
FOR A GOOD TIME...

Economies of Scale

IN LEAN TIMES, SHARING FOOD, WINE AND EVEN DESSERTS IN RESTAURANTS CAN MAKE YOU FEEL LIKE YOU'RE LIVING LARGE

By Serena Bass

I have been cutting back a bit lately at restaurants. People are talking about their summer holidays, and Spring Break is in full swing as I write. The beach looms. For me, it will be the trusty gauzy, cover-all muumuu, Ava Gardner hat, and explanations about my son the dermatologist who, if I even had a pastel *whisper* of a suntan, would greet me with such a piteous look of confusion... Well, trust me, it

is something you want to avoid.

I know... back to the food. So I am not only cutting back on the quantity of food eaten, I am *delightedly* cutting back on money spent. I have many friends whom I have now indoctrinated into splitting a glass of wine, which is too austere for some (they can have their own and half of mine) but just the ticket for me. Then we will probably

each have a first course and share a main course. After our knives and forks are back on the plate and pushed together, we might feel the wickedness come upon us and split a dessert.

The Tart's a Spy

The other night, I was at Northern Spy, a restaurant in Manhattan, and I think would have left without any dessert at all, but this lemon tart was set down at the next

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TORKIL STADVIL

table with — the words can only be — a giant dollop of whipped cream perched on top. I had a vision of the cream falling in slow motion

from a silver spoon and landing like a ballerina *en pointe*, weightless (ha!) and delicate (not). My friend's and my eyes locked onto this

confection, and then we looked at each other, heads tilted questioningly, and with minutely raised eyebrows.

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TORKIL STAVDIL

We ordered the tart and asked for it to be cut into two in the kitchen. The waiter asked if I meant across the tart so one had nothing but point and the other had all the pastry. We looked at her mystified, as if she had just crawled out of the sea and had not yet mastered equality or geometry. In the end, our disdain having quite missed its mark, we

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both had a perfect, narrow arrow of tart with an only *slightly* reduced dollop. It was, as I said... perfect.

I am a big fan of the smaller portion. All that eating off a smaller plate to make the reduced quantity seem normal, as if observing your food through rose-colored spectacles, has worked. But now, having crushed the spectacles underfoot, I am ready to have the smaller amount of food but on a 10-inch plate rather than a measly seven-inch plate. I am a grown-up eater now and can savor these slimmer pickings without feeling cheated out of my full whack of dinner.

One might immediately think “tapas,” but I defy you to order tapas and not be

stunned when the bill arrives. I always spend minutes checking off all the items they have charged us for — saying, under my breath, “mussels with fennel,” “artichokes with aioli,” and “patatas bravas,” before reluctantly conceding that all those innocent little oval plates had apparently contained a king’s ransom of snacks. And since fully 50 percent of this ‘cutting-back’ exercise is geared toward going out more and spending less, tapas had better calm its costs down if it wants my MasterCard pushed across a wooden table.

The Right Stuff

The restaurant at Soho House in Manhattan had the

right idea for a while. There were normal desserts available, but the *pièce de no résistance* was the tray, presented with some excitement by the waiter, with a crowd of little glass votives filled with a variety of tiny composed desserts, all to be eaten with a chic little espresso spoon. You could have one, two, or three (or six, as sometimes happened).

I first saw this brilliant idea at Sketch in London. Sketch is a fancy club off Bond Street with a restaurant, a nightclub, and a tearoom on the ground floor. When I first went there, for tea, the walls were matte dove grey and the upholstery pale moss green — everything was muted and

sleek. The only spark of true color, like a bride's bouquet, came from the rows of breathtaking little desserts in clear glasses on parade on an I. M. Pei-inspired glass counter. Each container revealed strata of mousse (coffee, chocolate, lemon), cream (clotted), custard (rose- or verbena-scented), cake (vanilla, almond, orange), and summer fruits in every shade of jelly; tiny trifles, all with a divine floral addition. A fresh violet, a crystallized mint leaf, a rose petal, or angelica flower. They reminded me of Fabergé eggs, so complicated and so painstakingly put together.

I have made versions of these and played with the ingredients. My opinion is

that not only do you need variety, you need texture. So one of my layers always includes something crunchy.

Try this little beauty: ganache made from a dark hazelnut Ritter bar on the base of a little glass, vanilla panna cotta, a teaspoon of minced stem ginger, a raspberry flood scented with rosewater, then a drained lychee. I reached for a bunch of fresh mint, but it had totally frozen in my *not-state-of-the-art* refrigerator. Please add a mint leaf in your mind. If you want to make crystallized flowers and leaves, Essortment.com gives good instructions.

Questions or comments?

Write to Serena: [sbass 'at'](mailto:sbass@nomadeditions.com)

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HAZELNUT GANACHE

- One 3.5 ounce bar Ritter dark chocolate with hazelnuts
- ½ cup heavy cream

1. Break the chocolate into squares and put in a small pan with the cream.

2. Set the pan over low heat and, shaking the pan occasionally, wait till the chocolate is soft, then stir to make ganache.

3. Spoon two tablespoon of ganache into each glass, dividing the whole hazelnuts appropriately. Set aside either in the fridge or

freezer, or just on the countertop, till the chocolate has set.

PANNA COTTA WITH STEM GINGER

Makes 12-14 small individual cups.

- 1 vanilla bean
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 2 cups heavy cream
- 1 cup (8 ounces) sour cream
- 1 1/2 teaspoons Knox powdered gelatin (one individual packet is 2 1/2 teaspoons)
- 1/4 cup minced stem ginger (optional)
- 12 peeled and seeded lychees
- Bunch of mint

1. To make vanilla sugar,

split the vanilla bean lengthwise with a sharp knife. Gently scrape out the seeds (which look like a sticky black paste) with the back of the knife, wipe the seeds into the sugar, and rub with your fingertips to mix into the sugar.

2. Put 1/2 cup of cream in a small saucepan, sprinkle on the gelatin in a thin layer, and set aside to soften for 10 minutes.

3. Put 1 1/2 cups of cream, the vanilla sugar, and the empty vanilla pod in a small saucepan over low heat, stirring a few times to melt the sugar. When little bubbles appear around the edge of the cream, remove from the heat and leave to

infuse for 10 minutes, then remove the vanilla pod, rinse and dry the pod and store it in sugar to make vanilla sugar for future use.

4. Put the gelatin pan over low heat and stir, scraping the edges with a heatproof rubber spatula. When the gelatin is completely melted, pour into the warm cream and stir to mix then strain into a medium bowl.

5. Add the sour cream and whisk to smoothly blend. Stir gently every now and then (no more whisking) until the mixture starts to become syrupy. Carefully pour 1/3 cup panna cotta onto the chocolate in each glass, scatter on a little minced ginger and leave

uncovered in the fridge. Once set, cover and leave overnight.

6. Just before serving, pour on the raspberry flood (recipe follows), add a lychee, and tuck in a mint leaf next to it.

RASPBERRY FLOOD

- One 12-ounce packet of frozen raspberries in syrup, defrosted
- 1/2 - 1 teaspoon rose flower water

1. Purée the raspberries and rose flower water, ideally in a food processor, for at least 2 minutes.

2. Strain through a fine sieve using a wire whisk to

encourage the purée through. Scrape the underside of the sieve to get all the purée.

3. Pour 1 to 1/2 tablespoons of purée on top of the panna cotta, depending on the size of your glass. There should be a 1/4-inch-thick layer. 🍷