

Menus made to appeal to aging baby boomers

WEEKEND EXTRA FROM G1

customization" that's needed to keep those well-heeled customers happy. Foot said if a customer has a certain health concern, restaurants have to be flexible enough to change the way menu items are prepared.

"Boomers' bodies are gradually wearing out — some are getting diabetes while others have concerns about salt or they're lactose intolerant," he said. "They may like a certain menu item but they'll want it prepared without nuts or milk or salt. Restaurants better learn to accommodate that."

Foot also noted that while many younger customers want a lively, noisy atmosphere when they eat out, baby boomers often prefer a quieter environment where it's easier to converse.

"The most successful restaurants will have options for their customers so they can eat in a noisy section or a less noisy section," he said.

Cactus Club executive chef Julian Bond said that's exactly what the Vancouver-based chain had in mind last month when it opened a \$6-million south Surrey restaurant that accommodates a wide demographic range. He said ceilings are designed to baffle sound and lighting is set to create different moods in different parts of the restaurant.

"We have a bar and lounge area where it's a little noisier and you can watch sports on TV," Bond said. "But you can sit in another part of the restaurant and have a quiet meal and be completely segregated from all that."

Vancouver restaurateur Geoffrey Howes said the aging customer base also means menus have to be printed in a "reasonable" type size that doesn't force sight-challenged boomers to squint or stretch their arms out as far as possible.

"All restaurants should have reading glasses and flashlights available to help customers read menus," he said. "It's practically a mandatory requirement now."

C Restaurant executive chef Robert



GLENN BAGLO/VANCOUVER SUN

Pat Quinn (left) sneaks a preview taste of White Spot executive chef Chuck Currie's new Health Check menu.

Clark said many older customers want smaller food portions.

"The industry is definitely moving away from huge portions, if for no other reason than to separate ourselves from the American mentality of filling up the plate," he said. "Hopefully, somebody leaves our restaurant feeling content but not filled up like you do after Christmas dinner."

Many restaurants have offered healthy eating options for years but the issue of healthy food has taken on a life of its own recently, with fast-food

restaurants scurrying to rid their menus of anything with nasty heart-disease-inducing trans fats.

White Spot this week became the first B.C.-based restaurant to adopt the Heart and Stroke Foundation's Health Check program by offering foundation-approved menu items considered nutritious and low in fat and sodium. The foundation feels it's crucial for restaurants to provide healthier options because nearly 40 per cent of Canadian household food dollars are spent on dining out.

"This is something our guests are looking for — healthier choices," said White Spot marketing director Chiyoko Kakino. "We'll do whatever we can to meet our guests' changing dietary requirements."

White Spot switched to a non-hydrogenated frying oil a year ago so its french fries are trans-fat-free and Kakino estimates that 85 per cent of the menu now is free of trans fats.

Howes said the trans-fats issue hasn't affected many upscale restaurants because most use high-end ingredients that don't contain a lot of trans fats.

"There's also a feeling among many customers that when they go to a fine-dining restaurant for a special occasion, the food they're about to have is probably richer than it should be, but what the heck," he said. "We sell tons of salad at lunch but when it comes to dinner, people want ribs or whatever because they've made a conscious decision to splurge."

Since environmental issues have surged to the top of the national political agenda, it's no surprise that sustainability has become a huge issue in the B.C. restaurant sector. Many restaurants struggle with the wild salmon versus farmed salmon debate. The Vancouver Aquarium's Ocean Wise program — which promotes sustainable seafood harvesting — discourages restaurants from offering threatened species like Chilean sea bass, orange roughly, shark and bluefin tuna.

The Vancouver park board this week voted to ban the sale of Atlantic cod and farmed shrimp from its 13 concession stands and three golf-course restaurants because they are harvested and farmed with unsustainable methods. Breaded calamari (squid) will replace shrimp while Pacific cod will replace Atlantic cod in servings of fish and chips.

The Ocean Wise program also strongly recommends restaurants remove farmed tiger prawns from their menus because farming practices destroy Asian mangrove forests. But market pressures and consumer demand have kept some of the city's

best-intentioned restaurants from banning tiger prawns.

Even Ocean Wise coordinator Mike McDermid acknowledged that alternatives like B.C. spot prawns and side stripe prawns are not available year-round and don't freeze as well as tiger prawns.

"We understand that's a tricky one for restaurants to take off because of price point and consumer demand," he said.

More than 60 Lower Mainland restaurants, four markets and one culinary school have joined Ocean Wise since its creation two years ago. The program's founding restaurant — C Restaurant — has long promoted sustainably harvested seafood for quality-control reasons, not just because of conservation concerns.

"We discovered that sustainably harvested seafood and quality seafood are interconnected — they're one and the same," said Clark.

Ocean Wise won't permit its restaurants to serve farmed salmon and McDermid said that while environmentalists have done a great job educating the public about the ills of salmon farming they might have gone too far.

"Now everybody is scared of a farmed product and it has become the next 'F' word," he said. "The problem with that is if we're going to keep up our passion for consuming salmon, we're going to have to figure out a way to farm it sustainably. Otherwise we'll just completely destroy the wild stocks and that would be a major disaster."

McDermid said some farmed fish species like catfish, tilapia and sturgeon are sustainable and Bond feels the Cactus Club has found a perfect alternative to open-net pen-farmed salmon — landlocked, freshwater-raised steelhead farmed in Lois Lake near Powell River.

Technically, steelhead is a trout but Bond said the fish has a similar taste and appearance as salmon.

"Serving wild salmon is great but with the volumes we're pulling out, it's a threat to wild stocks," he said, noting the chain's 17 restaurants used to serve about 54,000 kg of wild salmon during the winter season alone.

ABC Country Restaurants marketing director Joan Overin said the chain stopped selling farmed salmon about three years ago.

"It seemed like a no-brainer [decision]," she said. "The jury is still out on salmon farming and until all the questions are answered, we're sticking with wild."

Renowned Vancouver sushi chef Hidekazu Tojo said most of his customers are "very concerned" about healthy eating so he won't use farmed fish at his restaurant.

You can almost hear him wince over the phone when asked about farmed tiger prawns.

"I just don't like tiger prawns because the farming methods are terrible and they taste like mud," Tojo said.

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