



# Menu shareable apps to boost sales and satisfaction

Shareable menu items are trending and operators are responding with signature finger foods.

Sociologists frown when people watch their smartphones instead of engaging tablemates at restaurants. But these days, when the appetizers arrive, guests increasingly abandon the touchscreens in order to divide those bites with friends.

Despite what some see as an addiction to our mobile devices, a 2015 study conducted by Datassential reports that diners actually like interacting and sharing, especially when it comes to their food. Researchers have found that guests — millennials, in particular — are not only partial to orders of finger foods easily broken into small bites, but they're especially fond of dishes featuring familiar comfort foods.

Not surprisingly, French fries and potato skins are customer favorites for sharing. Foodservice operators find that such potato products are also easy to customize and showcase in more contemporary presentations, making them a perennial menu favorite. Interaction promoted by such foods gives diners the feeling of a modern communal table, says Arlene Spiegel, a New York-based restaurant consultant.

"It's fun to eat that way," says Spiegel. "Sharing gets people talking with each other. It's part of why we like to eat out."

## 5 Reasons to Menu Potato Appetizers

1. **Millennials** like to share, especially comfort foods.
2. Research shows, favorite shareables include **potato appetizers**.
3. Customers are willing to **indulge** when it comes to shareables.
4. Potato products are easy to **customize and modernize**.
5. Bar menus are a natural fit for **shareables**.



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The NPD Group reported in 2015 that 10 percent of all restaurant visits include a shared dish. Openings of tapas and small plates restaurants remain strong at the independent level, and at America's top 500 chains, 22 percent feature some variety of small and/or shared plates on the menu.



Datassential also found that more than half of consumers say they're interested in even more shared plates, leading some chains like Applebee's Neighborhood Grill & Bar to reconfigure their menu to allow for broader group customization. Last year the casual dining chain divided its appetizers into tiers of Bar Snacks, Shareables and Pub Plates.

This year, however, Applebee's is allowing guests to build their own samplers and increase "shareability" for multiple people at a single table. Guests can choose two of several appetizers for \$10.49 or three for \$12.99. And if they crave more, each additional snack amounts to a modest \$3.50 upcharge.

"When you combine value and the chance to customize, customers love it," says Leslie Kerr, owner of Intellaprice, a menu research and consultancy firm in Boston. "When people share their foods, they're also more likely to be decadent and indulge a little. Think about poutine [a French-Canadian dish made with French Fries, fresh cheese curds and gravy]: not the cleanest food or the healthiest to eat, but it's fun to share."

Hoss Grigg, owner of Big Daddy's BBQ in Meridian, Idaho, has seen the sharing trend work firsthand, and he sought to get in on it using one of the most cost-effective comfort foods—potatoes—with a new twist. He started with Idahoan® Tater Tumbler Appetizer Mix, a shredded potato product that's easily shaped into balls, pancakes and baskets, and stuffed with vegetables, cheeses or meats. Working within his concept's theme of smoked meat, his initial experiment with deep-fried tots included a flavor bump from bacon.



“Bacon makes everything better, right?” he says. “So we added diced bacon and cheddar cheese to the mix and fried it” into what would be called “Tater Pigs” Stuffed Tots.

Though each order contains just eight pieces, Grigg calls them “pretty filling for one, but a good shareable item for two or maybe three. We’re generous with them.”

Grigg says that increasing the chance that guests will share their appetizers is as simple as offering multiple sauces to suit various tastes.

“We make a jalapeño ranch sauce for this dish, but since it’s a tot, [guests will] dip it in about anything that tastes good,” says Grigg, adding that “Tater Pigs” now account for 60 percent of his appetizer sales. “They’re still potatoes, but they’re not fries. People want things that are familiar but unique.”

Ed Sadler, director of research and development for Montana Mike’s Steakhouse, also started with a cheese and bacon-studded tot made from the Idahoan® Tater Tumbler Appetizer Mix. But the more he used the Idahoan product, the more he recognized its versatility and began branching out.



One result was Totchos, a riff on the classic nachos platter, but substituting hand-formed tots for corn chips. Once deep-fried, the tots are covered with cheese, refried black beans, jalapeño slices, grilled chicken, pico de gallo and cilantro-lime cream. He said the dish feeds three to four people.

“With the bacon tots, you could pull them apart easily by hand,” Sadler says. “But the Totchos are more a fork-and-knife thing. I think that’s good, though, because it’ll give you something to pick with to get at the goodness.”

Clearly, operators are finding that shareable menu items are growing increasingly popular with consumers who are looking for a more flavorful, exciting dining experience. But not only are such preparations emerging as crowd pleasers, they are pleasing restaurateurs by helping them boost their

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