



SHOBA NARAYAN

MATTERS OF TASTE

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They offer diners the chance to sample many dishes. They offer chefs the chance to show off. But before you order that tasting menu, you might just want to read on.

Daniel Boulud never orders them when he dines out. Neither do Alice Waters, Danny Meyer, Drew Nieporent, or Bobby Flay. Mario Batali once said they were “for wimps who don’t have the guts to order off the menu.” And a prominent Boston chef has taken to calling them “fleecing menus.”

What is it about tasting menus that everyone who’s anyone seems to know but that nobody has revealed to us? And why is it that the same folks who steer clear of them in other establishments would never dream of retiring them from their own restaurants?

“There are three risks with tasting menus,” says Meyer, the man behind Manhattan’s Gramercy Tavern and Union Square Cafe, among others. “Time, portion size, and food quality.” As a diner, he says, “you are hostage to all three.”

Other chefs also throw around words like *hostage*, *oppression*, and *tyranny* when discussing *menus dégustation*. “I think it’s very hard to taste so many juxtaposed courses,” says Chez Panisse’s Waters, who adds that not only do tasting menus entail a lot of food, but the food tends to be rich in sauce and intricate in technique. “I notice I’m always craving a salad,” she says, “and I never get a salad. They can’t do something that doesn’t use expensive ingredients because the diner has to feel he’s getting his money’s worth.”

Flay is equally critical. People just don’t want to eat that way anymore, he says. “It becomes monotonous, and the night starts to get very long.”

“No one wants to sit at a table for more than three hours no matter what you do,” says Patrick O’Connell, chef-proprietor of The Inn at Little Washington. “Unless it’s a striptease.”

If chefs don’t like to be on the receiving end of tasting menus, sending multiple dishes out vexes them even more. “Tasting menus slow down the process of turning the table,” says Boulud, “confuse the service, and create chaos in the kitchen.”

Developing the menus is laborious enough, what with balancing flavor, texture, temperature, and seasonality over several courses while also incorporating enough surprises to avoid boring anybody. In addition, because the portions are smaller, chefs have to deal with double or triple the number of dishes they normally do. (A mini crab salad appetizer takes just as long to assemble as a full one.) Tasting menus are also more work for waiters, as a table of four with an eight-course tasting can mean a total of some 50 or 60 plates. Tempo and pacing are obviously key to providing a successful experience, which means there has to be perfect coordination between dining room and kitchen. Needless to say, this often results in some pretty frazzled nerves.

There was panic in the kitchen on a recent evening at Daniel, for example, when two patrons got up to go to the restroom. Their eight-person party was in the middle of the grand tasting with wines, and the fish station had just dropped eight *paupiettes* into hot sauté pans. Wrapped in a thin potato shell, each fillet of black sea bass was to be sautéed at high heat to ensure crispness on the outside and steaming flesh within. But since the fish, once plated, would last only three minutes before releasing water, general manager Michael Lawrence had sent an immediate “hold” instruction from the floor. Unfortunately, it was too late: The kitchen could do nothing to slow the cooking down. “Are they ladies?” asked the chef. (Women, he later explained, take longer at the restroom—and two take longer than one.) They were not. Saved!

For managers whose job it is to coordinate the front and back of the house, such curveballs can ruin everything. “A tasting menu is like a Broadway show,” says Lawrence. “You wouldn’t get up and go to the bathroom in the middle of Hamlet’s soliloquy, would you?”



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Likening a *menu dégustation* to a masterpiece by Shakespeare might seem a little much, but it's actually quite common for chefs to speak of tasting menus in theatrical terms. It is on this level, in fact—as the ultimate showcase for their art—that they most appreciate the concept. Tasting menus, they say, give them a chance to enlarge their repertoires and to experiment a bit—to indulge in what David Waltuck of Manhattan's Chanterelle refers to as showmanship.

"If you're playing with a new menu ingredient," says Patricia Yeo, formerly of New York City's AZ, "you can try it out in the tasting menu."

"As a chef," adds Boulud, "I like to be challenged by tasting menus. (Still, he says, he doesn't want every customer to challenge him. "That would drive me crazy.")"

Chefs also admit to enjoying the status of benevolent dictator that tasting menus confer on them. Because most places insist that the entire table order them, the menus put the people behind the meal in a position to pace it as they please. "With tasting menus," says Babbo's Batali, "the kitchen can present a menu in the order we think best and with all the wild cards limited. For the diner, it makes it easier to choose wine and removes twenty minutes of haggling over who gets what."

If you really press chefs about their reasons for offering tasting menus, though, they will eventually come around to the subject of money. "It increases the average check," Nieporent explains, by playing into the psychology of the diner. "Most people aren't going to spend that kind of money on à la carte." Indeed, while you might be outraged by the thought of a \$16 appetizer, a \$34 entrée, and a \$12 dessert, you'd probably have no qualms about shelling out \$62 for a tasting menu. And five-course tasting menus at most fine restaurants cost even more—\$85 and up. (Did someone say "fleecing"?)

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