your guests and what they expect. Then deliver not only what they want, but maybe even something they aren't anticipating—an even higher standard of quality. **E**



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