

# Presentation Tricks and Techniques

by Chef Michael Tsonton

**The adage, “you eat with your eyes,” has great merit. An initial “Wow!” from a guest launches the dining experience in the right direction before he even picks up his fork. Eye-catching plates are bound to elicit comments like, “What are they having?”**

Conversely, if the dish doesn't hold up to its good looks, even the best-looking meal will be an empty experience. Upshot: Food needs to look as good as it tastes, and vice versa. Ensuring that presentation contributes to the flavor profile is imperative.

Impressive garnishes, plating tricks and techniques abound but common sense and restraint should reign. The most important rule for any dish is flavor first. When I give young cooks or sous chefs the opportunity to create menu items for our kitchen staff to taste, I always tell them to think about their flavor profile first. Once the dish tastes great, from the first bite to the last, then we can tinker with the presentation.

Presentation is a funny thing. Much of a plate's successful visual appeal can be factored on the concept, price point, and the volume of plates that leave the kitchen. You need to integrate your concept throughout your restaurant. A great presentation that is incongruous with the type and style of restaurant can fall flat. A three-star Michelin plate isn't supposed to look like a fast-casual fish taco, but they should both look appetizing.

**Placement.** Making the plate look good sometimes is as easy as where you place the components on the plate. Center-of-the-plate proteins are really just that, meant to be the focus for the guest. Building the vegetable and starch around the protein can make simple foodstuffs feel elegant with a bit of organization on the plate. It's helpful to lay out the plate for the cooks with the uncooked product before service, or during the test plate for the tasting with the front-of-the-house service staff.

Plating rings are helpful for fast and steady plate presentations. Plating rings are available in many sizes and shapes and are great for portioning as well. If braised osso buco is accompanied by a classic saffron Milanese risotto, a plating ring is perfect for the task. Placing the risotto in the ring first allows for time to add the meat and vegetable, sauce and garnish with gremolata before pulling the ring from the plate. This keeps the risotto hot and in its place right up to the time the guest is served. Plating rings can be used for other starches, vegetables, and even stews. Even on the cold side, plating rings can help create plates for salads and cold appetizers.

Saucing a plate is an often overlooked plating technique. Personally I think there are too many ladles on the hot line and not enough spoons. Taking the time to make perfect grill marks on a steak, only to cover it with a mushroom sauce doesn't make much sense. A smarter visual approach is to sauce the plate first, place the steak in the center and then near it the starch, such as a stack of crispy fried potatoes tossed with fresh parsley. Oftentimes, saucing with a spoon instead of a ladle provides the same speed but with more control.

**Garnishes.** Fried garnishes also provide eye-pleasing options that will never go out of style. Using inexpensive Japanese mandolins to slice vegetables and tubers allows for a more upscale look. “Angel hair” strands of crisp fried sweet potato add a superb crunch to grilled pork loin with a bourbon sauce, and fresh sage leaves fried a la minute and tossed with plenty of salt combine earthy pop and eye appeal to pasta bolognese. Fried onion rings added on top of salads have always been a favorite. Thin-sliced fresh lotus root fried to crisp along with chips for guacamole gives a classic an interesting edge that will have the guest asking, “What are these?”

Even the cheese crisp still prompts customers wondering, “How did they do that?” The intense flavored crunch of a crispy lattice of Asiago can make a salad sing. All that’s needed is a nonstick baking mat. Toasted, candied and spiced nuts are terrific additions to many plates. I personally love to make spicy-sweet almonds for garnishes in salads and to tuck alongside grilled meat. Filberts, peanuts, walnuts or pine nuts all pack tons of flavors and a little goes a long way, making them economical to use.

Pickles of all kinds are superb additions, too. Think sweet and sour, spicy, garlic, or maybe curry. Nearly anything can be pickled, and it’s fun to let your imagination run with spices and flavors. These brackish gems make excellent surprises for additional flavor and finishing.

**Play with hot and cold.** Changing temperatures on plates is another subtle way to add depth in taste and presentation. A small bitter watercress salad nestled next to rich grilled sockeye salmon steak brings some garden freshness and bite to the fatty fish. Or let a warm potato pancake play partner to salty smoked salmon finished with some smooth aromatic-sweet applesauce.

The trick in presentation is figuring out how to get the most out of each plate, without going over the top and without bringing the line down during service. Short of adding foam, vapor or gelée to everything, the basic techniques haven’t changed too much. Many of the time-tested ones are the ones your guest will notice and can enjoy both visually and with their taste buds.