

Menu Trends

Move over, beer nuts

Bar food gets a fun, sophisticated makeover, from fried green beans to lobster corn dogs

By Pamela Parseghian

(Oct. 9) - Fluorescent-lit diners and Chinese joints serving late-night munchies are getting stiff competition from white-tablecloth restaurants and casual chains, which are luring customers to their bars with fun and affordable nibbles.

Especially fetching this season is a crop of French fries all dressed up with saucy sides, tempting toppings and some complete makeovers.

For example, [T.G.I. Friday's](#) is the first major casual chain to roll out green bean fries after the dish made a splash in upscale operations over the past five years. The Carrollton, Texas-based chain, with 829 locations in 55 countries, offers a 9-ounce portion of fried green beans with wasabi-cucumber dipping sauce for \$4 with the purchase of a main course.

The beans arrive frozen at the restaurants, already sporting their tempura-like batter. The dish is part of a limited-time offering of appetizers scheduled to run until Oct. 19. Each of the offerings is available without the purchase of an entrée for \$4.99 to \$8.99, depending on the item and location.

Another new promotional dish at Friday's is Potato Skinny Dippers, skin-on potato wedges served with two dipping choices — warm melted queso with chorizo or a Southwest sour cream with hints of cumin.

"This one gets me excited," says Phil Costner, T.G.I. Friday's vice president for research and development, referring to what he calls, "deconstructed potato skins." Since the dips are on the side, "they enable the customer to eat them exactly how they want," Costner says. "It's all about customization."

Also featured in T.G.I. Friday's limited-time offer are macaroni and cheese fritters — golf-ball-size scoops of the classic pasta dish that are breaded and deep-fried. The balls come seven to an order.

Costner says he first tasted a rendition of the mac and cheese finger food at Fix restaurant in the Bellagio in Las Vegas a few months ago. He and his team quickly worked with a supplier to develop the dish.

"I think we've really reinvented the appetizer category in casual dining," Costner says. "These are radically different, but there is nothing hoity-toity about them." In fact, because the new items are not typical fare for his core customers, a \$4 introduction price will "take the risk out" of trying them, he says.

[Bennigan's](#) recently launched a tapas-style Bar Bites menu systemwide. The items, which are somewhat larger than typical small plates, are priced at \$3 to \$4, depending on the location.

The chain's Irish fries come "loaded" with colby cheese, bacon and green onions and are served with a side of ranch dressing. Diners can order the new fries and other Bar Bites only in the bar area between 4 p.m. and closing. The goal was to bring in more guests during downtime, according to Brian Kolodziej, vice president of culinary innovations and operations for the chain's parent company, [Metromedia Restaurant Group](#) of Plano, Texas.

He notes that cooks remain on the clock until closing, which is between 1 a.m. and 2 a.m. The promotion keeps them more productive during the late-night shift.

Bar business has picked up significantly since Bennigan's menu introduction, according to Clay Dover, vice president of marketing at the chain.

Kolodziej says, "It wasn't intended to be a value meal, but it falls perfectly into what today's customers are looking for."

The rollout's most popular item is Burger Bites — three cheeseburgers made with 1.5-ounce patties and served with fries. Other items are fried calamari with bits of fried jalapeño and fried onion; Buffalo shrimp; and Southwest Chicken Taquitos, or deep-fried flour tortillas filled with shredded chicken, Jack cheese, roasted tomatoes, red bell peppers and green onions with avocado-ranch dressing on the side.

"Our average customer is buying 1.43 of the Burger Bites," Dover says. The items do "have a slightly higher food cost, but it is a daypart that is traditionally very weak," he adds.

The new menu "gives people a reason to stick around," Kolodziej says. "You are not going to order a rack of lamb at 10 at night." He says the bar bites are "an incremental purchase for people who would go just to the bar to drink."

Bennigan's dining room customers are not trading down in the dining room, Kolodziej reports. The dishes are all unique to the bar menu, which "helps our analysts sleep at night," he says.

Fewer restrictions apply in most independent restaurants. "Everything and anything goes," at [Rathbun's](#) and [Krog Bar](#), two adjacent restaurants in Atlanta, according to the restaurants' chef-owner, Kevin Rathbun.

In order to promote dishes at affordable prices in the bar and dining room, Rathbun says his main courses are almost all available in half sizes, except for such items as steaks that can't easily be split.

Furthermore he reduces the prices proportionately. If main course dishes, such as a lobster taco, are cut in half, so, typically, is the

price, Rathbun says.

"People will order more [menu items] if they have the variety," he says. "What happens is people tend to not look at the price anymore, they just order what they want." The average check at Rathbun's is \$50 and \$25 at Krog Bar.

Rathbun's popular small-plate dishes include a jumbo lump crab and garlic custard tart with Creole mustard and tomato-cayenne jam for \$7.95; a tostada with smoked salmon and crème fraîche for \$7.25; and Sardinian flat bread, topped with blue cheese, white asparagus and sweet pepper, for \$6.95.

But Rathbun's customers like fries, too. Most guests order at least one of Rathbun's signature eggplant fries, \$5.50, the chef says. For the dish, eggplant pieces are coated with breadcrumbs and Parmesan and then fried and served with a dipping concoction of hot sauce and powdered sugar.

A lobster corn dog with mustard crème fraîche, \$12, and black truffle popcorn with chives, \$9, are among the most frequently ordered dishes at the bar of Arcadia in the Marriott hotel in San Jose, Calif., according to Anthony Carron, corporate chef of the restaurant's management, San Francisco-based Mina Group.

The group runs seven other properties in San Francisco, Las Vegas and Atlantic City, N.J.

The popcorn is served warm in a large soup bowl and tossed with a generous dab of melted black truffle butter.

"It's not one we make a lot of money on," Carron admits. But it's a signature of the Mina Group restaurants and is found at all of their locations with bars.

The corn dogs are made of lobster mousse formed into cocktail-size, 2-inch franks that are steamed, dipped in corn batter and deep-fried. He serves five dogs per portion.

An eight-ounce American Kobe burger with Vermont Cheddar, partially dried heirloom tomato slices, pickled red onion, watercress and fries, \$16, is a favorite, Carron adds. Still, fries take center stage at Arcadia. Side dishes of "duck fat fries," \$6, tempt diners there. Those spuds fry in 70 percent duck fat and 30 percent canola oil, which helps raise the smoke point of the frying medium.

At the newly opened Key Bar in Austin, Texas, the food menu doesn't progress beyond chips and salsa, but mini popsicles that garnish the drinks are available for \$1 each. The most popular drink, the \$12 Key Cosmo, features citrus vodka, cranberry juice and lemonade, garnished with 1.5-inch popsicles on a stick. The pop is made of lemon juice and orange juice frozen in old-fashioned ice cube trays.

"If you walk through the place with the popsicle drink, people will

follow you to ask you what it is," Key Bar's owner Scott Hentschel, says. "It's that fun."