

WINE NEWS

cuisine



White ceramic or porcelain flat-bottomed tasting spoons, such as these sold at Crate & Barrel, make a pretty presentation when filled with a colorful seafood salad.

COURTESY OF CRATE & BARREL

Spoon Food -- Feeding a crowd bite by bite

By Jen L. Karetnick

A holiday party can be a challenging balancing act. Typically, guests are juggling flutes of Champagne that they're unwilling to part with, plates of hors d'oeuvres, forks, cocktail napkins and, if it's a business gathering, colleague's cards that have been thrust at them. Not to mention those women who may also be managing a purse.

Ruling out the tops of your guests' heads as table space, there is a simple solution to freeing up their hands so they can feed themselves: Forgo the forks and plates, and lay in a supply of spoons.

Not any old spoons, of course. Take a cue from professional chefs and purchase a few dozen, flat-bottomed Asian soup spoons, also known as dumpling, dim sum and miso spoons. Top toques were among the first to utilize these ethnic utensils for the increasingly compulsory amuse-bouche that welcomes diners to the restaurant table, and many also rely on the generously sized spoon to present partitioned servings at charity wine auctions and festivals that cater to hundreds of patrons. Commonly called tasting spoons, these vessels are especially ideal for presenting complicated signature morsels in miniature.

Thus it seems that chefs in every culture and of every philosophy have an extrapolated "spoon" dish in their arsenals these days. At a recent national Taste America event honoring James Beard, New World Cuisine creator Norman Van Aken fêted the late culinarian with a gothic-hued trio of purple potato, ruby tuna and black caviar for the appetizer portion of the fête, which took place at Azul in Miami. In San Francisco, Zuppa's chef-owner Joseph Manzare often

prepares Kobe beef crudo with white truffles for such parties; at his private functions, executive chef-partner Ola Fendert (of the just-debuted, Cal-Ital-oriented Local Kitchen and Wine Merchant in the Rincon Hill area) serves spiced ahi tuna with green vinaigrette, hearts of palm and fingerling potato chips as well as shucked oysters with lemon vodka granité, chives and caviar. The latter pairs wonderfully, he notes, with the Henriot Souverain NV that partner and sommelier Mark Bright recommends from the 40-glass wine list.

Even food scientist Ferran Adrià defers to the now-popular device: Cooking for a commitment ceremony in San Sebastián, Spain, he served his famous elliptical olives - culinary marvels that are actually pure liquid olives reshaped into the form of the original fruit - nestled into oval-bowled spoons. They were a burst of flavor, easily lapped up, while guests simultaneously toasted the happy couple with flutes of Torello Brut Nature NV Gran Reserva from magnum.

Catering to a crowd with tasting spoons has proved so advantageous that some chefs have finally put spoon food on their menus. At the freshly minted Michael Smith in Kansas City, the James Beard Award-winning chef offers a collection of spoons, plated three or four to an order, as an appetizer. "We started using the spoons as an amuse-bouche, but it evolved from there. Now it's the kind of appetizer people can have when they're really hungry, when they want something right away with their cocktails [or with a flute of François Montand NV]. The sweetbreads or foie gras might take eight minutes to get out to the table, but the spoons, boom, it's fast, they're there," Smith says.

What began as a whim is now in demand, so Smith has a host of recipes for his most basic of "plates." "We change it up on the menu, depending on how much protein is in them and what the composition looks like," Smith says. Some dishes are mainstays, however; patrons' favorites tend to include the confit of duck on truffled potatoes; the smoked sturgeon mousse with pickled beets and horseradish; and the olive oil-braised tuna with morcilla sausage and garlic shrimp. And for items that his clientele deems messier or just a bit unlikely, such as the fresh capellini pasta with lemon and caviar or the crayfish coleslaw, he'll serve miniature forks or spoons with the, well, spoons. If he doesn't, he admits, more conservative groups will ask for them, so he might as well provide cutlery that goes with their sense of table manners.

Oscar Del Rivero, chef-partner of Jaguar Ceviche Spoon Bar and Latam Grill in Coconut Grove, Florida, dismisses that type of patron timidity: "Some guests try to eat the ceviche out of the ceramic spoon

with a fork, while others just grab the spoon and put it in their mouths - the latter being the right way and the only way you can taste the combination of all the flavors of the ceviche."

The groundbreaking Jaguar also takes the palate-sparking idea behind spoon feeding and makes it many different types of hunger quantifiers. "Serving our ceviches in a spoon is like serving a miniature portion of the dish. And we can fit six spoons with different ceviches in one plate," Del Rivero says. "So you have a regular portion of many different flavors. It can be an appetizer or a light meal. Also a snack or bite while you are having a drink."

And as far as those drinks go, the chef notes, "All crisp and refreshing sparkling wines and Champagnes go well with ceviches. At Jaguar, we recommend [Bodegas López] Montchenot sparkling wine. It has a pleasant acidity with notes of peaches and apples."

The ceramic tasting spoons employed by Del Rivero and his peers are easy to pick up by their ample handles that, unlike those of conventional spoons, stick out at a 45 degree angle, and return to the tray neatly on their flat bottoms. (Resting a noodle spoon this way in an Asian restaurant, however, is considered the height of bad manners; if you pause while eating your soup, you're supposed to set it upside-down in a dish.) For the home entertainer, tasting spoons can be arranged on a tray and passed around. Or place them on a buffet table to great visual effect by utilizing cake pedestals of different heights and numbers of tiers.

This is an especially effective presentation with sweets, of which any manner can be reduced to petite portions. At Sino in San Francisco, for instance, pastry chef Eunice Lee wanted to make bite-size portions of crème brûlées so that guests could try different, complementary, Asian-inspired flavors. So now she offers a quintet of them - five being a favorite number in Asian culture, she says - in tasting spoons. She even spreads turbinado sugar on top of the custards, then blowtorches them until the surfaces of the spoons are caramelized.

Sorbets - intermezzo or dessert - scooped with a melon-baller, lend themselves to the spoon concept as well. Surely a dollop of Champagne granita is a delightful and sophisticated shiver of flavor for any holiday fête.

You need not visit a restaurant supply store to buy tasting spoons, which are usually cast in glazed white ceramic or porcelain; they are now being sold by mainstream retailers. For example, Crate & Barrel offers them via all three of its venues (retail, catalog and online), along with Dina Cheney's book, *Tasting Club: Gathering Together to Share and Savor Your Favorite Tastes* (DK Publishing), which instructs the reader how to use such vessels to sample honeys, syrups, oils and vinegars. These generous spoons are also handy, she says, for throwing "tasting parties" for friends. "Consider celebrating the seasons," Cheney advises, with local produce - for example, heirloom tomatoes - to taste-test the merits of various sea salts.

Or you can go high end and invest in Wedgwood, Noritake, Raynaud or Royal Crown; each maker lists Chinese soup spoons in its patterns. But the material that these spoons are made with can vary greatly. And if you shop in Asian groceries or go online, you don't have to spend a lot of money to acquire a good assortment that should last a long time: dramatic red or black Japanese melamine miso spoons; shiny Thai-style stainless steel; or Chinese dragon designs in pink or green ceramic.

Whatever the style, look for spoons that have a cool, smooth mouth-feel; don't retain odors; and go into the dishwasher easily. Party-goers won't refill spoons once they're emptied, either, as they might do with plates, so quite a few sets are needed for entertaining a crowd, especially if you plan to do more than one dish.

More complicated restaurant spoons, like Ola Fendert's caramelized pear and Roquefort cheese with black pepper gastric or his foie gras with brandied cherries, are actually doable at home; a demi-sec or Port will make cozy companions for their layered flavors. "Make sure the spoons are cold for the foie gras," Fendert recommends. Also, "Try to make them as high as possible, to make them visible to the eye. But because they are both very flavorful, keep them small," he says.

Indeed, it's important not to overfill spoons. Items that work best for the home cook include one-mouthful dollops of a citrusy seafood salad or ceviche that won't overwhelm a crisp Brut or a classic Sancerre with their complementary limey, briny flavors. If you remember the advice of Jaguar chef Del Rivero - "the whole flavor of each ceviche [should be] ready to be devoured by your guest in one single shot" - you will certainly relieve your visitors of committing too many etiquette-related sins at the same time.

Easy ways out: Too busy to do any actual cooking for your spoons? No worries. Big Chef is a company that specializes in shipping frozen hors d'oeuvres and fresh canapés - "classic, contemporary and ethnic" - overnight, nationwide. Choose from 40 varieties (from lobster Wellington to Brazilian cod fish croquettes) and plan for 8 to 10 pieces per person. They're ready to serve from the oven within minutes. All you have to do then is cut them into quarters, place in the spoons and squirt with a lemon; garnish them with sour cream and caviar; or frill them with herbs and lettuces for a far more sophisticated presentation than the usual toothpicks.

Stress need not be an ingredient in the prep process, either. If you can't find or don't want to invest in Asian soup spoons, pull out the wedding silver - you knew you registered for iced tea spoons for a reason - or perhaps Grandma's sterling silver bequeathment that gets used all too infrequently. No matter the source, silver makes for a glittery statement. - JLK

Where to buy tasting spoons online: AsianIdeas.com, traditional Chinese porcelain, \$24 for set of 24; GourmetSleuth.com, white ceramic with blue fish design, \$12.95 for set of 12; ImportFood.com, Thai stainless steel, \$3.69 for set of four.

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