

| **BY ANNELISE KELLY** | A server in crisp black-and-whites rolls a cart to a six-top. Reaching for a black, pebbly-skinned avocado, she deftly halves it with a single stroke and displays the flawless green interior. After dicing it in the skin and scooping it into a molcajete, she blends in the remaining ingredients according to the customers' preference. Voila! A fresh, custom-seasoned dish, and guests who feel indulged.

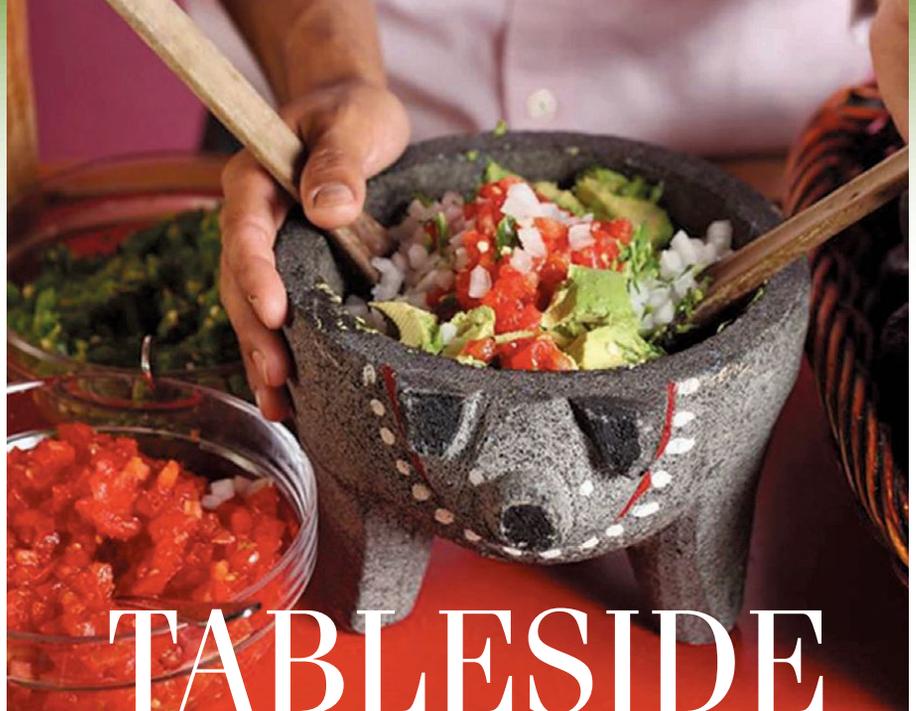
From fine dining concepts like Chicago-based Revolución Mexican Steakhouse to order-at-the-counter newcomer Tamale Boy in Portland, Ore., Mexican and Latin restaurant concepts at all price points are embracing tableside guacamole as a loyalty-building money-maker that increases appetizer sales.

Technomic's 2015 Starters, Small Plates and Sides Consumer Trend Report identifies "premiumization" as a trend, noting that appetizers are "increasingly showcasing high quality ingredients and preparation methods, such as tableside mixing of guacamole...and one in three Millennials agree that appetizers prepared tableside are higher in quality."

A tableside guacamole program is an investment, requiring equipment, time and commitment to training. It earns payoffs in spectacle, customer engagement, freshness and sales.

LEADERS OF THE PACK

Rosa Mexicano is a pioneer in tableside guacamole. Founder Josefina Howard encountered guacamole being made in the traditional molcajete while visiting Mexico and brought the custom to her New York City restaurant, according to



TABLESIDE Guacamole

the restaurant's regional executive chef, Joseph Quintana.

Rosa Mexicano utilizes up to six custom-made carts for service. Some restaurants rely on trays instead, and at Tamale Boy in Portland, where patrons order at the counter, the molcajete is loaded in the kitchen. "Everything is in it, so the servers just bring it to the table and mix," says Tamale Boy chef Abel Hernandez.

Some operators load the cart with rigorously inspected whole avocados, while some pre-slice them in the kitchen to ensure avocado perfection. At Revolución Mexican Steakhouse, they rely on whole fruit. Jorge "Tony" Estrada, owner and director of operations, emphasizes that his chefs "are trained to physically inspect every avocado for quality" during daily line checks.

Quintana compares the process to presenting wine. "Like a sommelier shows you the bottle, we show you the avocado when we open it. And if we feel it's not presentable, we do not show it and we cut another one."

GUAC TRAINING 101

Operators agree that judging avocado ripeness by touch is easily mastered with experience. The fruit should yield slightly to gentle pressure without feeling mushy or displaying gaps between the skin and the flesh, both signs of an overripe specimen. But because tableside guacamole requires such a personal touch, instruction is crucial.

"We train server assistants for at least a good four to five days in just guacamole making. It is one of our top, top selling items on the menu," says Quintana.

At Revolución, one server is dedicated to the task. "It's usually just one day of training. We'll sell about 30 to 40 [orders of] guacamole so they get the hang of it," Estrada says.

SO IS THE INVESTMENT WORTH THE PAYOFF?

"It's a lot of time and a lot of work but it's definitely worth it to give the customers that experience," Estrada says.

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shows the guacamole is really being made from scratch. And it’s a huge profit center,” adds Mark Garcia, director of food service marketing for Avocados from Mexico.

Quintana agrees. “People are amazed and thrilled by the show and anything that’s done fresh in front of a guest is really appealing to the eye.”

It also breeds loyalty. “The main reason we have tableside guacamole at Tamale Boy is because it’s very traditional and it’s something our guests really love,” says Hernandez.

“A lot of our operators tell us their customers come especially for the tableside guacamole,” reports Garcia. “It’s such a hit. Everybody at the table gets to participate—it makes guests feel special. Further, we definitely find that operators who have the full-blown guacamole cart really offer a unique appeal compared with just bringing a tray to the table.”

Revolución patrons certainly love their guacamole custom-made. “Part of the training is to wait, like when presenting a bottle of wine,” says Estrada. “The customer tastes it. If they want to add something or make it different, we fix it right then. The cart is not removed until the customer approves the flavor.”

A SIGNATURE TOUCH

Creating guacamole tableside invites rich opportunities for signature touches and seasonal specialties.

Revolución uses a house-made avocado oil, infused with chiles and spices, while Garcia proposes adding crawfish in New Orleans or crab in Maryland when in season.

Revolución had a hit with its roasted tomatilla salsa topped with spiced, toasted pepitas and queso fresco. One colorful version garnished with pomegranate seeds and queso fresco honors La Bandera—the Mexican flag. For a striking presentation, guacamole and ceviche are layered in a removable ring.

Quintana says “we’ve done so many variations. We’ll do a fall recipe with pomegranates and pumpkin seeds. We’ll do it with blue cheese, with roasted butternut squash, with crab meat. We also do guacamole con frutas, with mangoes, pineapples and pomegranate seeds.”

Cheeses, salsas, roasted vegetables and the fresh fruits of spring, summer and fall all find a tasty temporary place on the guacamole cart. Instead of incurring expensive menu rewrites, managers rely on their well-trained staff to explain

current options.

A tableside guacamole program is an ambitious but rewarding undertaking.

As Garcia concludes, “If a restaurant operator is not going to invest in proper training or the tools to make a successful program happen they shouldn’t do it. You’re able to charge a premium and offer your guests something they truly enjoy, but staff have to have proper training, and the right tools to do a proper presentation. Because it is such a premium offering, you don’t want to cheapen it.”

See a video of Rosa Mexicano’s tableside guacamole process, featuring Joe Quintana, at <http://elrestaurante.com/rosa-guac/>

Annelise Kelly, *el Restaurante’s* new contributing writer, is a freelance writer based in Portland, Oregon. Writing about food is one of her specialties. Watch for more from Kelly in future issues of *el Restaurante*.

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