

pretty little plates, packed with big flavors,

it's a small plate world

By Georgia Kral

NOWADAYS, we share everything: photos on Instagram, news on Facebook, UberPool rides with strangers. And we share our food in restaurants, too. The small-plate trend that rules the dining scene in New York City is built around the idea of sharing. Restaurants cater to guests who want to enjoy multiple dishes with their fellow diners, along with their followers on social media. What's more, in this food-obsessed town, small plates mean everybody gets to try a little somethin'.

"It's an ethos to live by. People can share a couple of safe things and a couple of adventurous things," says Chef/restaurateur Ken Oringer, co-chef and co-owner of the tapas restaurant Toro, which has locations in Boston and New York City. Small-plate dining, he believes, encourages intrepid eating.

To be sure, "small plates" and sharing have always been the norm in some food cultures. In Israeli and Mediterranean cuisines, mezes—small, shared dishes that appear at the start of a meal—are arguably the most meaningful part. In Spain, eating tapas is a cultural experience; it's about community as much as it is about food. But this style of eating has seeped beyond those culinary borders. New American restaurants are creating menus where every dish, large or small, is meant to be shared.

"Most people want to go out now, especially with a group, and eat a lot of different things," explains Eilat Admony, chef/owner of Balaboosta, Bar Bolonat and Taim. "We just order food, and we pass it around. No one has their own dish."

At Chef Dan Kluger's new restaurant **Loring Place** (21 W. 8th St., 212.388.1831), the menu is divided into five sections: breads, spreads and snacks; small plates; pastas; pizzas and large plates. Guests share dishes from all sections at this warm and welcoming restaurant. The former chef at ABC Kitchen and ABC Cocina relies heavily on vegetables, and small plates are where they truly shine.

and designed for tasting, sharing and loving



A variety of plates to rev up the appetite at Flora Bar.

PHOTO: SELECTION OF PLATES FROM FLORA BAR, DAMIEN LAFARGUE



Clockwise from bottom left: Grilled Chilean sea bass tacos at Vandal; tzatziki and pita bread at Kefi; an assortment of small plates from Loring Place; hummus paired with earthy bread for scooping up at Balaboosta.



PHOTO: SMALL PLATES AT LORING PLACE, ALIZA ELIAZAROV

“Often the dish starts from the vegetable up. It used to be all about the protein,” Kluger says. A leeks and pears plate, for example, is built of these two ingredients. The pears are raw, while the leeks are blanched and charred in the wood-fired grill’s embers: They play off each other in a flavorful way and are accompanied by sweet and crunchy candied walnuts, celery, yogurt and sherry vinaigrette. Another highlight on the small-plates menu is fluke crudo. Prepared with a careful touch, the fish is sliced in thin slivers and served with crunchy radishes, puffed and crispy rice poha, and citrus chili vinaigrette. A wood-burning grill turns out protein-forward dishes like halibut with braised mushrooms and chicken with roasted carrots and carrot-hazelnut romesco.

Walking into **Balaboosta** (214 Mulberry St., 212.966.7366) feels a bit like entering someone’s well-

loved home. Tables are clustered close together, framed photos decorate the wall, and the air is redolent with spice. Chef Admony’s menu may sound familiar to some, but the dishes surprise with their adventurous spirit. Hummus, for example, is served do-it-yourself-style. Only partially prepared, you mash it to your desired consistency with a mortar and pestle (a foodie group activity, if ever there was one). Nearly every table orders the fried olives to share, Admony says. Plump and briny, the mix of manzanilla and kalamata olives are fried schnitzel-style and served over a smear of organic housemade labne and harissa oil. And don’t miss the crispy chicken “Under a Brick,” served with earthy Israeli couscous, apricots, leeks and gremolata. Even though it’s a larger dish, the restaurant encourages sharing it.

How appropriate that the restaurant inside the Met

Breuer museum, **Flora Bar** (945 Madison Ave., 646.558.5383), sends from its kitchen dishes that also look like works of art. Take, for example, the purple endive salad. The leaves are arranged into a flower pattern, each overlapping the next. Nestled underneath are crunchy pecans and bites of Bayley Hazen blue cheese, and the whole dish is dressed in olive oil, honey, shaved lemon peel and sorrel juice. Like Ignacio Mattos and Thomas Carter’s other NYC restaurants, **Estela** and **Café Altro Paradiso**, everything at **Flora Bar** is designed to be shared, from the tuna tartare with truffles to the lobster and crab dumplings in yuzu broth. But some dishes (like the lobster dumplings, so pure in flavor) are too delicious to give up even one bite.

Eating tapas is all about camaraderie, and that’s just what you’ll find at **Toro** (85 10th Ave., 212.691.2360), located in a gigantic open warehouse space just steps from the Hudson River. The fun, casual vibe that cocktails and tapas conjure up spills over from table to table, from the bar area to large group tables. Co-owners and chefs Ken Oringer and Jamie Bissonnette’s menu features Spanish tapas and classic dishes like paella; the cocktail list is also Spanish influenced. “I was totally blown away by the tapas culture [in Spain]. It is about the importance of getting together, breaking bread, drinking and hanging out,” Oringer says. “Restaurants should be all about enjoying the people you’re with.” Menu highlights at **Toro** include the rich and umami-packed bocadillo de erizos, a panino-like pressed sandwich with sea urchin, pickled mustard seeds and miso butter; and pulpo (octopus) cooked a la plancha.

Some restaurants take the atmosphere as seriously as they do the menu. Take **Vandal** (199 Bowery, 212.400.0199), where the experience goes beyond the culinary. The eatery is party-oriented, the music is loud enough to inspire dancing, and nearly every square inch of the space is decorated in graffiti and modern art (including a break-dancing purple rabbit as tall as the ceiling). The menu was designed with sharing in mind. Celebrity chef Chris Santos (“Chopped”) says small plates “encourage social interaction.” Observes Santos: “It’s more communal. You get to see, eat and celebrate more dishes throughout the night.” Meanwhile, the menu spans the culinary spectrum: Guests can munch on foods as diverse as American Kobe beef carpaccio, yellowtail sashimi, spicy Korean rice cakes with kimchi, pork carnitas and Lebanese-spiced yogurt with bread.

Chef Michael Psilakis runs a handful of Greek and Mediterranean-inspired restaurants, and **Kefi** (505 Columbus Ave., 212.873.0200), open since 2006, may be the most accessible of them all, thanks to the relaxed atmosphere and communal vibe. From dips to sandwiches to mezes—such as grilled octopus served with a chickpea salad, and meatballs with tomatoes, roasted garlic and olives—sharing as a style of dining translates across the menu. “Meze is part of the experience [of eating Greek food],” Psilakis explains. “The idea here is to offer guests this home-style approach to dining.”