

Top trends in appetizers

Appetizers can be a great way to boost checks, but they have to stand out for customers to add them to their meals. The National Restaurant Association polled nearly 1,300 chefs for its What's Hot in 2015 survey and determined the top appetizer trends. Here are the five that rose to the top of the list, showcasing customers' desire for artisanal touches, adventuresome flavors and healthful options. **BY BRETT THORN**

1 Vegetarian appetizers

Even non-vegetarians realize that not everything they eat has to contain meat. Even if customers want animal protein in their main courses, chefs say they are looking for vegetarian appetizers, making them the most frequently cited appetizer trend for 2015. Expect to see more dishes like this Butternut Squash Bisque, right, with carrot and a touch of nutmeg that First Watch rolled out last fall.



FIRST WATCH

2 House-cured meats and charcuterie

Customers are increasingly drawn to restaurants that display craftsmanship with their food, and house-cured meats and charcuterie are the appetizer trend cited second most often by chefs. Chef Craig Deihl of Cypress in Charleston, S.C., has long made a wide variety of cured meats, which he serves in his fine-dining restaurant and his sandwich shop, Artisan Meat Share.



BRETT THORN

3 Ethnic and street food-inspired appetizers

If you order a main course that you end up not liking, your meal is ruined, but appetizers can be quickly tried and forgotten, making them an ideal course for experimentation. That's one reason why ethnic and street-food-inspired appetizers are the third most frequently cited appetizer trend, including dishes such as the street food-inspired tacos, left, at Pink Taco in Los Angeles.



PINK TACO

4 Seafood charcuterie

Seafood is hot. Consumers are looking to eat more healthfully, and with beef, chicken and pork prices rising in recent years, seafood has become more affordable by comparison. Chefs including Aaron Black of PB Catch Seafood & Raw Bar in Palm Beach, Fla., say they are increasingly making cold cuts from seafood, as shown below, helping to make seafood charcuterie the fourth most frequently cited appetizer trend.



PB CATCH SEAFOOD & RAW BAR

5 Amuses-bouches and bite-sized appetizers

Bite-sized appetizers and amuses-bouches — French for “mouth amusers” — are the fifth most frequently cited appetizer trend by chefs. Amuses-bouches are sometimes offered for free at high-end restaurants as a choice morsel to start off the meal. Bite-sized appetizers are more widespread and are ideal for sharing. Since they are small and generally low priced, they require little emotional, financial or caloric commitment from guests.

Bonefish Grill recently picked up on this trend with last year's addition of Mac + Cheese Bites, right, served with sweet chile sauce.

Meanwhile, Captain D's is working on “crab bites” — crab and other seafood with onions and vegetables — that company officials hope will promote incremental sales.



BONEFISH GRILL