

Presentation, Presentation Presentation



Starting with a solid foundation of mashed potatoes or pureed vegetables, meat can be either stacked in a teepee fashion (above) or offset (bottom).

by Fred Bondurant

When enjoying a fine-dining experience, well-prepared food is a given, but the way the food is presented distinguishes the chef's "art."

Remember when entrées were served with the meat at the bottom of the plate, a starch on the upper right, and the vegetable on the upper left? And maybe there was some type of sauce in a little ceramic or stainless steel cup. Oh, and don't forget the obligatory sprig of parsley. Well, food presentation has come a long way. That traditional presentation was known as a horizontal approach. The trend now is a vertical orientation. Occasionally, this vertical trend is carried to an extreme, and servers have to concentrate on balancing these tenuous structures so as not to send them tumbling.

How important is presentation? Chef Javier Vasquez of Redfish Blufish resta-

PHOTOS COURTESY FRED BONDURANT

rant on Captiva, who creates particularly tasty dishes, says, "It's everything!"

I can't help but wonder: Is there a system operating here, or is the idea just to see how high a dinner plate can be stacked?

Well, there is certainly the visual-only aspect of it. However, Scott Sopher, executive chef of Cin Cin in Ft. Myers, keeps in mind what he is pairing. "I might arrange the foods so that the diner will get several tastes and textures on a single forkful."

In addition to the vertical approach, artful presentations can be created with "plate painting." This technique involves applying colorful sauces to the plate with squeeze bottles. Designs can be as simple as a full circle around the circumference of a plate or the application of arcs, dots, or lightning bolts. The center of the plate can be filled with a sauce, and circles of other colored and/or flavored sauces can be applied concentrically outward. These can be "cut" with an implement as simple as a toothpick to form "arabesques." Or designs can actually be painted on a plate with a pastry brush and sauce.

Do Try This at Home!

So, is this technique something the home chef can employ for that special dinner party? You bet! Interestingly, a search of several bookstores for an "instructional manual" on food presentation was fruitless. Equally surprisingly, several recent graduates of culinary schools told me there are no formal courses on the subject. It seems that this skill is just learned on the job. There are, however, some basics.

First, here are some stacking techniques. As in any construction project, a sturdy foundation is required. Mashed or whipped potatoes or a puree of some vegetable is a good choice. On top of that, your serving of meat can be placed.



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Above left: An artful presentation can be achieved with “plate painting.”

Above right: An alternative to stacking veggies is to place them so they radiate from the center of the plate.

A steak medallion or chop can either be centered on top or offset on your foundation. Bone-in cuts can be leaned against each other (teepee style) to really achieve height. Colorful vegetables such as blanched and lightly sautéed haricots, baby carrots, or snow peas can be stacked horizontally or placed upright. A pattern of the veggies radiating out from the center is another option. If you don't care for the mashed/puree base, use fingerling potatoes. Just halve them lengthwise and place the cut side on the plate. A crisp potato galette is another good foundation.

Another technique to serving with altitude is the vessel itself. A popular option is a martini glass. This works nicely for presenting appetizers, especially

those with a sauce. The lines of a martini glass are clean and elegant, plus its design allows the diner to pick it up and drink any remaining sauce that is just too good to leave behind. A sauté of wild mushrooms (chanterelle, oyster, or morel) in a rich veal stock or red wine reduction is nicely suited for this type of presentation. Ceviche, with some colorful bits of cilantro, red and yellow peppers, or green ends of scallions, is another option.

There is one basic secret to creating designs with multiple sauces. They must be of similar consistency, or viscosity. In other words, using both a thin, runny sauce and a thick sauce won't work. Sour cream is often used as a white element for a nice contrast. It normally must be



“Arabesques” are formed by “cutting” rings of sauce with a toothpick.

thinned with cream. It is especially useful in a thick soup. Just place some (thinned) dollops on the surface and run a toothpick through them to form different designs. If these arabesques are a bit over the top, it is easy to add some color to your plate. Adding green is easy. Just take a green herb (cilantro, basil, or even blanched spinach), and grind it in your blender with some neutral oil. Place it in a squeeze bottle and paint a ring or design of your choice on the plate. You can even use it as a “reservoir” to contain another sauce, such as a reduction sauce.

Garnishes are another element of plate presentation. What began as butter curls and radishes carved into flowers has evolved into much more, and books are available that describe garnish creation. Edible flowers also are popular and add color, texture, and another level of showmanship.

One of the relatively newer concepts in plate decoration is “foam.” Foam has an ethereal feel in the mouth, and its taste is the essence of the base, often a fruit or vegetable. Credit for this invention goes to Chef Ferran Adria of El Bulli. This Michelin Three-Star restaurant, situated

north of Barcelona, is world famous. Open only six months of the year, it has a two-year waiting list for reservations. Fortunately, we have a local option. Daniel Riedener, executive chef of the Mad Hatter, offers his signature white tomato foam in many of his dishes. Yes, white tomato. Don’t ask how he does it; just enjoy.

Remember to maximize contrasts of color and texture. When adding items, less is often more. You don’t need (or want) a whole serving spoon of vegetables; just a few strategically placed around the entrée centerpiece will do.

How important is presentation? Norman Love, the world-famous chocolatier has stated, “People will drive one hour to sit down and eat a pastry that’s an absolute artistic masterpiece.” 🌴

Fred Bondurant, a self-taught cook and connoisseur of good food, was motivated early in his life by the discovery that his dates really appreciated a guy who could cook. Julia Child is his inspiration.

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