

Is the Entree Heading for Extinction?

By **KIM SEVERSON**

Published: December 5, 2007

THE entree, long the undisputed centerpiece of an American restaurant meal, is dead.

O.K., so maybe it's not quite time to write the entree's obituary. But in many major dining cities like New York, San Francisco and Chicago, the main course is under attack.

Although the entree's ills were first diagnosed in the late 1990s, when the rise of small plates kicked off the tapafication of American menus, the attacks have become more serious lately.



Upstarts like the snack menu, with its little offerings of polpettine and deviled eggs, are encroaching from the flank. Crudi, salumi plates and cheese boards have piled on. The appetizer, once a loyal lieutenant, is demanding more attention on menus. Side dishes and salads, fortified by seasonal ingredients and innovative preparations, are announcing their presence with new authority.

But the gravest threat may be the dining public, which seems to have lost interest in big, protein-laden main dishes.

“I think the entree has been in trouble for a long time,” said the chef [Tom Colicchio](#). “Eating an entree is too many bites of one thing, and it's boring.”

That's in part why he moved away from the classic appetizer-entree-dessert rhythm of Gramercy Tavern when he opened Craft in 2001, one of the first prominent restaurants in New York to deconstruct the menu into a long list of proteins, side dishes and sauces to be mixed and matched into a family-style meal.

At newer restaurants, the entree is being shoved even deeper into a corner. In the West Village, diners at the Spotted Pig can browse among almost two dozen dishes categorized as snacks, plates and sides, but just five entrees.

Only a quarter of the food people order at Boqueria is what the Flatiron neighborhood restaurant calls raciones, or entree-size dishes, said Seamus Mullen, its chef and a partner.

At Gemma, which opened this summer in the Bowery, the menu offers so much crudi and antipasti and carni and crostini that the secondi, presumably the main event, are given a mere two and half inches of space at the bottom of a 14-inch-long menu.

The trend is challenging even to veteran New York diners trying to work their way through the new menus.

“At Academia de Vino we have not yet tasted an entree,” said Gael Greene, the New York restaurant critic and author. By the time she and her dining companions have ordered everything they want to try from other parts of the menu, they’re too full for a main course.

Other restaurants have abandoned the entree category altogether.

Diners who visit Jean Georges for lunch select two dishes from a list of 20 similarly sized offerings for \$28. The menu at Maze, the [Gordon Ramsay](#) restaurant in the London Hotel in Manhattan, offers an equally long list of choices, ranging in price from \$12 to \$18, with no indication of which might be best as a starter or a main course.



Why is the entree in danger of becoming the California condor of the menu?

One theory is that people like to customize their worlds. Personalized playlists on iPods have replaced albums. TiVo has replaced channel surfing. In this quick-cut, video-on-demand universe, the entree is [Walter Cronkite](#).

“As a diner, the idea of me chewing 17 bites of one thing and another 17 bites of another is absolutely boring, and not how I want to eat,” said the chef [Mario Batali](#). “At the lower end, people are looking for options.” Two of his New York restaurants, Otto and Casa Mono, have no main courses at all.

Andrew Freeman, a restaurant consultant based in San Francisco, said customers who see a new ingredient on a food show or a blog want to try it without committing to an entire plateful.

“It’s like they want to date their food before they marry it,” he said.

Younger diners feel more comfortable calling the shots in higher-end restaurants. They dress more casually, order appetizers for entrees and avoid the traditional main dish with its accompanying starch and vegetables.

“The big, gut-busting entrees don’t really give diners that sense of risk-free adventure and experience,” said Colleen Rush, author of “The Mere Mortal’s Guide to Fine Dining” (Broadway Books, 2006).

Influences from the global pantry have also had their effect. More exposure to meze, dim sum, sushi and tapas has changed how Americans think of the structure of a meal. As a result, chefs feel free to break out of the traditional French model of restaurant dining by offering small, intense tastes of global flavors, said Eve Felder, an associate dean at the Culinary Institute of America.

“It’s more of a reaching back into the way in which people celebrate the table,” she said.

Although it’s hard to imagine a time when the single-entree meal wasn’t the norm, the concept is only about 75 or 80 years old, and not necessarily something to be cherished, said Paul Freedman, a [Yale University](#) history professor and editor of the new book, “Food: The History of Taste” (University of California Press).

Victorian meals with multiple main courses of calf's head, a beef roast and a saddle of venison supplemented by a fish course and dozens of accompaniments died out by World War I, he said.

"What you have in the 20th century is less opulent cuisine, and less time to devote to it," he said. And, he points out, modern America has always loved multiple tastes of several dishes. Think of the smorgasbord, the cafeteria, the buffet and the ever-changing multiple offerings at fast food restaurants.

"It's really not so much avant-garde but a look back and a reflection of Americans' desire to have a lot of choices," he said.

Still for many people, the shift is confusing. Diners sheepishly ask waiters whether they have ordered enough food. The movement has even given rise to a new verb. After writing down a seemingly random list of dishes, a waiter is apt to ask, "Shall I course that for you?"

For waiters and kitchens, an entree-less meal makes the job harder. At Morandi, where the chef, Jody Williams, presides over a menu laced with plenty of smaller dishes mixed with showy platters of branzino or steak for two, the computer system has been redesigned to include something called a segue bar. Waiters insert it electronically between groups of dishes. Instead of indicating traditional course breaks, which give waiters time to remove plates and reset the table, the segue bar simply slows down the flow from the kitchen.

At Spice Market, where the food is served family style in varying sizes, people order an average of three and a half dishes each, said [Jean-Georges Vongerichten](#). By his count, that's a lot; on a busy day, when a thousand people move through, it means his staff has to turn out a staggering 3,500 plates of food.

Still, he loves the trend. "It's easier for me to please you with three or four bites," he said.

If at this point you're wondering if you should start an entree-lovers' support group, relax.

For one thing, there are always steakhouses, the number of which has exploded in the past few years. Their unchanging format offers a black-and-white counterpoint to global, entree-free dining.

Michael Mina, the San Francisco-based chef known for elaborate, tiny courses contained within one entree, is working both trends. He just opened StripSteak in Las Vegas and in a year or so he plans to open a wine bar and restaurant in San Francisco that will have no main courses but rather 25 dishes of about the same size divided into five categories.

Even at the steakhouse, people tend to share the beef.

"It's still a social place," he said.

Other restaurants realize they might have taken things too far. When Tailor, Manhattan's latest molecular gastronomic effort, opened in the fall, the menu was divided into only salty and sweet categories. Then the chef, Sam Mason, added a second,

larger portion size and higher price to four dishes to help diners who wanted, as a server told me recently, “more of an entree experience.” In a final conceit the menu now has small plates, large plates and sweets.

And then there are the New York City purists. When Kerry Heffernan opens South Gate on Central Park South later this winter, the entree will star.

“There are times when you want to try everything on the planet, but more often than not you want to feel like you’ve been fed and nurtured and nourished,” he said. “I think that comes from having your own plate.”

At Prune, defending the entree is as much a matter of principle as of diner satisfaction.

“We still have six courses in the middle because I still have the attention span for a meal,” said the chef and owner, Gabrielle Hamilton.

She also refuses to let waiters and bartenders program just one or two songs into the restaurant’s playlist.

“You have to listen to the whole album,” she said.