

Salad days

Good for the waistline and your bottom line

BY SUZANNE BOLES

CATEGORY REPORT

Salads are good for the waistline. For restaurant operators, they can also be good for the bottom line. But to get the most out of this category, it's best to separate reality from misconception and then add a dash of creative savoir-faire.

For example, dispel the misconception that women are the primary target for salad consumption. Denise Bissonette, senior business manager, salads, Kraft Foodservice, says their company's studies show "it's almost evenly divided between women and men. ...It still leans towards women but is getting close to a 50/50 split."

Then, there are the general menu salads: house, Caesar and spinach are staple offerings at many restaurants, especially family style operations, where they're usually a side starter. Some restos add a protein — like chicken on a Caesar salad — and that becomes their

salad entrée offering. Until recently, operators didn't focus on the salad category much beyond this, but there are definite signs that salads are moving to the centre of the plate, offering consumers a "value" meal.

Witness the rise of salads in non-traditional locations. QSRs, for instance, have taken a bigger step into the salad arena, with a small variety of entrée salads with different toppings and flavours (both important to this category). And leading chains in the casual dining segment, says Bissonette, are offering a number of creative salad entrées, too.

Two salad success stories

Salads are, in fact, becoming so well accepted as an entrée alternative that some restaurants have made them their main offering. Two of the biggest players are Freshii and Salad Creations.

Freshii's founder and CEO, Matthew Corrin, opened his first store in Toronto

in 2005 (then called Lettuce Eatery), and the only item on the menu was salads. The menu has since expanded to include a limited selection of wraps, burritos, rice bowls and soups, but their mainstay is still salads with choices of lettuce and toppings, includ-

Salad Innovation

ASIAN STYLE WALDORF SALAD: dragon fruit, fragrant pear, celery, watercress, and pecans in a creamy miso dressing.

MICRO GREENS: served with Kirsch-marinated cucumbers and vanilla-flavoured Royal Gala apples, topped with a light pecan vinaigrette.

SPINACH SALAD: baby spinach topped with red peppers, sun-dried cranberries, goat cheese and house made vanilla vinaigrette.

MESCLUN AND FRESH HERBS SALAD: cloudberry vinaigrette, parmesan cheese tuile.

SOURCE: DIRECT LINK



Brenda Bot, president, Salad Creations Canada, has tapped into the trend that's seeing salads become main courses. Salads, particularly topped with protein, are a new "value" offering for recession-weary diners.

ing cheese and protein items — tuna, turkey, chicken and so on — topped with a choice of dressings. The Freshii concept is growing rapidly, with franchises throughout North America, and moving into international markets, proving that salads are definitely a top consumer choice.

Brenda Bot became a salad believer when she purchased the Canadian rights for the US chain Salad Creations and became president of the Canadian incarnation. Salad Creations is well entrenched south of the border (launched in 2003, now with 51 locations there, plus in Kuwait and Brazil). Bot opened the first Canadian store in Toronto in January 2009 and has a development schedule of 300 more Canadian stores in the next 10 years.

Like Freshii, Salad Creations offers a variety of lettuces, with 40 ingredients to top them off, and dressings, of course. Salad Creations also features wraps, soups and desserts.

Who wants a salad?

Freshii's Corrin confirms that today's men are definitely big salad eaters, and most opt for protein. "When you offer six different types of chicken and you can show men that

salad is a filling meal, it works (for them)." He adds that another market niche — high school girls — often comes into Freshii for lunch and orders a salad to share.

Bot says a variety of offerings is key to satisfying all palates and appetites. For example, a salmon protein topping fulfills customers' interest in pumping up Omega 3 in their diet. Overall, she says "we sell (salads) equally to men and women of all ages, and university and high school students, and seniors as well."

The beauty of salads, too, is they fill the stomach while also sparing the wallet. Toby Campbell, Unilever Foodsolutions category mix manager, dressings, says that when consumers are spending their hard-earned dollars, they want to feel satiated, and this is particularly important with recession-weary North Americans.

Kraft's Bissonette says 99 percent of consumers interviewed for a Kraft study said that it was important to have protein on an entrée salad to give the satisfying feeling of being fulfilled.

Operators who want to retain their customers, they agree, would do well to tap into the salad category's potential.

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Flavour on top

According to Direct Link, the five top salad dressing flavours are Caesar, ranch, Italian, coleslaw and balsamic vinegar. Top growing flavours are house, wine vinaigrette, balsamic, Greek and Catalina.

Corrin confirms the trend to more adventurous salad offerings. "All the salad concepts are constantly evolving their dressings to be more flavourful. The crazy thing is, at the end of the day, the most popular dressings are still balsamic vinegar, ranch, Caesar. So you do a lot to make everything gourmet, but people still want their regulars."

Unilever's retail salad dressing is the Wishbone brand, and the company is also well known for its Hellman's mayonnaise. Salads created with mayo, referred to as

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David Rosen, assistant manager, Salad Creations, shows how salads paired with wraps are a filling, nutritious meal for today's diners.

bound salads — potato, chicken, salmon, to name a few — are popular in North America, where sandwiches outsell salads. Campbell says mayo-based dressings are getting spiced up with flavours like chipotle — reflecting the rise of Hispanic influence — and aioli (garlic-flavoured mayonnaise).

She adds that, in Canada, Asian influences are big with such popular flavours as sesame and ginger. Sweet and savoury have been a mainstay in both Canada and the US for many years.

Asian flavours are a big draw for Canadian consumers, both in retail salad dressing sales and restaurant salad ingredients. Kraft's Bissonette says restaurant operators don't need to change their entire salad to ride a trend, but adding two different ingredients, like noodles and edamame, to a house salad

and topping it with an Asian-inspired sesame or soy-based dressing can help you cash in on this popular trend.

The traditional Greek salad is still holding its own, she says, but she suggests operators “think beyond your basic Greek salad to Mediterranean and dial it up a notch with some innovation. It may be something as simple as adding some sundried tomatoes and instead of a Greek feta using a balsamic dressing.”

Know your salad market

Like any offering, catering to your specific market is also important. Bot says the Salad Creations store in downtown Toronto appeals to a large vegetarian population, so they've included tofu as a protein topping option.

The bottom line is that any restaurant can fulfill the desire of customers who want a salad as their main course. You don't need to have an overwhelming selection of salads, but a few choice entrées on the menu, which can be changed around by adding ingredients you already have in the kitchen, along with some creative ideas, will keep customers returning for more salad days. **yfm**

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Salad Dressing Flavours

Top Flavours	Fastest Growing Flavours
1. Caesar	1. House
2. Ranch	2. Wine Vinaigrette
3. Italian	3. Balsamic
4. Coleslaw	4. Greek
5. Balsamic	5. Catalina

SOURCE: DIRECT LINK



Top salad tips

ADD PROTEINS OR OTHER INGREDIENTS you already use in the kitchen (chicken, shrimp, almonds) to create an entrée salad.

WATCH DRESSING PORTIONS. Too little or too much can ruin the flavour of the entire salad. Consider offering dressings on the side.

BE CREATIVE. Bot of Salad Creations suggests doing theme salads like “Canadian Cob” or using fresh fruits for summer salads. Don't forget to make the menu description mouth-watering, too.

PLAY TO THE SEASONS. A warm winter salad could include fresh grilled vegetables and warm chicken or other protein.