

MATTERS OF TASTE

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Danny Meyer breaks it down even further. The primary restaurant costs are food and labor, he explains, and the primary food cost is protein—fish, meat, and fowl. “In a regular main course, the fish has to be cut from the heart, and as the fish tapers, those smaller cuts are not useful. In a tasting menu,” he says, “because the portions are smaller, those smaller cuts are absolutely useful, so you can get better yields from your protein.”

Tasting menu desserts also translate into profits. Unlike à la carte, where diners may skip or share a dessert, tasting menus charge for it whether you want one or not. After all, says Meyer, “You’re paying the pastry chef every night, so you might as well maximize the number of guests who eat dessert.”

Finally, there’s the issue of leftovers. “Tasting menus are a great way of using up ingredients,” says Yeo. If her kitchen orders too much cod, for example, she’ll feature the fish on her tasting menu the following day.

Economic advantages notwithstanding, there are some places where tasting menus just don’t work. “In a restaurant that’s busy and relies on turnover,” says Nieporent, “they are completely impractical.” Danny Meyer says that at his perennially popular Union Square Cafe, where it’s all about quick turnover, tasting menus have never been an option. At his Indian-inflected Tabla, on the other hand, the restaurateur markets them aggressively—in part to make ingredients like jaggery, tamarind, and fenugreek “accessible” to wary diners. “Ordering a tasting menu at Tabla,” he says, “is like wrapping yourself in a security blanket.”

Everybody’s heard stories about the *menus dégustation* at The French Laundry, Thomas Keller’s Napa Valley restaurant, where five-hour, 19-course marathons are par for the course. And those who make the pilgrimage to sleepy Yountville don’t seem to mind making that kind of an investment of time. Still, you can’t help but wonder how Keller’s interminable meals will play in Manhattan, where he plans to open this winter. Will New Yorkers, with their buzzing cellphones, high-speed power lunches, and pressing theater engagements, tolerate sitting for several hours simply because the food is so exalted?

Keller admits he may have to make a few modifications but says he has no intention of overhauling his basic strategy. “A great baseball player doesn’t change his style because he changes teams or locations,” he says grandly. If New Yorkers insist on doing a “power whatever,” as he calls it, he’ll provide a private facility to accommodate them.

Obviously, there are certain places and occasions that lend themselves much better to the concept of the tasting menu. Some nights you may want nothing more than to linger for hours over multiple courses and paired wines, while on others you might want to dispose of your roast chicken in a hurry and head for home. The real dilemma arises when you don’t know what you want, or when you’re in the mood for several small courses but your companion is set on a particular starter and entrée. In situations like that, you might want to consider a third option: designing your own tasting menu. “My chef friends are going to kill me for saying this,” Daniel Boulud confesses, “but you can ask the kitchen to divide your appetizers and main courses into two or four.”

Just don’t tell them you heard it here.

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