

PERFECTING PLATING

Current trends inform the presentation choices chefs make today // By Jody Shee

Functionality and practicality have caught up with artform as the main considerations in modern plating technique. Today, perfect plating still involves the creative process — but also taking into consideration current industry challenges.

ACF Chef Rich Rosendale, CMC, chief vision officer for Leesburg, Virginia-based Rosendale Collective, which includes a restaurant, classes, culinary lab and catering, first thinks practically when it comes to modern plating techniques.

While there's still an appreciation for technique, he is more apt to apply fermentation, dry aging or sous vide, for example,

to get the texture he's looking for — all applied prior to actual plating. “Now there aren't as many steps, but it still looks extraordinary,” he says.

This is a marked difference from his time as an apprentice and sous chef at The Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. “It was a different normal back then,” he says. “We were doing high-end, labor-intensive dishes



From left: Loup de Mer & Grapes; Chorizo-Stuffed Quail; and Sole a la Walewska by ACF Chef Carlos Villanueva.



Clockwise from left: Jhonnatan Contreras, executive chef at the InterContinental Miami hotel, plating 24K gold grilled Wagyu beef tenderloin with truffle demi-glace potato pave and golden oyster mushrooms; close-up of the main entree for the 2021 Make-A-Wish-Ball; "pine-apple" made with roasted pineapple compote, coconut mousse and almond sponge cake and served with Chateau d'Yquem, by Chef Rich Rosendale, CMC.

with a lot of components and where a lot of technique went into them.”

The pandemic, food supply issues, soaring food costs and labor challenges of today “weigh in on plate presentation in a bigger way than they ever have in my career,” he says.

For a recent catered event, to create a safer — but still playful — self-service option, Chef Rosendale set up a dessert buffet by working with a local woodworker to make a table-size puzzle platter that allowed the chef to plate each dessert on its own puzzle piece for the guest to break off and take away.

AU NATUREL

At all costs, **Chef Jhonnatan Contreras**, executive chef at the hotel

InterContinental Miami, avoids putting anything fake on the plate. In his view, everything should be natural, including coloring. “I’m against plastic or fabric or anything industrial,” he says. That means no food coloring. Rather, all colors should come from plants.

Once, for an aquarium-themed Make-A-Wish Foundation Ball held at his hotel, Chef Contreras sourced blueberries and wavy white cabbage to create a seaside look. He also molded “shells” out of natural ingredients like dehydrated potatoes, tapioca and pasta.

Chef Nicco Muratore, executive chef for the Seattle-based, six-unit Mama Restaurant Group, favors a less-forced, more natural plating style. “I have watched plating trends evolve from stylized sauce swooshes and dots around the plate to a more relaxed fluidity,” he says. “I like to let the ingredients fall on the plate and look more natural rather than think this dot must go here.”

His own plating thinking follows what the guest wants to and will experience when eating the dish. “In the early 2000s, it was challenging to eat. Sauce was spread on the plate with a paint brush,



Chef Nicco Muratore, executive chef for six-unit Mama Restaurant Group, Seattle, plates a spice-crusted lamb loin dish (left); A close-up of the dish, which also features tahini and baba ganoush (credit: American Lamb Board).

but it wasn't practical," he says. "It's nice when it looks pretty, but it must taste good and make sense." He uses an offset spatula to slide a dollop of sauce across the plate and might top it with the entrée so that each bite includes the noticeable sauce flavor.

Garnishes also must make sense and add texture and flavor rather than simply bring visual appeal, Chef Muratore says. Levantine and Persian cuisines — which Chef Muratore's restaurants showcase — use a lot of herbs and shallots, so he often garnishes plates with a fine-chopped herb mixture of parsley, mint and dill or tarragon, basil, mint and scallions. For a delicious crunchy garnish, he deep-fries shallots or a mix of sunflower seeds and pepitas. He also puffs bulgur in the deep fryer for pops of crunch.

THE PLATE AS A CANVAS

In an artistic sense, less is more, so decluttered plates are trendier now, says Sacramento, California-based **Chef Mai Pham**, founder of Star Ginger and Lemon Grass restaurants featuring Southeast Asian cuisine. In upscale dining, she has noticed the use of larger, beautifully handmade plates with smaller portions of food plated off to the side rather than in the center, she says.

Chef Pham also considers how the plating will look on Instagram, which partially dictates her style — whether it's the photo she posts on Instagram or ones that guests will post from their tables. "The picture has to be strong, and the subject must be clear instantly," she says.

As Instagram is a global platform, Chef Contreras is keenly aware that guests post photos that can affect his reputation around the world. Thus, he makes sure his dish looks good from all angles, not knowing which one the guest will take when snapping a shot.

PURPOSEFUL STORYBOARDING

The "tell a story" trend sweeping the restaurant, food and other industries also dictates how some chefs plate their food. **ACF Chef Carlos Villanueva**,

corporate executive chef for bakery group Lantmannen Unibake in St. Petersburg, Florida, considers that guests visit fine dining restaurants not because they need to eat but because they want to enjoy the experience. “It’s a show; they are spending money on food, and they want to be entertained,” he says. He wants guests to walk away with a good experience they will tell others about.

Chef Villanueva finds it’s best when dish inspiration comes from a personal experience or from something in nature. For example, as a child, his grandmother frequently took him into the garden, and he’d come back inside tracking soil through the house. So, he makes a beet salad in which he presents beets in various forms on the plate, including beet greens, beet gels, mousses, whole and sliced. “I may also include black edible soil thrown on the dish as representative of tracking in dirt.” Then he tells his grandmother’s story.

“Once you have your story, consider what plating style and eating experience you want to go after,” he says, adding that there must be a reason behind each ingredient.

In a broader sense, plating is part of a show, Chef Villanueva believes. Plating, aromas and actions all play a part. “The moment the guests sit [at the table] to when they leave are all a part of plating,” he says.



Top: Mai Pham, chef/founder of Star Ginger and Lemon Grass restaurants in Sacramento, California (above); As an edible garnish for this Crispy Noodle Pillow with Ginger Prawn and Scallop Stir Fry, Chef Pham adds mustard flowers on top (below).