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A Longtime Power Spot Eyes a Wider Audience

Michael's, lunchroom to the media elite, is adding small plates and variety to the menu.

By JEFF GORDINIER

Tom Brokaw was in the other day. So was Mehmet Oz, the celebrity doctor. "And some other people that shall remain nameless because I don't want to give them any press," said Esther Newberg, the influential literary agent.

She was speaking of Michael's, the breezily elegant restaurant near the corner of Fifth Avenue and West 55th Street that has, for nearly a quarter of a century, drawn a daily gathering of people who are famous for conducting the symphony of words and images that we refer to as "media." Ms. Newberg had just been there for lunch with Ina Garten, the cookbook author and TV star. On any given afternoon, most of the surrounding tables are occupied by editors, executives, authors, agents and news anchors.

They get a warm welcome at the door. They catch up with each other. And a lot of them order the same dishes with steady regularity.

For Ms. Newberg, the repast might involve the Nantucket bay scallops, or half a Cobb salad. "Every once in a while, when life is hard, I'll have the hamburger, because it comes with a thousand French fries," she said.

Given that kind of fare, and its graying devotees, Michael's qualifies as a trend-immune institution. But on Wednesday, in a bid to attract some fresh faces, the restaurant will introduce new lunch and dinner menus that put more emphasis on the small plates that are now in vogue across the country.

If the power tables start passing around Korean tacos and duck-confit sliders, what does that say about the way America eats? Michael McCarty, the man whose name is on the Manhattan restaurant and its elder sibling in Southern California, answered this way: "People would rather go and have six bites of six different things than six bites of one thing," he said. "And that is something that I started really analyzing two years ago. The paradigm shift has occurred, and this is the way that people want to do it."

Mr. McCarty is 59 and has two children in their 20s. Watching their dining habits, he couldn't help noticing that something different was afoot. "They and all of their peers are extremely knowledgeable about

food," he said. "They're over the top. It's a cultural thing." And that voracious appetite for food, and for information about food, means that a night out often feels like a restless, table-hopping quest for flavor.

"These kids, I can't believe it, they'll wait two hours in line to go to a restaurant," Mr. McCarty went on. "But they can amuse themselves with their devices. And the timing — they don't sit down for an hour and a half for dinner, because they do three or four things in a night. They're bored with two tastes. They need to have five or six."

Mr. McCarty has seen his vintage clientele gradually adapt to that kaleidoscopic mode of dining, too. In response, he and his team revamped the menu at their Santa Monica restaurant. Those changes were "a resounding success," he said, sending out the message that the restaurant was more accessible than a younger crowd might have assumed.

"Anybody who's around this long, you become mythical," he said. "We do not want to be a restaurant where people say, 'Oh, yes, we come once a year for our anniversary.' Now we have a menu where people come three times a week."

The new menus at the New York outpost, developed over recent months with Kyung Up Lim, the executive chef, take a similar tack — studded with shishito peppers, Korean fried-chicken wings, specialty cocktails, hot-from-the-oven pizza and other signifiers of culinary currency.

Now the challenge is twofold: Will those drinks and dishes help attract a new crowd of up-and-coming players, especially at night, when that demographic is apt to dodge Midtown and fan out through Brooklyn and the Lower East Side? And in a place that Debra Shriver, the chief communications officer for the Hearst Corporation, called "the class cafeteria for anyone in media," can the era of small plates make its Michael's debut without alienating the regulars?

The secret, said Jonathan Waxman, the chef from Barbuto who got a big break working at the original Michael's in 1979, is to usher in the change with the sort of starch-free, California-style touch that Mr. McCarty is known for. "You introduce it gently and carefully," Mr. Waxman said.

"If someone says, 'Michael, I really want that Cobb salad,' you don't say no."

Of course, the Cobb salad and the burger — like the art-gallery-style décor — won't be going away.

"I'll still order those things that I just named," Ms. Newberg said. "And that's what will make it a great restaurant for me, that I can go there and still get what I like. Even if they change it."



DEBBIE HOGAN JR./THE NEW YORK TIMES



RYLAND PERRY/THE NEW YORK TIMES, TOP LEFT; JEFFERSON SOOY/SHANE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES (FACE)

Feeding The Buzz

Michael's, a Midtown magnet for editors, executives and other media players for nearly 23 years, is changing its menu to reflect the times. Top left, Michael McCarty, who lent the restaurant his name, with the television matchmaker Patti Stanger. His kitchen's new dishes include, above, Korean steak tacos and left, from top, marinated beets with lobster, burrata and miche; prosciutto pizza; and Korean fried chicken wings. At far left, the writer Dominick Dunne (in glasses) was among the lunch patrons in 2003.