

VEGETABLES/FRUITS ARE 'MORE THAN DECORATIONS':

PUTTING GARNISH TO THE SALES-TEST

No matter how wonderful your menu is or if the items are trendy or traditional, customers "eat with their eyes" before making their choice, and a simple garnish—on the plate, on the pan, or on the buffet table—is a positive enhancement that can show you "really care." And it can also increase the bottom-line.

Some locations have the in-house talent to create elaborate swans, Birds of Paradise, ice carvings, etc., plus the requisite staffing time. But even when labor is at a premium, there are many vegetable and/or fruit garnishes that are quick and easy to prepare, operators say, even if that's only a lemon, lime or orange slice with a twist, placed atop kale, or perhaps a fanned strawberry or two.

A vegetable preference: Some operators who generally "go with the flow," become adamant about which garnish should be teamed with which menu item. For example, Tim Yingling, gen. mgr., operations and marketing, based at Duracell Intl., a Food First Restaurant Corp. account in Bethel, CT, prefers working with vegetables rather than fruit.

"You can create miracles with vegetables since they're easier and crisper to work with, so we do a lot of vegetable garnishes at Duracell. But it's taboo to put a cold garnish on a hot plate and it's done too often in the industry. It's my philosophy that for hot plates we use hot vegetables such as zucchini boats with creamed spinach, or turned and glazed mushrooms as garnish. It's a natural, warm ingredient that's edible."

Fruits are reserved for cold buffets and table garnishes, Yingling points out. Apple swans and watermelon baskets are fairly standard, but for a fruit and cheese board, his staff occasionally puts kabobs of fruit on watermelon baskets to create an Indian head-dress. Also, platters for catering may be liberally gar-

nished with bunches of grapes dipped in granulated sugar to "look like they're frozen."

The sorbet cup: A recent addition to Duracell's garnishing repertoire puts oranges in the spotlight. "We square-peel from the top of the orange to half-way down, then pull the orange out of the peel. (It's later used in a fruit salad). Fill the shell with orange sorbet, fold the skin back up, and use as a plate garnish and palate cleanser. The trick is to get small oranges," he explains.

Chocolate dipped strawberries and bananas, or bananas dipped in chocolate then rolled in sugar frosted flakes—or first dipped in peanut butter, then chocolate and frosted flakes—are easy to prepare and always well-received by Duracell customers.

"Of course, for desserts, cherries, raspberries and blackberries make a wonderful yet simple garnish sprinkled on a plate. Avocados—cut in half and scooped out—provide an ideal 'container' for guacamole, which we prepare from the avocado

and pipe back in, then garnish with fruit or vegetables," Yingling says.

Avocado shells are filled with citrus salad and served as an edible garnish at 300-bed Northeast Georgia Medical Ctr. in Gainesville, GA, according to exec. chef David McDowell, CCC.

Garnishing policy: "It's a Morrison Health Care policy to garnish everything—all entrees for patients and in the cafeteria. Plus, we do cheese, fruit and very ornate ice carvings for hospital catering functions. For patients, we have a standardized garnish rotation including tomato wedge plus kale, orange wedge with kale, fresh parsley, etc., to create eye-appeal," McDowell says.

For cafeteria customers, larger serving pans or display platters rather than individual plates, are often garnished with carved cantaloupe flower baskets or swans carved from apples.

To garnish desserts, miniature hedgehogs are crafted from mangos that are scored with 'x's, then turned inside-out, while peacocks emerge from watermelons, with kiwi slices on skewers simulating feathers. As a finishing touch for a slice

of pie or cake, a half cut of kumquat or key lime can be placed atop a whipped cream rosette, McDowell suggests.

Pineapple trees:

For large catering functions, the Northeast Georgia foodservice staff have been known to create an impressive pineapple tree or two. "We core a whole pineapple and put it on a metal rod stand, then add six more whole pineapples with the tops cut off. Banana leaves are

added at the top, then skewers of kiwis, melon balls and star fruit are stuck in at random."

Celebrity Cruise Lines, with food-service provided by Miami, FL-based Apollo Ship Chandlers, works hard at upholding its reputation for "creatively and beautifully decorated food." Using local produce from Florida, as well as other ports-of-call, Apollo has "specially-trained European and Asian staff—especially Filipino—who are very skilled with melon, fruit and vegetable carvings.

"For luncheon and dinner plates, an enormous staff bundles vegetables, bouquets and fruit. It's very labor-intensive, with a higher staff ratio detailed to do the culinary artistry," notes Manfred Ursprung, Celebrity's v.p. total guest satisfaction.

For a 'photo finish': To promote the ongoing development of fresh new garnishing concepts, staff members are encouraged to contribute their ideas and corporate personnel—including three-star Michelin chef Michel Roux who serves as a consultant—he teaches the staff the designs for each menu item by providing a detailed recipe and photo of what the finished product should look like.

"What is classic with cheese is what we use for garnish, i.e., grapes, pears, apples and nuts. You wouldn't use pineapple since that doesn't go with cheese. But grilled pineapple would be used to garnish the Tush kebab or Greek kabob. And, for the Oriental menu, dragon sculptures and designs are made from watermelons," notes Alfred Goldinger, Apollo's dir. of food operations.

Sauces and slices: Carved fruit flowers are often teamed with cold dishes such as Caribbean Fruit Salad, Conga Pineapple and Chicken Salad, as well as with flambe dishes. And fruit sauces as well as fruit slices are often paired as dessert garnishes, he says.

For example, Pear Charlotte/St. Honore Black & White is garnished with pears, while cheesecake, pies and individual fruit tarts are teamed with appropriate fruits plus peach and kiwi sauce (or other fruit sauces) and a sprinkling of almonds.

