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Whet your appetite

More munchies make the meal for today's diners

By **LINDA M. WIEDMAIER**

Even when ordering appetizers, Bob and Beverly Forrester have perfected the art of marital compromise.

The Savannah, Mo., couple - who dine at the Ground Round once a week - alternate requesting each of their favorites. One week they'll munch on Mrs. Forrester's choice, three-cheese potato skins. The next week, they'll order the combo basket called Pot O' Gold, Mr. Forrester's fave. They may follow up with a sandwich, or if they plan on steaks as an entree, they agree upon fried mushrooms to begin their meal. Or they'll skip all but their first course.

"A lot of times we'll order an appetizer and drinks and that seems to hit the spot," Mr. Forrester says.

That's definitely a trend observed by Herman Cain, National Restaurant Association president. Traditionally a starter course to stimulate the appetite, appetizers have "evolved into little meals in their own right," Mr. Cain says from his office in Washington, D.C. "More and more, we're seeing consumers forgo the entree selection and making a dinner out of appetizers instead."

That may be one reason people are ordering up a round or two of appetizers in recent years. According to "Consumer Reports on Eating Share Trends," released by the National Restaurant Association, the number of restaurant appetizer orders has been rising each year: 5 percent in 1994, 4 percent in 1993, and 1 percent in 1992.

Expanding menus

Some St. Joe restaurants have expanded their appetizer menus beyond nachos to keep up with consumer tastes. Ground Round's new menu devotes one of eight pages to its 22 appetizers - which range from traditional mozzarella cheese sticks to the trendy black bean ravioli. Prices go from \$1.95 to \$7.50.

The newest rave at D&G Restaurant are poppers - cream cheese-stuffed, batter-dipped jalapenos - one of 19 appetizer selections (\$4 to \$5) on the landmark hangout's menu. Jeff Clark, D&G manager, says the restaurant has recently started offering some appetizers for a limited time. Then, based on customer response, he decides if the munchies deserve a place on the permanent menu.

Catfish tenders recently passed the test, but a deep-fried pickle spear didn't even make the cut.

"That one sort of threw me," Mr. Clark says. "I don't think that will catch on, but you never know."

Gerald Cullens, Ground Round general manager, says that though he's noticed most people do order entrees along with their appetizers, some people will forgo the salads that come with the meals and

pay extra for a basket of appetizers.

"They want something warm that's fairly quick," he says.

Mr. Clark says "quick" is the operative word.

"A lot of people like appetizers because they're fast and they're something different," he says.
"They're food for people on the go."

Appetizers also appeal to those who like to linger in restaurants - whether they're out with friends for a multi-course meal, socializing over some drinks or watching a sports event.

Although buffalo wings sales have decreased since the Kansas City Chiefs lost their playoff game earlier this month, the spicy chicken wings are still the most popular appetizer on the bar side of the Ground Round, says Mr. Cullens, because they're "traditional munchies - cheap and filling."

The same could be said of D&G's bestseller - a basket of fries with cheese sauce.

Sampling the goods

Though there always will be a place for them as "traditional munchies," appetizers also offer a way to sample ethnic cuisines without committing to an entree. According to the National Restaurant Association's report "Ethnic Cuisines: A Profile," nearly 63 percent of consumers strongly agree with the statement: "I am more likely to try a dish I have never had before in an appetizer portion than as a larger portion."

Many people may have noticed, though, that nowadays an appetizer portion may be larger than some entrees.

Mr. Cullens says the reason his establishment began offering larger portions of all foods, including appetizers, was to compete with the all-you-can-eat food bars at some restaurants.

Seems appetizers have to keep up with Americans' growing appetites.

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Sampler platter

The following appetizing information is courtesy of the National Restaurant Association:

- Half of all menus at casual dining restaurants include a variation of nachos, making them the single most common appetizer item on menus of casual dining chains.
- In an analysis of 54 menus from 1994 and their counterparts from 1989, there has been a distinct shift in emphasis away from meat-based appetizers.
- Cheese-based appetizers made up 58 percent of all appetizers in 1994, up by 15 percent since 1989.
- Shellfish accounted for 27 percent and vegetable-based items for 15 percent of all appetizer selections in 1994.
- Eight out of 10 appetizers on a typical casual dining chain restaurant are items, such as finger foods, that lend themselves to sharing
- Restaurant patrons with an annual household income of \$40,000 or more tend to order more finger foods than those with lower incomes.
- Households with three or four family members tend to order shared appetizers more than restaurant patrons who live in smaller households.
- Patrons between ages 25 and 34 and those who are college-educated are more likely than average to order appetizers.

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