

It's All About Craftsmanship

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USING
PREPARATION
& COOKING
TECHNIQUES TO
ENHANCE PLATE
APPEARANCE

When I'm asked, "How can we make our plates look better?" or "What type of garnish do you recommend for our plates?" my response is typically, "When good techniques are applied, the appearance of the food itself is like a built-in garnish."

If you were fortunate enough to attend ANFP's 2014 National Leadership Conference in Minneapolis, you may have seen my IGNITE session presentation—10 Ways to Enhance Your Foodservice Operation. In it, I talked about ingredient selection and craftsmanship. That session is

harmonious with the subject of this month's article. Using the following approaches, you should be able to naturally enhance plate appearance for your customers without increasing costs.

BUILT-IN PLATE GARNISH

With the increasing cost of food, and employees required to do more with less, I find it wasteful to invest time and product into a special plate garnish. If the proper approach is taken when designing recipes, plates, and menus, the garnish will be in the food. This concept begins with you, as the menu writer, and flows through to a well-trained



kitchen staff. Everyone must ensure that products are stored properly, that recipes and techniques are followed appropriately, and—finally—that food is held and served in the proper manner.

The built-in plate garnish consists of three colors, three shapes, and three textures. In addition, sound cooking techniques help create an eye appealing plate composition. This is a cost savings approach, as it does not require additional product or labor yet increases the customer experience through a great first impression when the plate is presented.

MISE EN PLACE

I'll address "everything in its place" at the level of recipe and menu design. This is the mise en place to ensure that the production flows smoothly. One must confirm that the ingredients required for production are onsite and accessible. Reviewing the recipes with the team will help clarify duties as well as expectations and execution during the shift.

- Ensure order sheets correlate with the upcoming menus and production.
- Pull necessary items from the freezer early enough to thaw under refrigeration.
- Have employees review recipes and gather necessary ingredients before beginning production. This allows time to react to any missing ingredients.

THREE COLORS

As we all know, the food we serve comes in various colors. Depending on how we treat it from the time it is received throughout the preparation, cooking, and holding steps has a direct impact on the color and appearance when it hits the plate. The key point in "three colors" is that this approach will help develop the appearance of the plate. As you create dishes and menus, consider the final colors that you will bring together.

- Different ingredients add to the variety of colors.
- Cooking and finishing techniques help provide color or contrast to the plate.
- Sauce, salsa, relish, compote, tapenade, and compound butter can add color and interest to the plate.

THREE SHAPES

Shapes apply to how we prep the ingredients for the recipe and the components for the plate. I always teach that we are in charge of the food, not at its mercy. This means we can change or retain the natural appearance of the food. Carrots can be kept as rondelles (rounds or coins), they can be cut on a bias/diagonal creating ovals, they can be turned into a batonnet 1/4 x 1/4 x 2-3 inches or julienne 1/8 x 1/8 x 1-2 inches, various size of dice, vichy, paysanne, tourne, etc. It's possible to achieve many shapes from this one ingredient. An important factor when producing any

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of the cuts is consistency, which ensures evenness of cooking.

- Good knife skills help in this effort.
- Machines with various attachments can aid in executing different cuts.
- A mandolin slicer, French fry cutter, etc. can also help make unique shapes.



Various textures paired with the colors and shapes will lead to a built-in plate garnish.

THREE TEXTURES

As stated above, we are in charge of the food. This means that we can change or retain the inherent texture of the food. We accomplish this through our approach to preparing a particular item. This begins with the actual cooking techniques, as well as how the product is held for service. When designing the plate and menu, think about how the various textural components complement one another in the final dish. Ensure that the final product will address different types of mouth-feel. Various textures paired with the colors and shapes will lead to a built-in plate garnish.

- Breading, battering or flouring, and frying or baking will all result in different textures when completed.
- Simmering or roasting root vegetables will result in two different textures.

- Potatoes can be baked or whipped, made into home fries or hash browns.

SOUND COOKING TECHNIQUES

Aside from designing the plate to incorporate three colors, shapes and textures, the importance of proper cooking comes into play. When you present the kitchen staff with a recipe, it's critical that they understand the directions, including the cooking technique. Final flavor, appearance, and consistency depend upon repeated proper execution of the standardized recipe.

- Blanch and shock green vegetables before final cooking; carrots can also be blanched.
- Do not overcook items as this will lead to discoloration.
- Sear or fry at the proper temperature with the proper amount of oil (fat).
- Items need to be dry in order to caramelize.
- Caramelization = good flavor; Carbonization = burned flavor

PROPER TEMPERATURE AND HOLDING

We reference temperature continually in the kitchen. Proper temperature begins at receiving and storage. For example, receiving warm spinach results in wilted spinach that is not as vibrant in color. Ensure that products arrive and are stored at the ideal temperature.

- The balance of food cost begins at the receiving door. Be sure that anyone who receives your deliveries is properly trained not just to count cases, but is knowledgeable about quality standards for the incoming supplies.

Next is the cooking temperature, whether referring to an oven temperature, water boiling/poaching, high heat/low heat or degree of doneness, this directly impacts how the final product will appear on the plate. Also important are the holding temperatures. Keep hot food hot, cold food cold.

- Maintain temperature logs for all refrigeration as well as the hot/cold service line.

Should an item be covered or not covered? Is it crispy or is it soft has a direct correlation on how a prepared product should be panned and held.

A HEALTHIER PLATE

As you integrate the guidelines above you will not only be creating a more eye-appealing plate, you will likely be presenting a healthier plate. This is a result of executing proper culinary techniques and enhancing the appearance of your plate.

When we serve food that's appealing, people want to eat it. As long as we are adhering to nutritional standards we will likely be enhancing the overall health of those we serve. This is especially important in health care. This population needs all the natural nourishment they can get. It's our duty to prepare food that is cooked with care and with an understanding of the stated processes. In doing so, the plate will have a fresh, vibrant, eye-appealing look and will

make a positive first impression. When we successfully accomplish an attractive, flavorful plate we are helping those in our care to have an improved quality of life. **E**



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