

The Food Connection

By Carol Harvie Yamaguchi

Two current trends in the restaurant industry that are gradually catching on in Canada and the U.S. are the communal table and the do-it-yourself meal. Both of these concepts have been around for decades in Asia and Europe; however in North America, these particular dining styles are just beginning to take off.

A restaurant with a communal table is a busy, lively place with an inviting domestic feel to it. Everyone is welcome and everyone is equal. There is no discrimination against the single diner or for the customer with a big wallet. Diners do not require a reservation or a partner or group to dine out. They can walk in off the street and feel comfortable sitting at an empty spot at a table full of strangers. No more feeling like a loser when the waiter leads you to an 'out of the way' table for two and then pointedly removes the second set of silverware. In this new democratic concept of the communal table, a solo diner can anticipate a meal and perhaps some conversation, some networking, or at the very least, some social exchange over the course of the evening.

From the restaurant's point of view, the shared table can be a lucrative draw. Single diners without reservations don't mind lining up when presented with the opportunity of not eating alone. A larger client base is developed since the solo diner can be a single looking for a soul mate, a widowed or a divorced person looking for some company, a career person needing a quick meal, or a tourist traveling alone who wants to sample the local cuisine. 'Turn over' will be higher at this table than the smaller tables for couples or groups. In general, a new dynamic is created in the restaurant that in turn attracts more customers since there is an added dimension of busy activity, noise and excitement.

Another concept that seems to be increasing in popularity is meal assembly or the do-it-yourself meal. Asian and European cuisine has been offering this style of dining for a long time: Chinese hot pot allows diners to cook their meal themselves as does Japanese Shabu Shabu or Sukiyaki. Korean Bilgogee or Bossom are other examples as are Swiss Fondue, Beef Bourignon, and Raclette. Offering meal assembly choice to the diner provides an added dimension to dining out. Since the chef has more or less done all the prep work, the diners are able to enjoy putting all the elements together. In this 'hands on' approach to eating out, the client feels an added satisfaction and connection with the dining experience.

On a recent trip to Japan, my husband and I experienced this concept of meal assembly at its most extreme: a popular fish restaurant in Tokyo offered fishing rods and bait to its customers. After the customers reeled in their fish from a small pond, they then informed the chef of the desired method of cooking as well as their choice of starches, vegetables side dishes and sauces. Another restaurant on the coast, south of Osaka, combined a marketplace experience with a do-it-yourself grilled meal. From a mouthwatering assortment of fresh fish, shellfish, meat, vegetables and sauces, the customers could make

their choices which they then carried back to tables, outfitted with grills and equipment, to cook as they wished. On a more sophisticated level, high end restaurants in Tokyo's fashionable shopping area, offered 'mix and match' menus or else served the ingredients for interesting appetizers and desserts that could then be assembled by the diners.

Both concepts, meal assembly and the shared table, seem to be a desire to recreate the ambiance and comfort of the traditional family meal where everyone is welcome, where food is shared and prepared in a 'hands on' fashion, and where a social connection along with a full belly is the desired outcome.