



Pasta is a great opportunity for taking a basic dish upscale, as Bertucci's has done with its Baked Tortellini and Chicken Gratinati, featuring chicken, cream, ricotta, mozzarella, Romano and tomatoes tossed with tri-color tortellini and brick-oven-baked.

# The New VALUE PLATFORM

The latest challenge for operators is to deliver  
upscaled flavor at downscaled prices

BY PHIL DANIELS

There was a time when the commercial channel of the foodservice industry was strictly and clearly segmented. Quick-service's approach to patrons and menu development was very different than family-style, casual or upscale/fine-dining. But, in recent years, things started to evolve. Consumers began demanding "food frills" with their quick-service. The fast-casual segment grew rapidly in answer to that demand, on the proposition that patrons still wanted their food prepared quickly but with a higher level of quality and flavor.

Then came the recession of 2007 and new stresses for the foodservice industry. Consumers now demanded more value for their dollar than ever before but still were not ready to sacrifice quality.

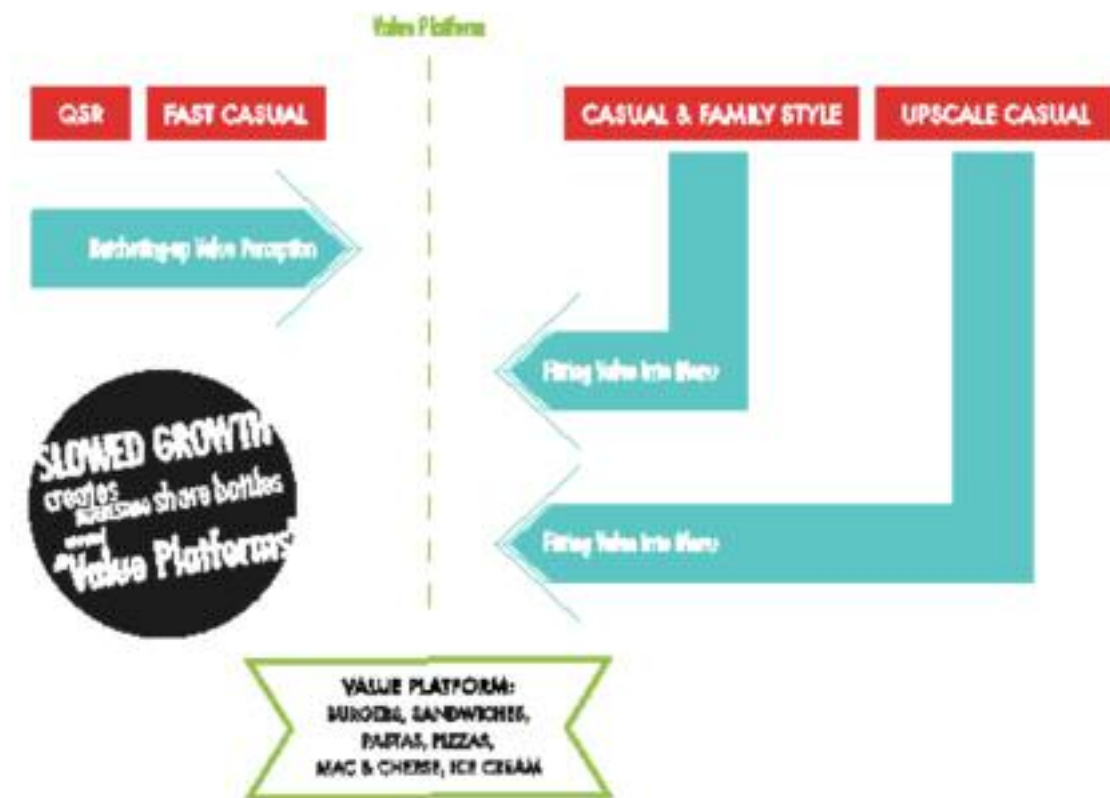
These changes in the foodservice-segment landscape have created an interesting phenomenon: Operators in all segments are moving toward an optimum value platform nestled between full-serve and quick-serve spectrums.

Operators seeking this new value platform are "upscaling the downscale" — either on their existing menus or by opening new locations under the brand umbrella, both efforts showcasing more-upscale culinary interpretations brought to life through downscale pantries.

At one end of the industry, casualization is a proven strategy in play. Leading high-end chefs are opening more-casual burger joints; others have gone mobile, utilizing food trucks to bring their culinary talents to a more mainstream audience while delivering maximum value.

Noted Chicago chef Michael Kornick of upscale MK restaurant fame partnered with David Morton to open DMK Burger Bar and the new Fish Bar, which offers a "clam-shack" atmosphere with most meals under \$10. Similarly, fellow Chicagoan Rick Bayless made news with the launch of the quick-serve Xoco, with a menu based on Mexico's

## EMERGENCE OF THE VALUE PLATFORM “Upscaling the Downscale”



most beloved street foods, much more humble than Topolobampo’s offerings.

At the other end of the spectrum, the quick-service segment is making upscale strides to satisfy its customers’ demands for more value without surrendering their constant quest for flavor. From this perspective, efforts are reversed: Operators are upgrading existing ingredients and menu items to bring a heightened value perception.

Fast-casual operators showcase high-end ingredients while quick-serve flexes its culinary muscles by tapping into more premium-branding strategies for enhanced quality; some food trucks are even going brick and mortar.

Within this new value model, any operator can be your competition, and “battle lines” are drawn somewhere between the fast-casual and casual-dining segments. Quick-serve and fast-casual operators are upping their flavor and quality game to add menu-item value — while still offering fast service at an affordable price point. Meanwhile, full-service operations are

using their more-diverse pantries to give patrons more affordable options while still delivering on their individual brand promises.

Several base menu items are emerging as the culinary cornerstones of this new value model: Burgers, sandwiches, pasta, pizza and ice cream all represent opportunities for operators of all segments to add value and quality through upscaled or casualized tactics.

These platforms offer the “menu elasticity” to reside on any menu, from QSR to fine dining, without confusing consumers. These items make customers feel comfortable with your menu and thus are the natural platform for upgrades through culinary experimentation and enhanced quality and value.

### A PLATFORM OF PIZZA

Premiumization of a well-known item is the starting point for a value platform. Unexpected combinations, unique sauces, premium proteins and artisan cheeses, as well as double-zero flour and other blends, make the experience memorable. From coast to

# FULL-SERVICE FLAVOR, Drive-Thru Value

These days, getting more for less is an undeniable trend. That premise led Checkers/Rally's Drive-in Restaurants to a product launch that merges full-service expectations of flavor and variety with the value and convenience of limited-service.

"It's time to blur the line between the sit-down sensibilities of flavor, choice and culinary substance with the convenience and value of the drive-thru format," says Ryan Joy, senior director of R&D for Tampa-based Checkers/Rally's.

One way that inspiration came to life was in its recently launched Flavor Built Burgers — a line of six customizable burgers built using casual-dining flavor standards. The chain's goal was to create a notable offering of premium ingredients and inventive flavor choices not previously available from a quick-serve concept — but for a fraction of the cost of full-service burgers. (The Flavor Built line is priced at \$3.95 to \$4.95.)

Mindful of cost realities, the line focused on alternative sources of flavor that were as over-the-top as they were affordable: big, beefy, grilled portobello mushrooms for the Shroom & Swiss Burger, real BBQ rub for the Backwoods Burger, an abundance of real bacon as the foundation flavor for the Baconzilla Burger, garlic-Parmesan and seasoned grilled onions atop the A.1. Prime Time Burger.

And Checkers/Rally's found that a strategy built on big flavor has big rewards: One in 10 orders at the drive-thru is for the new Flavor Built line — with a 174 percent increase in profitability on all checks that include the Flavor Built offering.

"Ours is an audience that knows what they want; they're not going to settle," says Joy. "They may not have a lot of money, but they know what's good."

This menu-development approach would find itself at home in the casual-dining sector.

Checkers/Rally's has proved that partnering value with flavor is a strategy for the times.

Checkers/Rally's Flavor Built Burger line features six "over-the-top," customizable burgers, including the Baconzilla, loaded with real bacon.



coast, operators have been taking advantage of the pizza occasion for a long time. But California Pizza Kitchen was probably the first chain to capitalize on the opportunity, and continues to excel in this category. Today, CPK pizza offerings range from Pear and Gorgonzola to Thai Chicken to Roasted Artichoke and Spinach.

Within its "Pure Pizza Revolution" mission, Laguna Beach, Calif.-based zpizza is another brand based on premium pizza, touting ingredients like organic wheat and tomato sauce, Wisconsin mozzarella and additive-free sausage, along with exotic upgrades like cremini mushrooms and truffle oil. Its Provence pizza features organic tomato sauce, homemade roasted-garlic sauce, mozzarella, artichoke hearts, capers, tomatoes and basil — signature ingredients that elevate the platform and reinforce the brand's mission.

## BUILDING BETTER BURGERS

Once, the burger wars were fought among the nation's largest fast-food chains, but now, nearly everybody is in the burger battle. Burgers are leading the way as the key battleground platform, and for good reason: The burger is a perfect vehicle for premiumization, with better meat grinds, artisan cheeses and breads, premium bacon or secondary meats like sliced prime rib and signature condiments and quality toppings.

A good example of this is the recent menu engineering done by Checkers/Rally's Drive-In Restaurants, a Tampa-based burger chain with more than 800 units. Its introduction of the Flavor Built Burgers menu concept showcases a customizable burger platform that delivers bold, indulgent flavors through fresh, premium ingredients found normally only in a full-serve, casual-dining segment.

Red Robin's popular Gourmet Burger and Ram Restaurants' successful BurgerRama promotion are two more examples, both showcasing upscale burger builds with a wide offering of toppings, cheeses, garnishes and spreads.

## SANDWICHES GO CENTER STAGE

A few years ago, one might not have assumed that Subway would become the leading QSR chain, jumping out in front of McDonald's in number of units. Sandwiches are a prime platform for adding value — and their portability will always be an advantage. They don't have to be revolutionary or trendy; they just have to deliver a level of craveability.

The boom in grilled-cheese sandwiches as a value platform is a perfect example of “upscaling the downscale” in all segments of foodservice. At upscale Campinile in Los Angeles, chef Mark Peel's weekly “Grilled Cheese Night” offers a rotation of selections that appeal to weeknight diners, but still fetch upwards of \$18 a sandwich. Creative melts include the Sevillana, with serrano ham, fresh figs, manchego and honey, and a Fresh Burrata with cherry tomatoes, prosciutto, pine nuts and salsa verde. And, an indicator of its downscale, casual appeal, grilled cheese is the core for a number of food-truck operators, but even at street level, these builds are far from basic.

## PASTA UP AND DOWN SEGMENTS

Simple and inexpensive, pasta offers a blank canvas for chefs of all segments to experiment with and upgrade, from the \$3.99 Three-Cheese Baked Ravioli at quick-serve chain Fazoli's to the \$29 Sea Urchin Raviolini with olive oil, garlic, pepperoncini and tomato ragu at SD26 in New York City. Building on a base of pasta, menu developers can offer any degree of upgrades.

Last fall, Bertucci's launched a new menu with brick-oven-baked pasta dishes, including a multigrain penne with Bolognese sauce and chicken sausage, topped with provolone. Small but significant ingredient adjustments and modifications to technique bring a rustic, homemade appeal to the pasta dishes served in this casual-dining setting.

The classic mac 'n cheese has long been a kids' menu offering at chains but had been notable for a lack of variation and inspiration. In the last few years, however, this comfort favorite has seen a profound transformation into a decadent bowl of opportunity.

From operators like the Southern Mac & Cheese Truck in Chicago (where customers

line up for such varieties as Roasted Artichoke, Spinach and Goat Cheese Fondue or Black Truffle, Crab and White Cheddar) to a national fast-casual chain like Noodles & Company, which recently added Truffle Macaroni with Baby Portobellos, the key to innovation with this versatile platform industry-wide is in the selection of creative flavor-pairings, artisan cheeses and added ingredients with an unexpected twist.

## ICE CREAM TAKES A CULINARY SPIN

Ice cream is another culinary comfort that chefs are taking to the next level, in all segments. Ice cream has always offered a sense of familiarity and comfort; now, new adaptations emphasize flavor and ingredients.

In independent restaurants and ice cream shops, sweet and savory flavors like salted caramel, herbs, olives, olive oil and curry are all being sampled.

In the mainstream, high-volume ice cream market, innovative new flavors are popping up to meet this increased demand, but their cues are taken from items consumers already love, like baked treats and nostalgic desserts. In this area, ice cream flavors include French Toast, Banana Cream Pie, Honey Fig and Bread Pudding. But, as we've seen before, a simple, no-frills base is the starting point. From there the options are truly endless.

On all parts of the menu, the value platform model is all about adding value up and down the chain in commercial foodservice. For QSR and fast-casual operators, it involves taking culinary inspiration from casual and fine-dining segments and delivering it back to consumers within a limited-service format.

For full-service segments, value means developing items to attract consumers with high culinary imagination but at a price point that lets them experience your “brand” at a more affordable overall cost. ☺

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