



Change: PART I

by Phyllis Ann Marshall

Change is good. You go first! Nothing is more certain than change, especially in the restaurant biz. Who would have thought we'd pay four dollars or more for a cuppa' Joe and have to learn a whole new language to place our order? At the same time the researchers tell us that more than 50% of the population drinks a cola for breakfast.

Some changes are fads like the carbo-loading and down-loading and others are trends like choosing to eat healthier, more fruits and vegetables. I remember when Tom Simms of Mimi's Café asked me if I thought "Blackened Redfish" was a fad or a trend. Remember when Paul Prudhomme's blackening spices were the new rage? I answered that I thought it was a trend and would stay awhile because of our increasing love of spice, but now in hindsight I see it was both. The Redfish, which is in short supply, was replaced in the equation by other fish. I am happy to say that I had fabulous Redfish in the French Quarter in New Orleans at Ralph Brennan's Redfish Grill so it is not extinct. The concept of "blackening" was expanded not only to other fish, but to meats and vegetables. The blackening spices broadened from peppers to include herbs and all kinds of ingredients as the technique expanded into "crusting" or adding sautéed crispness to our entrees. Pascal's delicious signature dish of Thyme Crusted Seabass is in the same genre.

Sometimes items appear new like the flavored Vodkas and sweet martinis now driving many lounges as a feature on display. See this upstairs at the Cannery, in the tiny intimate bar at Chakra, the jumbo bar at 3Thirty3 or the new "O Bar" at Mastro's Ocean Club. Though martinis are retro, I doubt that Dean Martin ever drank a chocolate martini or lemon drop. But this trend has made bars and lounges much more important and the need to upgrade bar food essential. The fad for small plates has emerged as both a bar/lounge expansion of the appetizer

menu as well as the make-up of an entire menu. These were originally an adaptation of tapas or early dining appetizers, a tradition in Spain. The old Broadway Department store at the South Coast Plaza had a tapas bar in the 80's. Restaurants have made small plates a popular and profitable shift from free happy hour food. AOC in Los Angeles made the small plate theme the rage as they adapted the menu in the style of a Chef's Dinner format. In Orange County the menu at Restaurant 162' at the Ritz-Carlton Laguna Niguel is comprised of small plates with plenty of opportunity for pairing with wines. Bayside has mastered the art of great small plates as bar food taking us from shrimp cocktail to elegant seafood martinis.

At times ingredients are recycled. What is it that they say? What goes around, comes around and there is nothing ever really new....Take our favorite comfort food; mashed potatoes. They are now smashed, or served flavored with garlic, horseradish, truffle oil, or the fascinating white chocolate with salmon at the Anaheim White House. Other changes just

evolve. For example, our love for sushi & sashimi made eating raw fish acceptable and when the Japanese crusted the ahi they created the "seared ahi", a must on many menus. Remember what we did to the classic Caesar salad? We added protein toppings; chicken/shrimp/ahi/etc., in response to its popularity and carbo downloading.

How do restaurants, especially independents, figure out what new ideas are best for their growth and how to stay relevant and manage change? The test is to look at your customer base and make sure it is not heavily dominated by an older, senior crowd or that you are missing the major demographic in your market. Constructive change is structured to broaden your market and offer options to your guests. Next month in "Change Part 2" we will discuss how to manage changes.

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