

SELLING THE SIZZLE

Tablesides service adds flavor, freshness and flair to the dining experience.

In today's competitive foodservice environment, often, it's not enough to simply serve up flavorful food. That's why savvy operators are adding dramatic and sometimes sizzling tableside service elements to turn heads and separate themselves from the pack. Service extras like "eatertainment," customization and interactive dining provide flavorful extras and upgraded guest interaction, all with no increase in cost, but with the potential for significant increases in guest counts, guest satisfaction and top-line sales.

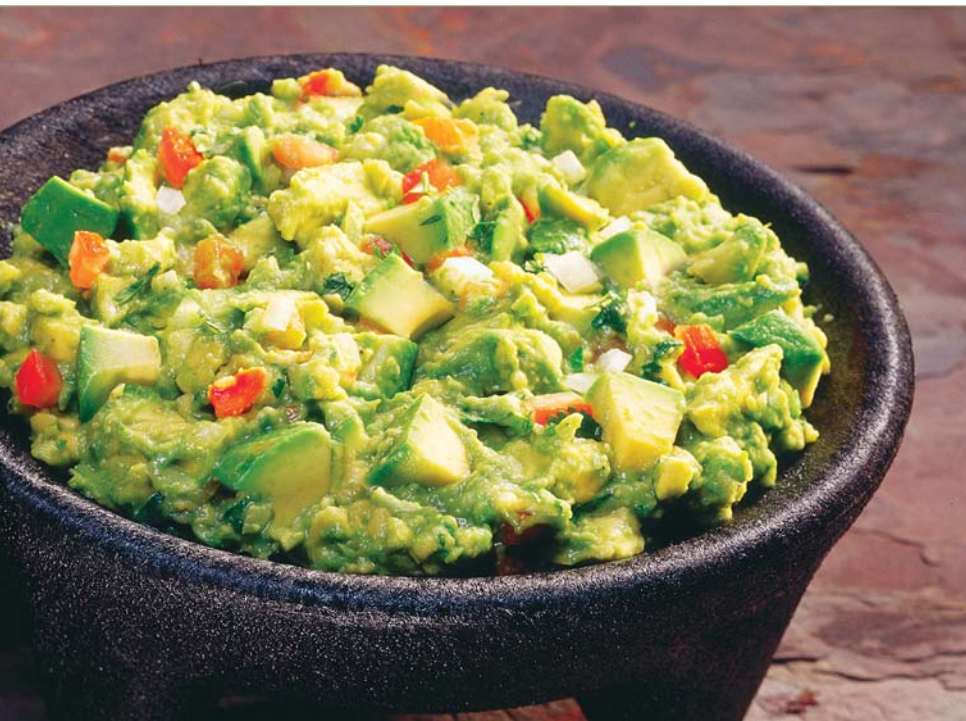
QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- The growing popularity of tableside service
- New service techniques to wow your guests
- Advantages to operators using tableside service elements



ROCKFISH SEAFOOD GRILL'S SIGNATURE SEAFOOD COCKTAIL IS SERVED IN A MARTINI GLASS AND FINISHED TABLESIDE, TOPPED WITH A FRESHLY ASSEMBLED SALSA SHAKEN IN A MARTINI SHAKER.



EL TORITO OFFERS TABLESIDE GUACAMOLE IN ITS RESTAURANTS. THIS IS A RELATIVELY SIMPLE ADDED-SERVICE TECHNIQUE, ENABLING THE DINER TO CUSTOMIZE FLAVORS AND INGREDIENTS.

The obvious and simplest forms of added table service include basics like having servers grind fresh pepper or grate fresh Parmesan cheese on Caesar salads or pasta. This simple concept takes on new flavor and meaning at Not Your Average Joe's, an emerging Massachusetts-based chain featuring creative casual cuisine. Servers mix an addictive combination of freshly grated Romano cheese, freshly chopped garlic, crushed red pepper flakes and olive oil at the table. Guests then dip homemade focaccia into the freshly prepared mixture. This bread service proves that one way to be above-average is to raise the often mundane and throwaway part of a meal into a meal starter that delivers a real bang.

Beyond adding a bit of flair, this and many other tableside presentations also demonstrate a commitment to flavor and freshness. What could be more fresh and flavorful than a dip or salad enhanced or finished off right before the diners' eyes?

APPETIZING, TABLESIDE

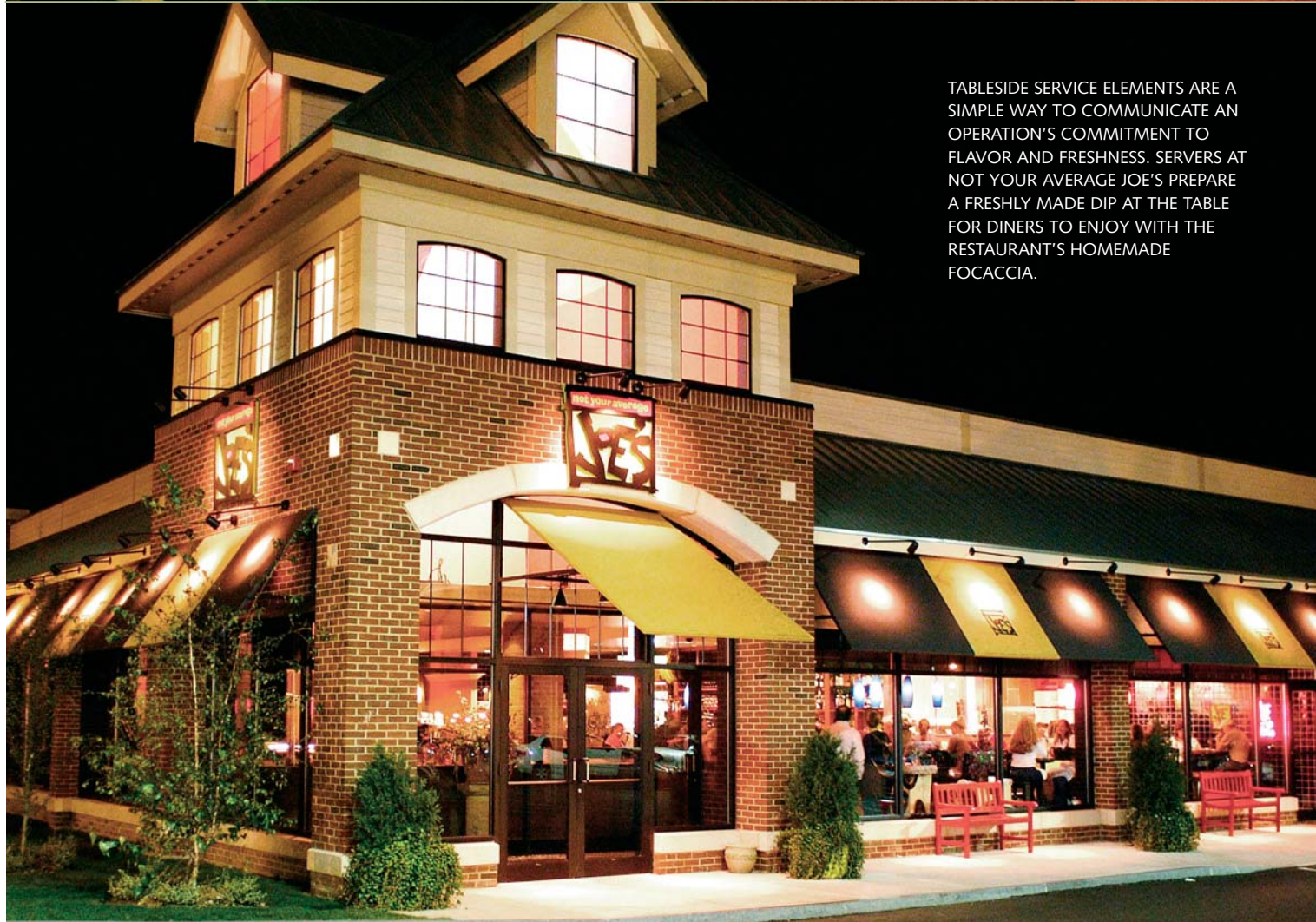
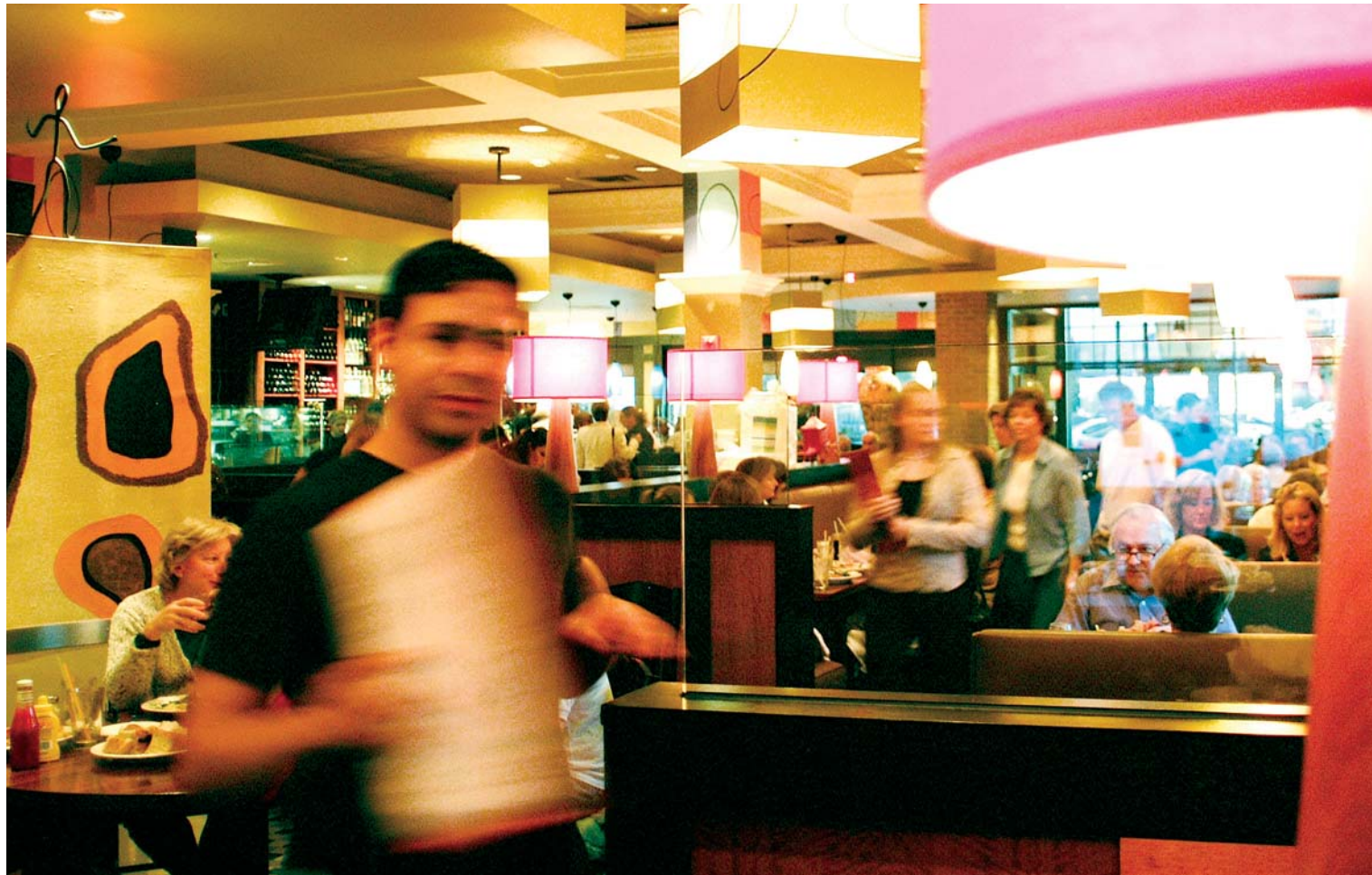
The appetizer category offers many ways to add a "wow" factor with some simple elements of tableside service. Many casual dining restaurants utilize bamboo steamers as a way to improve the presentation of pot stickers or dumplings, an increasingly popular appetizer choice. When the server removes the steamer lid, a cloud of steam and exotic aromas fill the air, creating a

real head-turning impact. Z Tejas, a 12-unit Texas-based operation offering new American cuisine, has incorporated a different pot sticker presentation into its repertoire — its Cast Iron Skillet Dumplings appetizer is described as a sizzling skillet of shrimp and pork dumplings. When the skillet reaches the table, the server pours a red chile-ginger dipping sauce, creating tableside sizzle and unleashing a feast of sound, aroma and flavor.

Another approach that leverages Asian-inspired foods and adds excitement at the table is the use of "hot pots." Trader Vic's, the California-based island-Eurasian restaurant group, was an early pioneer in providing the table with a small grate-topped, Sterno-fueled firepot that allows the guests to sizzle their own Polynesian-styled fare, including saté- and yakitori-style meats. There are so many skewered or bite-sized appetizer options that could be enhanced or customized in this manner.

Ohio-based Select Restaurants has adopted this tabletop cooking style in Café Winberie, its Euro-American bistro concept. It offers chicken skewers ready for tabletop warming and finishing off with a spicy peanut sauce.

El Torito, the California-based Mexican dinnerhouse that introduced the shaken-at-the-table Cadillac Margarita, has successfully rolled out tableside guacamole in all of its locations in the west and midwest. Avocado, diced serrano chiles and a



TABLESIDE SERVICE ELEMENTS ARE A SIMPLE WAY TO COMMUNICATE AN OPERATION'S COMMITMENT TO FLAVOR AND FRESHNESS. SERVERS AT NOT YOUR AVERAGE JOE'S PREPARE A FRESHLY MADE DIP AT THE TABLE FOR DINERS TO ENJOY WITH THE RESTAURANT'S HOMEMADE FOCACCIA.



RED LOBSTER

THE "EN PAPILOTE" COOKING METHOD IS MAKING A COMEBACK, AND TANTALIZING DINERS WITH ITS FLAVOR AND PRESENTATION.

blend of herbs and spices are portioned in the kitchen, then mixed together tableside in a Mexican mortar and pestle, allowing the guests to customize their guacamole with more or less peppers, cilantro or seasonings to taste. Blending together avocado and a few other ingredients delivers a low-maintenance bang for the buck, while also providing a fresh and flavorful tableside thrill and diner interaction.

Similarly, P.F. Chang's China Bistro, with locations in most states, creates many of its dipping sauces tableside to suit diners' flavor preferences.

In another appetizing example of tableside theatrics, Rockfish Seafood Grill, a Texas-based chain of over 20 seafood restaurants, took a cue from the cocktail lounge when it reinvented the classic seafood cocktail. Chefs place shrimp and avocado in a giant martini glass and servers embellish the presentation tableside by shaking a freshly assembled tomato salsa in a martini shaker and pouring it over the seafood.

SALADS: TOSSING A THRILL

The Caesar salad holds an important position in the history of tableside dining, for it was the first salad to move out of the kitchen and into the dining room, where its dramatic tableside assembly never fails to capture diners. While not all servers are confident enough to pull off a cracked egg-and-anchovy dressing in front of an audience, operators from fine dining to casual theme concepts are looking at ways to bring excitement back into the salad category. For some, this means customizing ingredient selections at the table, and for others, it means serving sizzling salads.

One simple tableside salad option is to serve a large salad bowl of dressed greens, family-style, and offer a range of fresh ingredients that can be added by servers or diners. In fact, just the mere act of tossing a salad tableside offers the potential for drama, adding a small but significant element of guest

interaction, and delivering a fresher, more flavorful salad than one that was assembled behind the scenes, perhaps hours earlier.

The success of fajitas has proven that sizzle sells, and Colorado-based Rock Bottom Restaurants, an 87-unit chain of brewpub-styled eateries, proves that fajitas aren't the only menu item to sizzle. Its Mrs. Chow's Sizzling Shrimp Salad presents a special mix of salad greens tossed with a sambal ginger dressing in the kitchen and brought to the table with a sizzling skillet of Szechuan-spiked shrimp and Asian vegetables. The server uses tongs to place the shrimp and vegetables over the salad tableside, creating a level of eatertainment.

TABLESIDE TAKES CENTER STAGE

While the idea of serving a steak on a sizzling skillet is hardly new, today's operators are looking at skillet service as an innovative way to offer value cuts at affordable price points. Examples could include using a combination of exotic mushrooms and roasted garlic to enhance the value perception of a sizzling flat iron steak.

The potential for completing entrées with a sizzle is vast. Any protein can be prepared in the kitchen and

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SMOKEY BONES' FRESHLY MADE DOUGHNUTS ARE SHAKEN TABLESIDE IN A BAG WITH CINNAMON AND SUGAR.

finished off with the addition of sizzling sauce, wine or savory sauté tableside. A sizzling luau chicken with island vegetables and spicy teriyaki sauce is another option to use in this flavorful format.

The classic fish *en papillote*, once limited to fine dining restaurants and whole fish preparations, has been re-tooled to meet operational needs in the casual dining segment. The idea is to prepare the fish with a variety of seasonings and vegetables, wrap it tightly in parchment paper and bake it in a hot oven at the time of ordering. The enclosed fish is served to the guest, at which time the server slits its



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THE DESSERT MENU PROVIDES ANOTHER OPPORTUNITY TO ADD EATERTAINMENT VALUE, AS IN SEASONS 52'S DESSERT SAMPLER.

packaging tableside, releasing delightful aromas and wowing the guest.

Red Lobster modifies this classic dish to prepare its popular Citrus Shrimp in a Bag — steamed in a pouch with green onions, lemon and seasonings. And its Caribbean-themed sister company Bahama Breeze offers fresh tilapia in its flavorful Fish in a Bag — baked in parchment with fresh seasonal vegetables and herbs, yellow rice and black beans.

Texas-based Water Street Seafood Co. has taken the *papillote* concept and added a Caribbean spin. Chefs wrap Caribbean-braised pork in a banana leaf and steam it to order. The server provides an element of tableside drama by unwrapping the packaged pork, which always turns heads and creates an “I’ll-have-that!” buzz within the restaurant.

Side dishes can also easily be enhanced by added service techniques. The baked potato still remains one of the most popular accompaniments to a steak, and operators are returning to the tried-and-true potato caddy for a way to add spice to spuds. Giving guests the opportunity to customize their potato with roasted garlic butter, sour cream, green onions, applewood-smoked bacon and cheddar cheese — all added by the server at the table — creates valuable points of guest interaction where the server can engage the guest in conversation and build a memorable rapport.

DRAMATIC FINALES

Dessert provides a great opportunity to impress and entertain the guest with truly memorable finales. Flambéing a dessert tableside may not be a realistic scenario for restaurant operators; however, there are plenty of alternate ways to customize dessert table

service while minimizing operational complexity. For some operators, dessert drama means simply pouring a sauce tableside. The perennial favorite (but rather plain) brownie becomes re-energized when servers top it with hot fudge sauce tableside, giving the guest the opportunity to “say when.”

Darden’s Smokey Bones offers its guests doughnuts in a bag filled with sugar and cinnamon that the server shakes tableside. The clever, fun and flavorful idea also capitalizes on made-to-order appeal because the doughnuts are fried upon ordering. Max and Erma’s is another operation using the made-to-order technique on its dessert menus with its freshly baked-to-order chocolate chip cookies as well as a build-your-own sundae bar. And old-west themed Claim Jumper offers a Chocolate Chip Calzone, a baked-to-order treat presented piping hot from the oven.

Seasons 52, a new concept in the Darden group of restaurants, capitalizes on the simple idea of a sampler plate — already a huge hit in the appetizer category — to offer the guest a reasonably priced sampling of numerous desserts, designed to appeal to everyone’s sweet tooth and promote a lot of guest interaction. Its pick-and-choose creamy treats are offered as mini-servings in shot glasses. This presentation gives diners individual attention and creates an interactive build-your-own dessert program.

Another idea for adding drama to the dessert category is to reinstate the traditional dessert cart or a similar visual presentation. Desserts are difficult to resist once viewed, and having servers present their options tableside is a great marketing tool as well as an easy form of dinner theatrics.

From shaking up a special seafood cocktail to drizzling some extra gooeyness over a brownie dessert, every category of today’s menu offers simple yet dramatic and flavorful ways to enhance diners’ tableside experience. ☺

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