

FLAVOR & THE MENU

TOP 10 TRENDS FOR 2016

Skillet Sensation

Skillet preparations are poised for a sizzling comeback.

BY KATIE AYOUB | JANUARY 5, 2017

Comfort food is always king. The challenge, of course, is finding new ways to present it. Skillets are the ultimate comfort food carrier. They're an American tradition, pulled from the hearth during pioneer days, offering up skillet stew, cornbread and maybe a cobbler, if times weren't too lean. They were brought to Grandma's Sunday table with an oven mitt and a warning that the bubbling skillets were piping hot. Skillet preps serve up all good things cast with deep emotional connections.



A SKILLET OF TOMATO-BRAISED MEATBALLS WITH BURRATA AND GRITS SERVED AT ACORN IN DENVER, RELAYS RUSTIC, HOMEY, HEARTY, JUST-FOR-YOU CUES THAT RESONATE WITH CONSUMERS TODAY.

Skillets bring old-fashioned values that are highly relevant to today's diners, who look for authenticity, connectivity, craftsmanship and transparency. They continue to seek out comfort food. Preparing and serving food in a skillet answers these deeply felt desires. "Consumers want honest food," says Michal Slavin, directory of culinary & menu innovation for the Houlihan's, J. Gilbert's Wood-Fired Steak and Bristol Seafood concepts. "Skillets lend themselves to an honest food approach. They feel like, 'You're making this special for me,' and it's folksy and wholesome. There's an inherent authenticity, and that's what diners are looking for."

This trend speaks to the desire for honest food with a rustic earnestness that's hard to beat. "Cast-iron skillet preparations deliver old-time magic to the table," says Pam Smith, nutritionist and culinary consultant. "It's the sense of heritage as we go back to things that our grandmothers did, like canning, pickling and preserving. We're living in a time where high value is being placed on what people do with their hands."

Fajitas—that Tex-Mex invention of a sizzling skillet paraded through the dining room—is a distant cousin of this trend. Instead, modern skillet preps are driven by trends that continue to impact menus and push innovation. Comfort food is certainly a driver, which opens up possibilities significantly. So, skillet preps of monkey bread, gratins, baked pasta dishes and desserts are all welcome here. Iron Skillet Brownies from Ivy Kitchen in Dallas are served with vanilla bean ice cream and topped with hot fudge.



Dry-Aged Prime Beef Meatballs in a cast-iron skillet were inspired by Chef Danny Grant's family recipe, served at Maple & Ash in Chicago.

No matter what finds its way into the skillet, the prep is mindful, reflecting modern flavor innovation and technique. Jason Hoffman, executive chef of Ivy Kitchen, says the skillet not only looks great on the table, but it makes for a better brownie. "The skillet is essential in creating a crispy outer crust, and it allows the center to remain moist and fudgy," he says.

Two major menu trends that are propelling this trend forward are the brunch boom and the bar bites movement. Each of these are led by global flavor discovery. We've seen eggs Benedict transform into two poached eggs in a tomatillo sauce over griddled corn cakes, and a bar staple of popcorn is now dusted with furikake. Modern skillet preps offer these global flavor adventures while couching the experience in a familiar, comforting carrier. Both hold tremendous opportunity for innovation.

Bar Bites & Shareables

Never has a category been more important to so many different restaurant brands. Sociable, shareable, interesting, adventurous food rules the roost here. Skillet presentations deliver on all of the emotional cues, while also setting down an elevated experience. Consider mini skillets as bar bites or small plates, maybe housing blistered heirloom carrots glazed with harissa and honey, or a bubbling serving of pasta carbonara. Or maybe it's a larger skillet, placed in the middle of a table with a heaping plate of flatbreads for scooping and dipping. It's all irresistibly inviting, while anchored to a soothing place of familiarity and hominess.



The wildly popular Oven-Baked Pizza Dip at TR Fire Grill in Winter Park, Fla., makes pizza a dippable, shareable experience, coming out bubbling and inviting in a cast-iron skillet.

Danny Grant, executive chef at Maple & Ash in Chicago, serves a family recipe of Prime Beef Meatballs with caramelized tomato sauce and old-school garlic bread. The meatballs are cooked and served in a cast-iron skillet. Ivy Kitchen's Hoffman serves Iron Skillet Brussels Sprouts with crispy shallots, smoked bacon, sesame seeds and Sriracha-honey-lime sauce.

At 21 Greenpoint in Brooklyn, N.Y., Sean Telo serves Foie Fried Rice: rice, Hudson Valley foie gras, linguica sausage, Portuguese allspice and scallions, all topped with eggs, then baked and served in a sizzling hot skillet. And at Presidio Social Club in San Francisco, a shareable of Burrata Cheese with Early Girl tomatoes, gypsy peppers and toasted levain comes to the table in a piping hot skillet.

Bob Gallagher, senior VP of culinary at TR Fire Grill in Winter Park, Fla., says the Oven-Baked Pizza Dip is one of the most popular items on his menu. "It continually scores the highest in both guest satisfaction and intent of reorder," he says. Presented in a shareable skillet, it's made with Buffalo mozzarella, provolone, pepperoni, sausage and garlic, and served with grilled rosemary focaccia. "We were thinking about items that were familiar to people but that we could serve differently," says Gallagher, who holds the same title for TR Fire Grill's multi-unit sister concept, Tony Roma's. "I wanted to rethink pizza. I

wasn't interested in committing to doing all-out pizza on this menu. The dip seemed like an easy way to deliver those favorite flavors in a shareable format."

He menus another "table share" skillet of Smoked Meatballs with leek and onion beef gravy and manchego cheese, as well as a "shareable side" of Mac & Cheese, with orecchiette, Wisconsin cheese curds and a Wisconsin cheese-crumb crust. "The cast-iron skillets promote authentic cooking, and they have functionality," he says. "The food comes out with a bubbling crust—it makes it more appetizing. The skillets serve a purpose. It's a real item that supports the idea that we're serving real food."



With versatility in size options, skillet preparations showcase on-trend shareability. This Pork Belly Carnitas Feast is one of the new shareable platters at Lolita Cocina in Boston, topped with escabeche salad and onion strings, served with tortillas, black beans and salsas.

That full sensory experience helps push skillet preps further into menu development. The back-of-house advantages make them even more appealing. "Cooking and serving in the same vessel is super-efficient," says Michael Slavin. "From a service standpoint, the product is hot and it raises guests' perception of the idea that it was really just made for them."

Breakfast & Brunch

The modern brunch trend is still booming, influencing breakfast and all-day breakfast fare with big flavors and bold mash-ups. Skillets have always found a home at the breakfast table, from hashes to baked egg dishes. Now, skillet presentations are softening the ground for adventurous items, like Israel's shakshuka, Spain's huevos a la flamenco, and Mexico's chilaquiles and huevos rancheros. "There is the comfort aspect that is coming from the most comfort-infused part of the day: breakfast," says Chris Koetke, VP of culinary arts for Laureate International Universities. "It is no surprise that breakfast is largely about comfort foods, and that skillets have played a big role here. When we reach for comfort foods, breakfast is a great source of dishes."

At Shaya in New Orleans, a shakshuka with chermoula, Jerusalem artichokes, spicy chiles, tomato and eggs is served in a skillet pulled from the oven. Another shakshuka, on the menu at Saul's Deli in Berkeley, Calif., presents an egg baked in rich, spicy tomato sauce with cumin, oregano and parsley, and served with pita, labneh and s'chug.

At Tag Restaurant Group in Denver, Colo., Troy Guard, chef-owner, likes what he calls the "old-school vibe" of iron skillets. "Skillet prep is useful in keeping your dish hot, but it also assists with the presentation," he says. He serves a Morning Skillet with poblano hash, farm eggs and romesco, as well as a Duck Confit Hash that sports a duck egg, duck crackling and root vegetables.



The brunch boom has brought renewed interest to skillet dishes like this Short Rib Hash, with braised beef short rib, eggs, home fries, peppers, onion and spinach, at Spoke & Steele in Indianapolis.

"So many breakfast items call out for skillet presentations, from frittatas and hashes to potato soufflés and cheesy grits," says Slavin. "The visual element here is stunning—you can see these dishes puffing up and bubbling. That has a huge impact on guests."

Pam Smith summarizes the virtues of skillet preparations in modern foodservice: "Cast-iron skillets provide that homestyle, handcrafted feel, and they impart a smoky, grilled flavor," she says. "Cast iron gets screaming hot for excellent searing, and the heat is even and long-lasting. Whether the cookware is used for hashes, baked cornbread, roasted Brussels sprouts, seared steak or a beautifully caramelized cobbler or pineapple upside-down cake, the cast-iron pans add a special sizzle to cooking."

Dishes served in skillets relay so many modern cues. Small batch. Hearty. Homey. Real. Nostalgic. They tell an authentic story and they share the unparalleled flavor of fire.