

## Appetizer Adventures

Small offerings continue to be big business. Flavors, texturants, stabilizers for freeze-thaw systems—all help processors create high-quality finger foods and well-crafted delicacies.

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June 12, 2014



Traditional appetizers, more formally known as hors d'oeuvre, from the French term referring to an item that's a "small part set apart from the main work," are served during the cocktail hour. They arrive, almost informally in their formality, prior to the main meal of a banquet. The idea was for a service that allowed for the arrival of all the guests of the banquet and provide a nibble or two that could hold off the earlier arriving attendees during the wait. These hors d'oeuvre commonly were served accompanying aperitifs, drinks served before meals.

Over time, appetizers evolved to the point that they're sometimes served with no meal afterward. This is the case with many receptions and cocktail party events, where dinner is expected to be enjoyed elsewhere, if at all. The popularity of party appetizers in the U.S., especially as items replacing full meals vs. preceding them, began with upscale offerings in the 1920-1930s during a time of increased indulgence. In these instances, such food items are more properly called canapés—a.k.a. finger food.

Appetizers transitioned to the home setting beginning in the 1950-1960s. Then, on-the-go eating fashions of the late 20th and early 21st century, coupled with a boom in food manufacturing technology, conspired to make appetizers and finger foods a more significant part of the food culture.

Ethnic influences also figure large, especially with cultures that have longer traditions of such foods. These traditions can be represented by such concepts as the tapas that made their way from the Iberian Peninsula to trendier urban spots here, or Asian dim-sum and similar tasting menu-style trends. The ability to more effectively freeze and capture the hand-crafted flavors and presentations of tasty food bites only gave that much more support to the growing offerings in the category.

The composition of an appetizer varies based on how it is served and is limited only by the chef's creativity. For example, cold canapés are available frozen but are sometimes difficult to duplicate in a manufacturing scenario. This is because the main characteristic for them is to be hand-crafted and contain multiple integral components. They generally consist of a base, made from bread, toast or even a cake-like base. The fundamental ingredient can also incorporate polenta or rice/risotto as bases, and all will then (usually) build up from an array of flavored spreads.

The foundation spread is a key component of the flavor experience. It acts as a barrier between the base and the protein or prominent ingredient in many assemblies and also bridges the multiple elements. Spreads come in many forms and can be something as basic and delicate as a flavored oil, moving up to a mayonnaise, aioli or a compound butter. They also can be more dense—perhaps a cream cheese or cheese base. Spreads even may focus on meat—say as a pâté or liver spread or a seafood and dairy spread. Or, it can be a preserve of dried fruit or vegetable incorporated into a soft cheese.

Further flavor enhancement to the complete canapé can come from a relish, chutney (sometimes used as a base spread) or salsa. Then, a garnish is used to top the canapé with a finishing touch. The latter may come as a simple zest of fruit; a touch of parsley or other fresh herb sprig; a sliver of a vegetable; or even fresh fruit.

Examples of the above would include cured salmon with lemon verbena cream on a pumpernickel base and topped with fennel slaw, or a hoisin-glazed duck breast with black bean and grilled pineapple salsa arranged on miniature rice cakes. (In the 1890s, zakuski canapés à la Russe were the hot trend. They have been described simply as a two-bite canapé that consists of combinations or variants on the aforementioned components.)

Manufacturers using starches, like breads or rice cakes; and dairy components, such as cream cheese, can find that challenges of freezing render negative results that make it more plausible to opt for a refrigerated approach instead. However, another tactic could be to add hydrocolloid gum systems to the cream cheese or other spread matrix to improve the freeze-thaw characteristics. Also, denser breads and starch platforms will freeze more successfully.

## **Some Like It Hot**

Preparations for hot appetizers have been trending in three forms: wrapped, stuffed, or breaded and battered (see “Batter Up!,” page 105). Since stuffed items often are breaded or battered, they can include items such as egg rolls, steamed buns, pizza rolls and similar. These will usually be prepared as deep-fried items partially or fully cooked before freezing, although health

trends have pushed some items to baked formats but with coatings and coverings that mimic fried foods. Baked versions of pizza rolls or egg rolls are appearing with more frequency in freezer cases.

Typically, wrapped appetizers are heavy on the protein, such as bacon-wrapped shrimp or scallops. An advantage is that these items can freeze well, if sealed and packaged in such a manner as to keep moisture from sublimating out and resulting in freezer burn and a tough, undesirable texture.

Hot battered or breaded appetizers have enjoyed a surge of creativity to allow high-end style food items mainstream availability. Popular examples of such preparations include arancini —herbed, risotto rice-based hors d’oeuvre that are filled and rolled into small spheres, breaded and deep fried or baked. They typically are served with marinara sauce, either as a napping sauce for the plate or as a dipping sauce on the side. On the opposite end of the spectrum, chicken wings or “drumettes” continue to grow to the point where the supply of these protein parts actually has become threatened at times.

The manufacturing of most types of appetizers is fairly basic, often employing qualified hand-crafters who make the product in certified assembly rooms from prepared stock or bulk ingredients. Each item is piece-prepared, assembly-line fashion, with the finished item run through an instant freezer. Companies such as Wilmington, Mass.-based Progressive Gourmet Inc.; Marlees Seafood LLC, in New Bedford, Mass.; and High Liner Foods Inc.’s American Pride Seafood brand (also in New Bedford) have found great success with such upscale, hand-crafted appetizer offerings.

There has, in turn, been strong response of manufacturing to this need for the home or restaurant, while keeping the made-by-hand feel. In some cases, it’s the key challenge to appetizer innovators. Technology and efficiency drive and support the hand-wrapped part of production via mechanical mixing of fillings, extrusion and consistency. But, complicated custom machinery is an option to fully automate the process and better mimic the individuality of foods designed for the hand itself.

## **Just Like House-made**

Canapés and classics with new flavor fusion twists are highlights of a transition from the time- and labor-intensive creations of an in-house production process to the efficiency of brought-in offerings. Companies such as Sysco Corp., US Foods Inc. and multiple other specialty producers and distributors showcase growing categories for items such as cheese-based appetizers, hand-folded appetizers and other crafted-style manufactured products.

Accompanying this movement is a demand for sauces and condiments as expanding portfolios. This movement has been driving product developers to “up their game” and is a result of foodservice establishment operators responding to a consumer demand for more interesting finger foods.

Creative chefs maximized their menus with small-plate offerings and bar bites. Once patrons recognized the convenience and value in the size and variety of these offerings—plus got hooked on the culinary adventure in trying them—the door was opened to the more creative impulses of research chefs seeking to replicate the experience on the home front.

An increase in classic appetizer concoctions, like oysters or tenderloin Rockefeller, and the

appealing retro revival of meatballs and deviled eggs, proved that adventurous consumers were open to food experiences the previous generation might not have been so quick to embrace. (It should be noted that this, in turn, had a “feedback loop” effect on restaurant menu developments.)

Consider, as an example, the “deviled egg rotation” at the Crop Bistro in Cleveland. The establishment sometimes includes avocado or chili-spiced deviled eggs, accompanied by condiments such as olive and tomato salsa.

Currently, pre-made deviled eggs containing fillings enhanced with such on-trend ingredients as wasabi or sriracha are popular in local gourmet supermarkets. But, the recent successful production and sales of peeled, hard-boiled eggs by companies such as Eggland’s Best and the Happy Egg Co. indicate consumers might soon be able to purchase prepared deviled eggs in the refrigerator case on a national basis.

Stuffed mushrooms, too, have been one-upping their game between packaged retail offerings and restaurants. The classic constantly is being remade with core changes, such as baby Portabella mushrooms or crimini mushrooms, and filling twists such as hummus, lobster or Asiago cheese.

## **Ethnic Flavors**

Bakeable product offerings are being made in a number of fusion-type flavors. Think pulled pork wontons, Philly cheesesteak spring rolls and the like. Also gaining popularity are traditional ethnic items, like spanakopita or lobster quiche. Many of these baked appetizer products are using par-fried or par-baked ingredients to deliver bake-at-home freshness. Risotto and mac-‘n’-cheese balls are competing with the more pedestrian baked mozzarella sticks.

The common approach is the use of familiar and pre-portioned ingredients to make somewhat exotic quick-serve finger food items. Finish-at-home kits, too, are a growing phenomenon. Phyllo cups with a filling such as cranberry walnut and thyme or canapé kits with crostini spreads (garnish and main component included) are giving consumers creative options that merge food product processing with home cooking and baking.

Another major ethnic appetizer theme involves flavored spreads and dips. This is a huge category that has grown inordinately in the past decade. The hummus boom is an excellent example, exploding into a \$650+ million category in just a handful of years. Riding the hummus coattails are dips and spreads, such as guacamole, artichoke, spinach and eggplant products, often in vibrant colors and presented in layers of flavors. These have become quintessential “gathering” snacks targeting social situations and group events or holidays.

Dips such as spinach, mushroom and layered types, to be served with chips and crackers, are showing up on the retail counters, too. Many are created for refrigerated shelflife and not the shelf-stable standard creations of the recent past. However, improved shelf-stable technology has come in handy for some products in the appetizer category.

New methods of controlled-atmosphere processing and packaging have been responsible for pushing fresh avocado formulations to the forefront. Previously, such products were highly perishable and had shelflife of only a few days at best.

Ingredients that include on-trend flavors, such as spice blends, glazes and unique breading and

coatings, are being married to par-fried or par-baked products incorporating the use of specialty starches that help baked selections meet the challenge and need for freeze-thaw stability. The use of IQF ingredients, such as herbs or puréed garlic, to provide fresh-made flavors can also be advantageous.

## Stick to It

Customized sauces further broaden appetizer flavor horizons. In fact, packaging that offers several different sauces now sometimes goes with a single appetizer. Seasoning blends, too, are available in a wider variety of specific offerings, and more seasoning companies are opening to their doors to co-development and customized assistance to individual processors.

Seasonings are developed for dry application to a protein—for example, a chicken satay skewer or pork or fish meatballs—in a dry seasoning format and, when baked, become a wet glaze or sauce variation. These must be able to withstand the high-heat intensity of grilling or rapid-cooking technology—especially tricky when combinations of ingredients include individual components that have differing smoke, sear or char points.

The aforementioned seasoning systems perform particularly well on proteins. For instance, shrimp or chicken applications can employ them to add successful piquancy to skewered items. Meanwhile, crusted coatings can incorporate whole grains, multigrains and ancient grains. More health-conscious products are developed with the target of “bakeability.”

Baking (vs. frying) helps to reduce the fat pickup and create a trans fat-free offering. Also, smaller portions reduce cook times for such appetizers. This could allow them to be par-fried, depending on the ingredients in the coating.

When further, post-production processing of frozen appetizers is mandatory, developers must also consider packaging and rethermalization methods. The rapid-cooking technology mentioned dictates considerations in the formula creation of a breading and adhesion system. The cook-up or retherm of an item will drive the approach to be used in the formulation.

So, for example, in the creation of a breading system that is fried or high-oven temperature cooked, one should avoid the use of sugar or sugary ingredients, as these will become too dark in the finished cook-off. Also, upon reheating, this could leave a bitter note to the final flavor.

Products using breading and designed for rapid reheating, such as microwaving, must withstand the blow-off of the breading caused by steam. Such high-speed cook times generally run some 2-3 minutes from frozen.

Pre-frying to start the browning and assist with better adhesion of the coating is a standard method for ensuring success. This keeps the volatility of cooking from negatively impacting breading. However, this also means the breading must be durable enough to withstand the harsh-speed cooking and stay crispy, while the core ingredient stays moist and delicious in its center.

Depending on the filling of a coated or breaded product, it is possible that stabilizers will be needed. The formulator can use these to control and minimize boil-out or syneresis. A common binding agent that can manage the water is xanthan gum or a blend that can include xanthan with a starch or hydrocolloid. Guar can assist with controlling weeping of water and fat, as well as when heating in a rapid-cook environment.

The trend of small offerings continues to excite and attract more interest. The need for sociable, snackable foods is definitely a growing category. Manufacturing is meeting this demand for both the foodservice industry and the mainstream consumer. Best of all, ingredient technology means quality is no longer at risk of being compromised for efficiency. Flavors, texturants, stabilizers for freeze-thaw systems—all help processors create high-quality finger foods and well-crafted delicacies.

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