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## STYLE

# Can the Tasting Menu Survive a Possible Recession?

Fine-dining restaurants are slashing courses from prix-fixe offerings to appeal to diners who want to spend less

*By Amber Gibson*

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North Carolina restaurant Herons shortened their eight-course tasting menu to five courses and added an a la carte option. PHOTO: ANNA ROUTH BARZIN

The 14-course tasting menu at Michelin-starred Reverie in Washington, D.C., is known for pristinely plated Atlantic seafood. At \$245, the egg yolk sauce on the risotto tastes like liquid gold and dessert comes dotted with dollops of caviar.

None of this mattered on Wednesdays and Thursdays when owner Johnny Spero was having trouble filling tables. So he did what many chefs would find unthinkable: He slashed the menu by four courses midweek and dropped the price to \$180.

It worked. Spero immediately saw a more crowded restaurant. “The goal is to give guests flexibility without compromising the quality of service,” he says.

Across the U.S. and internationally, fine dining is changing its approach to tasting menus. Gone are the days of 18-course menus unfurling like a three-act opera over three-plus hours.

Now you can find three- and four-course prix-fixe menus for less than \$200. Some restaurants have even dismantled their tasting menus and are allowing diners to order a la carte from them.

Chefs say they are facing struggles bringing in diners, rising food costs and worries about a looming recession. Diners are looking to spend less, or at least have the option to. Diners have also said that they don’t want to be there for hours, but still want to enjoy haute cuisine.

There will always be renegade chefs. Alchemist’s Rasmus Munk in Copenhagen serves up to 50 “impressions,” rather than courses, in what is billed as an experience of a lifetime, for about \$800. Spanish chef Aitor Zabala in West Hollywood charges \$645 for his tasting menu and nonalcoholic drink pairings (\$720 with wine pairings) at Somni.

But chefs in the mold of Ralph Fiennes in “The Menu,” a dark comedy satirizing fine dining, are few and far between. Diners are also becoming less willing to blindly surrender to a chef’s whims.



San Francisco open-fire restaurant Osito launched a four-course, midweek prix fixe menu, and reconfigured the dining room from a 26-seat communal table to 14 separate tables with 37 seats.

PHOTO: MOLLY DECOUDREAU

People “only want the more theatrical narrative of a lengthy tasting menu on rare occasions,” says William Drew, director of content at 50 Best, which ranks top restaurants, bars and hotels worldwide.

Diners say that they tend to splurge on lengthier menus when traveling because it feels more like a special occasion, but they don’t want double-digit courses on an average Thursday at home.

“I love long, crazy tasting menus and want to eat all of the most creative dishes a chef can make,” says Chicago-based diner and content creator Seth Bernstein. “But tasting menus are expensive and a lot of food, so I appreciate having an a la carte option or shorter tasting menu that allows me to more frequently eat at restaurants I love.”

## **Boosting slow periods**

Deployed strategically, shorter and less expensive menus can entice diners during slower days and broaden a restaurant’s reach.

In Chicago over the last few weeks, steak omakase spot Bonyeon and fine-dining restaurant Atelier launched abbreviated tasting menus. In London, for lunch, The Clove Club shortened its tasting menu by five courses.

In San Francisco, chef and owner Seth Stowaway of open-fire restaurant Osito launched a four-course, midweek prix fixe menu last year, and reconfigured the dining room from a 26-seat communal table to 14 separate tables with 37 seats.

Because of these changes, Stowaway says the restaurant has seen a 20% increase in revenue for the first quarter of this year. “It still feels a little early for the restaurant to determine the full impact,” he says, “but it’s trending towards very successful.”

In an effort to boost business, even the most elegant of restaurants are also now allowing their tasting menus to be ordered a la carte, like at international-fusion restaurant Mugen in Honolulu, La Palme d’Or at Hôtel Martinez in Cannes, France and Neapolitan-inspired Estro in Hong Kong.



Hong Kong restaurant Estro now offers diners any single dish they want off the tasting menu without having to order all of it. PHOTO: NICHOLAS WONG SIXTEEN PHOTOGRAPHY

Previously Estro's chef Antimo Maria Merone only offered a tasting menu and no a la carte dishes. But now diners can have any single dish they want off the tasting menu—from savory dishes to desserts—without having to order all of it.

In the five months after he made this change, Merone says that just 10% of diners elect for the a la carte menu, translating to 12% of total revenue. He expected the number to be higher but says it's still been helpful in increasing visits from regular customers and attracting new diners.

At the Umstead Hotel and Spa in Cary, N.C., too many guests were crowding into the casual lounge while not enough were signing up for the eight-course tasting menu at the more-elegant Herons.

So executive chef Steven Greene shortened Herons's menu to five courses and added an a la carte option. While abandoning his eight-course tasting menu initially "crushed" him, Greene acquiesced, recognizing that this was best for

the hotel. With fewer courses, he pours extra creativity into several canapés inspired by micro-seasons at the restaurant’s farm.

## Sustainable and profitable

Chicago’s newest Michelin-starred restaurant, Cariño, started using leftovers from its main tasting menu for a new late-night taco omakase last year in an effort to reduce waste and maximize revenue. The \$125 taco omakase is eight courses with two rounds of cocktails, compared with the \$200 main tasting menu that runs between 14 and 16 courses and doesn’t include drinks.



Cariño started using leftovers from its main tasting menu for a new late-night taco omakase. PHOTO: KELLY SANDOS

“The tasting menu results in a lot of leftover ingredient scraps,” executive chef and owner Norman Fenton says. “I wanted to maximize the restaurant’s overall profits by using up those scraps.”

Fenton says that the taco omakase has a higher profit margin than the tasting menu, since ingredient cost is lower. It brings in around \$30,000 a month in revenue, and the counter seats, where diners are face-to-face with the kitchen, sell out especially quickly.

Bernstein, the Chicago content creator, has dined at Cariño for both the regular dinner and taco omakase, and appreciates Fenton’s ingenuity. “It’s an opportunity to eat some very special tacos made by an incredible chef at a really

good price,” he says. “These are some of my favorite tacos in Chicago, so I guess that means I love scraps.”

## Perhaps shorter isn’t cheaper after all

These shorter offerings may cost less and cater to diners who want lower prices, but they often don’t result in diners actually spending less, chefs say.

At Osito Restaurant in San Francisco, diners who order the shorter tasting menu are spending more on beverages and are open to after-dinner drinks, Stowaway says. “Somewhat frequently, the checks end up being almost as much as the full tasting menu.”



When diners at Copenhagen restaurant The Samuel order its new a la carte options, chef Jonathan Berntsen finds that they ‘will in turn spend a bit more money on a nice bottle of wine,’ he says, or supplements such as truffles or caviar. PHOTO: MTJ:STUDIO

In Copenhagen, chef Jonathan Berntsen added a la carte options at the intimate and luxurious The Samuel, which used to only serve a tasting menu, and found that guests who order a la carte “will in turn spend a bit more money on a nice bottle of wine,” he says, or supplements such as truffles or caviar.

“I love seeing a la carte options on a menu to give myself more flexibility and to save a little extra money for champagne,” says Seattle-based diner Emily Austin. “Girl math!”

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