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GOOD BUSINESS in Tough Times:



Lobster on the Menu Proves a Big Customer Draw

By Thom Householder

The current economic situation is forcing restaurants to be even more creative in the way they operate. Ideas to cut costs, woo customers, and increase revenue are more prized than ever, and restaurants are turning to new and creative ways to accomplish these goals.

Some restaurants, however, are relying on a time-tested idea to drive traffic: featuring lobster on the menu. It may seem coun-

terintuitive to feature a premium product that customers undoubtedly associate with luxury, but that's exactly what customers may look for when they dine out.

terintuitive to feature a premium product that creates excitement and really stands out when it's featured. Featuring lobster is a great way to be noticed in a crowded, competitive market.

from other menu items by keeping lobster prices high."

But savvy restaurateurs also understand that there's a long-term benefit to featuring a product now that can—and does—cultivate future customers, both by turning new customers into repeat customers and strengthening the relationship between the restaurant and current customers.

That's something that Steve DiMillo, manager of DiMillo's Floating Restaurant



Lobster photo provided by Maine Lobster Council. Food photos by Maine Lobster Council and Terrence McCarthy

terintuitive to feature a premium product that customers undoubtedly associate with luxury, but that's exactly what customers may look for when they dine out.

"Maine lobster is one of the few menu items that instantly enhances the reputation of a restaurant when it's on the menu," notes Dane Somers, Executive Director of

lines: Smart restaurateurs can offer diners exceptional values while maintaining healthy margins.

However some restaurateurs according to Tim Fasshauer with Supreme Lobster and Seafood Company in Villa Park, IL, "are trying to make up for lost revenue

in Portland, Maine, understands well. His family's restaurant has been satisfying diners on Portland's waterfront since 1982, and lobster has played a big part in the restaurant's success.

"Lobster excites people and evokes a sense

of quality,” says DiMillo. “We feature lobster in a number of traditional ways, and use every last bit of the lobster for multiple menu items. There’s plenty of value in it, and we’ve learned that important business lesson over and over through the years.”

Aside from attracting customers, lobster is a versatile product that delivers plenty of uses. The Maine Lobster Association, for example, features nearly five hundred recipes on its Web site, www.lobsterfrommaine.com. The image of a steamed lobster is instantly recognizable, but customers respond positively to lobster no matter how it’s presented, Somers notes

For example, DiMillo’s menu features traditional lobster dishes—steamed whole lobster and a lobster roll—but also a lobster club sandwich and lobster stew. Lobster for the roll, club sandwich and

“It gives customers the treat they want when they dine out.”

Cutino adds that lobster thermidor was one of the first dishes he learned to cook, and lobster has always one of his favorite ingredients to showcase. In particular, he cites the success of promoting lobster specials on Sunday and Monday, traditionally two of the slowest nights in the industry, as well as the popularity of a house specialty, lobster pasta. The lobster pasta is a value item that combines lobster claw and knuckle meat in a housemade alfredo sauce. It’s also a flexible dish that can take advantage of whole lobsters not sold earlier in the week.

Per-person ticket averages also rise when lobster is ordered, according to Cutino. “We know that people are likely to enjoy appetizers, wines, and even desserts when they make lobster their

entrée,” he says. “It’s good for diners, because they’re in a good mood and leave having had a great time, and it’s good for us because we sell more items. Everybody wins.”

Looking Ahead

As the industry faces some of its stiffest challenges in quite some time, it’s clear that restaurant own-

ers must pay attention to every aspect of their business. The recipe for success has many ingredients. Attracting customers with offerings that stand out from the competition; and using products that provide versatility and value, and are instantly attractive to diners are two keys to success.

Maine lobster is one such product with a proven record, is familiar to chefs, and strikes a unique note in the minds of guests. In a time when every decision a restaurant makes has added importance, it’s invaluable to know about proven winners.

Thom Householder is a principal at Front Burner PR in Portland, Maine.



stew is steamed and picked in-house, and the shells are used to make the base for the stew.

Positive Feelings Nationwide

Even though New England is home to the lobster fishery, restaurants around the country make lobster an important part of their business strategy. Restaurateur Bert Cutino, who started The Sardine Factory over forty years ago in Monterey, California, has used lobster to drive business from day one.

“We’ve had a love affair with lobster for years, because it practically sells itself, can be used in a number of ways, and adds terrific value when it’s combined with other items on the menu,” he says.

