

FLAVOR & THE MENU

TOP 10 TRENDS FOR 2016

Next-Gen Nachos

An “anything goes” approach fuels innovation in this fan favorite.

BY KATIE AYOUB | JANUARY 5, 2017

There’s an exuberance in an order of nachos. Choosing them is freeing—they signal a good time. As a group, when you go all-in on nachos, you’re firing the starting gun, cutting the ribbon, declaring the celebration. They take shareability to a special place—messy, indulgent, familiar, interactive. Nachos have been around since football became a national pastime. But they’ve gained steam recently, and they hold new potential for menu developers today. Taking cues from the loaded fries movement and the continued shift toward more sociable dining, chefs are reimagining nachos in wonderful, craveable ways. It’s certainly a smart business move, as they offer up a low-cost carrier primed for premium upgrades. It’s also a proven formula for a successful menu strategy, demonstrated by the boom of loaded fries and tots, to name a few.

That sense of fun inherent in every scoop, pull and crunch makes nachos a perfect playground for innovation—in the chips, cheeses, toppings and drizzles. And because nachos are perhaps the most familiar, most loved shareable of all time, chefs can introduce a little adventure tucked within those savory, gooey, addictive layers.



NACHOS ARE AN IDEAL PLATFORM FOR INTRODUCING NEW FLAVOR SYSTEMS. IN NASHVILLE, TENN., THEY SERVE AS A BASE FOR PARTY FOWL’S SIGNATURE HOT CHICKEN, WITH A TOPPING OF WHITE BEANS, CHEESE, AVOCADO, JALAPEÑOS, GREEN ONION, LETTUCE, PICO DE GALLO AND SOUR CREAM.

For customers who might find poke a bridge too far, Tuna Poke Nachos, like the dish at Next Door in Dallas, offers just the right balance of familiar and exotic. Paul Niekrasz, executive chef, builds them out with cucumber, pine nuts, wasabi crema and wonton crisps. In fact, the trendlet of poke nachos is quite an impressive phenomenon, with concepts across the country turning to the safe platform of nachos as a gateway for this trending seafood dish. The poke nachos at Chive in Vero Beach, Fla., sport unsalted corn chips topped with seaweed, minced ahi tuna, tomato, wasabi mayonnaise and horseradish cream.

“Nachos are a great platform for approachable or gateway ‘fusion.’ It’s a simple, affordable and recognizable building block for menu development,” says Dennis Samala, chef and founder of Creative Culinary Concepts. “This trend is in part driven by poke and all things Asian, like wonton nachos with raw fish and sauce toppings.”

Nachos also help extend a brand’s flavor story, while showing off a fun, familial side of things. At Little Goat Diner in Chicago, Stephanie Izard menus Machos Nachos, with housemade masa chips, barbecue pork, beans, pickled peppers, cheddar, sour cream and avocado. And at The Country Cat in Portland, Ore., Adam Sappington illustrates his love of all things pork with his Chicharrones Nachos, based on a layer of pork rinds, topped with crispy pork, red curry-spiked Velveeta and a cilantro-radish



Chef Edward Lee dials up the flavor and craveability with a heady combination of gochujang and Texas chili, all over a bed of crunchy tortilla chips.

salad. “The flavors are spirited, with Asian red curry Velveeta cheese and the salty-crunchy mouthfeel of chicharrones,” says Sappington. “The accent of fresh cilantro and a squeeze of lime with the crispy pork and radish is an explosion of pure flavor.”

Petty Cash Taqueria in Los Angeles makes the veg-centric trend a craveable bar bite with its Roasted Cauliflower Nachos with crema poblano, Jack cheese, rainbow cauliflower, kale and pickled Fresno chiles.

“Nachos could shoulder well many regional American flavors like cheddar cheese, horseradish, barbecue, Mom’s pot roast, corned beef, grilled shrimp, gumbo,” says Chris Koetke, VP of culinary arts

for Laureate International Universities. “This trend could also be fodder for internationalization. Why not melt Brie over the nachos, layer on prosciutto, sprinkle with Parmesan, douse in Bolognese, or dress up with crab and béarnaise? It’s pretty mouth-watering stuff with the potential for instant acceptance.”

The Thinking Person’s Nachos

Although nachos often look like a thrown-together pile of chips and toppings, the ones that move this trend forward are more thoughtful in the build. Not only does the balance need to be considered—between chips and cheese, savory and sweet, crunchy and soft—but the intention in the flavor play is also critical.

“Ratios and balance of ingredients are both really important, but so is thinking through all of the elements and how they express your brand,” says Michael Slavin, director of culinary & menu innovation for the Houlihan’s, J. Gilbert’s Wood-Fired Steak and Bristol Seafood concepts. “There’s a constant thematic evolution for new news in foodservice. With nachos, it used to be you could only go with a Mexican theme or maybe a Southwestern theme. Now, directions you can go with are endless, just with the carrier alone. Look beyond the tortilla chip at yucca chips, plantains, wontons, roti or paratha breads, Indian fry bread, arepas. Nachos today can be so creative, but the process has to be deliberate.”



Signature ingredients make all the difference. This version is elevated with portobello mushrooms, Wisconsin blue cheese and jalapeños atop blue corn tortilla chips.

Exploring on-trend flavor systems in a nacho platform is a great opportunity for menu differentiation. For a Mediterranean theme, maybe it’s Greek Nachos, found at Meraki Greek Bistro in Miami. There, pita chips replace tortilla chips, and the build carries through the theme with tomatoes, cucumbers, olives, feta, yogurt sauce and olive oil. Samurai Burrito, a Japanese fusion restaurant in Fountain Valley, Calif., stays on message with Sushi Nachos, wonton chips topped with raw fish, sesame seeds, wasabi mayo and togarashi.

“Nachos give chefs more real estate to build flavors upon, as well as unmatched crunch,” says chef-consultant Robert Danhi. “Also, we can look to different chips to excite discerning palates. What about a Vietnamese-inspired twist using rice-tapioca crackers topped with grilled lemongrass pork, pickled veggies, fresh herbs and drizzled with roasted chile sauce?”

Party Fowl in Nashville, Tenn., specializes in hot chicken, the local dish that’s recently become a national phenomenon. Serving up an appetizer of Hot Chicken Nachos is a natural extension for the brand. “We made them in the tradition of great 1970s nachos, from such restaurants as Houston’s and Chi-Chi’s,” says Bart Pickens, executive chef. The nachos star bacon-fried tortilla chips topped with hot chicken, white beans, cheese, avocado, jalapeños, green onions, lettuce, pico de gallo and sour cream. “Our menu has a lot of different vessels to showcase our hot chicken, and nachos seemed like a great fit,” he says. Honey Butter in Chicago has successfully extended its craveable fried chicken into an ingenious shareable of nachos, served on Thursdays, called Fried Chicken Nachos: crisp tortilla chips, fried chicken strips, corn pico de gallo and pimento cheese sauce, finished with a drizzle of lime crema and candied jalapeño.

Safe Adventures

Combining the unfamiliar with the familiar is a common theme in foodservice today, in response to the tendency for consumers to go with what they know while looking for something a bit different. “Nachos are a casual gateway to adventurous ingredients,” says Slavin. “If I want to introduce blood sausage, rather than putting bangers and mash on the menu, I’m going with the easy entry point. Nachos are reliable. They put the guest at ease.”



White Cheddar Shishito Nachos showcase how on-trend substitutions can take nachos in a wonderful new direction.

Data from global research firm Mintel reinforces this instinct, reporting that 35 percent of diners would try menu items with unique flavors or ingredients if they were in familiar dishes. “Nachos are a dish that

many consumers are familiar with, so using that as a base is a great way to introduce diners to unique flavor combinations,” says Amanda Topper, associate director of foodservice research at Mintel. “With the popularity of fusion cuisine, operators have the opportunity to incorporate international components to this dish. The pickled and spicy elements of nachos are primed for experimentation. Instead of pickled jalapeño, include kimchi, or use a gochujang hot sauce instead of salsa.”

Nachos offer a safe platform for global flavor discovery—and with that comes a premium upgrade, too. The excitement around modern nachos hails from the creative, sometimes daring flavor combinations that springboard from such a simple base. And underpinning that adventure is a shared experience of indulgence. “We hear so much about consumers’ interest in healthfulness, yet the majority of consumers we survey say they love restaurants that offer ‘over-the-top’ menu items,” says



Fried Chicken Nachos fit seamlessly onto Honey Butter’s menu in Chicago, featuring fried chicken, pimento cheese, tortilla chips, lime crema, corn pico de gallo and candied jalapeño.

Sharon Olson, executive director of Culinary Visions Panel. “There is no denying the excitement of sharing something that is just a little bit wicked when dining out.”

Maneet Chauhan, chef-owner of Chauhan Ale & Masala House in Nashville, Tenn., makes Indian flavors less intimidating with Lamb Keema Papadi Nachos, layering spicy lamb keema, papadi chips, tamarind chutney, Provel cheese and cucumber-tomato kachumbar.

Bollywood Theater in Portland, Ore., offers a nacho dish every night on its menu. One is Chaat and ‘Cho, inspired by an Indian street snack, starring a base of wheat-and-nigella-seed crackers with boiled potatoes, tomatoes, black chickpeas, sev (tiny fried chickpea noodles), yogurt, green chutney and tamarind chutney. At Komodo in Los Angeles, an Asian fusion concept, the Kimchi Nachos feature fried corn tortillas, cheese, Sriracha aioli, kimchi, chicken and bacon. “It’s our version of the entire food pyramid in one bite,” says Erwin Tjahyadi, executive chef. “Our nachos are wonderfully messy, spicy and full of flavor.”

Five in Fresno, Calif., menus Tuscan Nachos: fried wonton chips, spicy Sicilian sausage, two cheeses, Alfredo sauce, sour cream, avocado, pico de gallo and cilantro.

Edward Lee, chef-owner of Succotash in National Harbor, Md., and 610 Magnolia in Louisville, Ky., wanted to create a craveable nachos dish that reflected the big flavors he's known for. His Gochujang Chili Cheese Nachos fuse Korean flavor into a Tex-Mex classic. He simmers beef chili in beer and chipotle infused with gochujang, then smothers tortilla chips with it. He tops that with cheddar, Serrano peppers and sour cream spiked with more gochujang. "I tested this a bunch of times until I landed on that balance of fermented flavors that's not just about spice," says Lee. "Nachos are a great dish to play with, and when you hit on the right combination of flavors and textures, they're addictive."

Much like innovation around burgers, pizza and sandwiches, nachos offer a multitude of components. When chefs tinker with them in just the right way, it's magic. "With the possibilities unlocking as we experiment with flavors and textures," says Robert Danhi, "2017 is definitely the year for nachos as a carrier."