

CARRY-OUT: DINING ON THE FLY

BY MARY LOU SANTOVEC



A few decades ago, the majority of meals were made from scratch and eaten at home. But in just one generation, home-cooked has been replaced by convenience packaging, prepared foods and a plethora of carry-out options.

Today, according to the National Restaurant Association's Top 10 Trends for 2010, some 40 percent of adults agree that purchasing to-go meals from restaurants, take-out and delivery places makes them more productive in their daily lives.

Once the mainstay of Chinese restaurants, pizza and quickservice locations, carry-out has gone mainstream. Casual dining restaurants and even some white tablecloth establishments are embracing carry-out, developing new menus or creatively packaging their regular menu items to-go.

Take-out trendsetters

Outback Steakhouse takes credit for starting the trend in the casual dining carry-out game. During the mid-1990s, one of its South Florida locations was seeing an influx of customers coming to the bar just to order food to-go, according to Greg Michals, joint venture partner who is responsible for 15 restaurants in Wisconsin and Minnesota with the chain. Looking for a way to accommodate customers conveniently and sensing the potential for a good revenue stream, the restaurant opened a room containing phones, a refrigerator, a cash register and employees specifically dedicated to handling carry-out orders.

From those humble beginnings, the chain now offers three ways of ordering food to-go: online, in-person and by phone. Each location has its own dedicated room and parking stalls to serve its carry-out customers.



"Chinese restaurants get kudos for carry-out because they've done that for many years," said Michals. "But now all casual dining restaurants are following us."

Smart packaging helps food travel well

Ciatti's Restaurant in La Crosse offers carry-out for anything on their menu, but the options come with caveats. "We try to advise the customer on what travels better," said Vince Valdez, operating partner/general manager. "If you want your steak medium, we recommend medium rare because it continues to cook."

While the restaurant's entire menu can be packaged to-go, its most popular selections are the "Pasta Party to Go" or "Large Party to Go." Both of these feature pasta, salad and bread sticks in a unique carrying container. A custom cardboard box with a handle holds up to four, 8" by 12" roasting pans filled with hot food. "A customer can pick it up and it will stay warm in the container for 30 minutes," he said. "It carries like a briefcase and fits in with today's lifestyle."

Busy moms on the go represent the majority of the take-out market. But there are business and entertainment applications too. Many of the pharmaceutical reps that visit the Gunderson Clinic and the three hospitals in La Crosse will stop by Ciatti's to pick up an order for their physician clients. "It just allows them to carry in food for up to 30 people by themselves in two nice carrying cases," said Valdez.

Easy options, easy pick-ups

Pasta has also proven to be a popular carry-out item for Biaggi's Ristorante Italiano's Madison

location. Biaggi's recently developed the "Pronto Pack," a complete pasta dinner for four to five people for \$30. The pack features a choice of pasta, salad and bread sticks with optional additions such as meatballs. Customers can choose from seven varieties of pasta and two salads to-go.

Despite its short existence, the Pronto Pack has proved popular. "People who get it, get it regularly," said Andrew Nicholson, managing partner. "We've gotten such great feedback for it." Plans are underway to increase promotion of the Pronto Pack.

Biaggi's has dedicated its first three parking spots to its carry-out customers. And the restaurant happily goes the extra mile to serve them. "If it's raining, we'll tell them we'll run it out to them," he said.

Popular picnic meals

Theatergoers to American Players Theatre in Spring Green know that the carry-out food provided by Mazomanie's Old Feed Mill is a great way to extend the evening's entertainment. "We get quite a few people stopping by to pick up a nice dinner to take to the theater," said owner Nancy Viste. The Old Feed Mill is about a 20-minute drive from



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the theater, which has picnic tables on the grounds.

Viste and her husband started the carry-out option 15 years ago when the restaurant first opened. "It was just a really good fit," she said of the decision.

Some of Viste's customers will purchase appetizers; others will pick up sandwiches. And there are those who want a full dinner. The restaurant, which uses plastic containers for dinners and traditional take-out containers for sandwiches and appetizers, sends along plates and silverware with the orders to accommodate diners.

The Vistes also own The WhistleStop Cafe in downtown Mazomanie. APT patrons can create their own meal with selections from the WhistleStop. The café contains a retail section selling artisan cheeses, homemade bread, alcoholic beverages and handcrafted food products made in the café's kitchen. (The shared-use processing kitchen has 13 tenants and acts as an entrepreneurial incubator for the area.)

Fish fry on the fly

Fish fries in Wisconsin are as ubiquitous as mosquitoes after a heavy summer rain. But the Red Mill Supper Club in Stevens Point has found a way to capitalize on fish fry popularity while offering its customers a unique to-go experience.

Four years ago, owners Don and Melissa Thompson opened the Junior Mill for their popular Friday fish fry. Don constructed this 8-foot by 8-foot building specifically for carry-out orders of the restaurant's fish, shrimp and walleye dinners.

Inspiration for the drive-through program, called "Fish on the Fly," actually came from fast food where "you always see the drive-in at McDonald's busy," said Don Thompson. The supper club, located on a busy highway, was the perfect spot to test his observation.

"We were looking at putting in a window [for carry-outs], but that was too expensive," he said. "We have a circular driveway so we put in a building." Don reduced expenses by building the structure himself. The design is a small replica of the supper club's logo.

There's no need to call ahead for



Carry-out Container Options

While carry-out saves customers time, the containers holding the food can pose concerns for those who want to live green. The foam clamshells, which keep temperatures stable, are petroleum based. Biodegradable or recyclable containers can ease customer consciences, but cost about one-and-a-half times as much as traditional containers. That trims even more off of restaurants' narrow profit margins.

Those who do choose the more expensive containers can leverage the product's marketing ability by adding logos and brand names. "It is common for larger chains to customize containers," said Samina Mahmood, vice president of Superior Equipment Supply, located in Milwaukee. "Smaller restaurants could customize the carryout bags which is actually a very visible packaging item and can be re-used by their customers."

Superior sells food containers made from paper, ones that are bio-degradable or recyclable, ones made from corn-based resin, even microwaveable ones. "With both parents working in the family, they want food containers that they can warm up easily in the microwave," Mahmood added.



an order. When a customer pulls up to the Junior Mill, the employee inside the building calls in the order to the kitchen on a two-way radio. After paying at the Junior Mill, the customer just pulls alongside the Red Mill. "The food is run out to the car and away they go," said Thompson. "It's a way of getting the quality of a famous Wisconsin fish fry with the convenience of taking it home."

The Junior Mill is open year-round and response, according to Thompson, is very good. Customers pay the same price whether they eat in or take out. And they appreciate not having to get out of their car for their order. "The farmer's wife who works at the hospital doesn't want to walk into the restaurant wearing scrubs, so she can pick up a hot dinner and take it home for when her husband comes out of the barn," he said.

The return on investment for the Junior Mill has been positive. The structure paid for itself in four months and since then, the only cost has been employee wages and electricity. While there's the added cost of the carry-out containers, Thompson no longer has to pay bussers or waitstaff to serve those customers.

With the city of Stevens Point home to a big Catholic community, the Thompsons experimented with offering their fish fry on Wednesdays during Lent. But they found they were competing with the local parishes who held fish fries as fund-raisers and have discontinued the practice. They have considered offering their signature prime rib dinner through the Junior Mill on Saturday nights. That idea is still in the planning stages.

Most of the operators interviewed report carry-out orders averaging between 2 to 30 percent of sales depending upon location, time of year or menu offerings. So obviously, carry-out is here to stay. Restaurants are finding that embracing the trend can improve customer loyalty and reap big rewards. **WR**



The Red Mill's "Junior Mill" building for their "Fish on the Fly."



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