

Make a Big Hit with Small Plates

By Chef Joe Palcsak

Picture a leisurely evening spent with a dozen or two of your favorite friends, surrounded by several bottles of good wine and an assortment of delicious food attractively arranged in small portions on individual plates. If this sounds like your idea of a good time, then you would definitely enjoy a small plates party. If you were the one throwing the party, your friends would certainly enjoy it too!

No matter how you approach it, there is an undeniable labor-intensive element to a small plates party. It takes a bit of work and planning to pull it off, especially if your goal is to mingle during the event. If you follow these basic guidelines, you can spend at least as much time in the game room as you do in the kitchen, maybe even more. The result will be an evening that you and your friends will long remember and eagerly look forward to repeating.

STEP ONE: Keep in mind that the idea is for the food to be served throughout the entire evening. It's not a mindless sprint to the buffet; it's a pleasant leisurely stroll through a rich, unfolding and ever-changing wonderland of delicious flavors. Let your guests know that all of their senses are in for a prolonged treat. You will be setting out new plates all evening.

STEP TWO: Plan a menu that allows you to prepare as many components as possible ahead of time. The more you can do before your guests arrive, the less you'll have to do while the party's going on. Keep in mind that some plates will be sitting out a while. Food that is delicious at room temperature is the best kind to serve at a small plates party.

STEP THREE: Make sure that your plates remain small. Think heavy hors d'oeuvres. A good rule of thumb is to plan on about two and a half plates per guest. Ideally your friends will all be couples. This way, each couple—provided they are willing to share—can experience four or five different plates.

STEP FOUR: Unless you have a caterer's resources, use attractive, sturdy plastic plates because you are going to be going through a lot of them. Two and a half plates for 24 people comes to sixty plates. Look for a plate with a 4–6 inch diameter. Using plastic will also make clean up a breeze.

STEP FIVE: Variety is much more important than making sure that there is enough of everything for everyone. While it is more work for you, your party will be much more successful and memorable if you offer six or seven different plates instead of two or three.

STEP SIX: Think bold and unique flavors and make sure to vary the types. Remember, this is not just a food party; it's really a food and wine party. Keep their mouths watering the entire evening. Also, the more you can vary the individual menu items, the more you will be able to reach not only the stomachs, but the very hearts of each and every one of your dear friends.

I once catered a small plates party where the hostess selected six different plates off of my Small Plates menu, three of which were raw food plates—two different sushi dishes and a carpaccio. I strongly advised her that this was not a good idea, but she insisted. The result



Photo by Ron Summers

was as reliable as the fact that when you get two dozen people together, many of them will not be thrilled to see sushi in the line-up. The lesson here is that you are invested in everyone having an enjoyable time, and when you throw a small plates party, the food goes a long way to determining how much fun the party is.

STEP SEVEN: While you don't want every plate out at once, you do want to always have variety available. Put your plates out a few at a time, and as much as it is possible, mix them up a bit. At the same time, keep a loose order in mind. You will definitely want your lighter plates out early and the heavier plates later. No matter how much you try to educate your guests about the casual nature of a small plates party, the Pavlovian nature will kick in and the plates will tend to be gobbled up quickly at first.

A good way to insure that there will be at least some variety throughout the evening is to have a couple of nibble platters scattered about: a cheese tray, a tapas tray, a vegetable tray, some crackers and spreads, etc.

STEP EIGHT: Presentation matters. I hate to admit it, but people do eat with their eyes first. Please don't fret or spend too much time on presentation, but by all means, maintain an awareness that your plates should be visually appealing.

These guidelines will go a long way toward helping you pull off a very nice small plates party and after you and your friends have experienced just one or two evenings of small plates, you will be seasoned veterans. Unless I miss my guess, you will want all of your parties going forward to be small plates parties. But, as much as

I can guarantee that just about everyone will enjoy a small plates party, I can also guarantee that very few will actually want to assume the responsibility of throwing the party. If you are one of that rare breed, you will thrive on the information in this article and go on to hospitality greatness. I've included a few recipe ideas for your next small plates party. If, on the other hand, you would prefer to be on the receiving end of the invitation, here are two more ideas for throwing a successful small plates party. Choose a few of your guests (six to eight) and charge each of them with preparing and bringing one dish to feed about 6–8 people. Just keep in mind that you will want to coordinate the food line-up. By spreading out the load, you will free yourself up to a large extent. Of course, the best way to really just enjoy the party with absolutely no worries is to give me a call and have me cater the event!

Meatballs in Red Wine Sauce

- 1 pound ground pork
- 1 pound ground turkey
- 6 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 Tbsp. fresh Italian parsley, minced
- 2 tsp. dried thyme
- 2 tsp. dried oregano
- 2-3 dashes worchestershire sauce
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1/3 cup homemade breadcrumbs
- 1/4 cup grated parmigiano reggiano or pecorino romano cheese
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 3 Tbsp. olive oil
- 1/4 cup flour
- 1 cup good red wine
- 1/2 cup good chicken broth
- 8 potato rolls, halved horizontally
- 8 oz. aged provolone cheese
- Fresh Italian Parsley, minced

Combine first 11 ingredients and roll into small meatballs. Refrigerate meatballs, covered, for up to 3 days. Do this step ahead of time.

Brown meatballs in large non-stick skillet in 3 Tbsp. olive oil over medium heat. When meatballs are browned, sprinkle flour over the top and stir for about three minutes. Add the wine and broth. Increase heat to medium-high, bring to a boil or rapid simmer and cook a few more minutes until just thickened. Transfer to two large baking dishes. Cover and bake at 375° for about 20 minutes, until meatballs are cooked through.

Cut the provolone into 1" squares. Can be done ahead. Store in zip-lock bag and refrigerate for up to one week.

Create a "nest" by tearing out a pinch of the bread from each potato roll half, being careful to not create any holes. Rub each bread half lightly with olive oil and arrange on a baking sheet. Bake until just lightly golden brown in a 375° oven, about 7 minutes.

Plating: Place a bread half, nest-side-up in the center of a plate. Scoop 2–3 meatballs with sauce on top of bread half and arrange a few cheese squares around the meatballs. Garnish with Italian parsley.

Salmon Puffs

- 1 sheet of purchased puff pastry, slightly thawed
- Flour for dusting
- 1 package of baby spinach leaves
- 2 1/2 pounds good salmon, cut against the grain into 3/4" strips
- Salt
- Lemon pepper
- Duxelles (recipe follows)
- 2 eggs, beaten
- Purchased pesto

Cut pastry along the two seams to form three rectangles. Cover two of the rectangles in a tea towel and return to the refrigerator while you work with the other one. Dust work surface with flour. Roll out pastry to a 12" x 5" rectangle. Lay one third of the spinach leaves in a straight line lengthwise down the center of the pastry. Lay one third of the salmon on top. Season with salt and lemon pepper. Top with one third of the duxelles. Brush a small amount of the beaten egg along the far edge of the pastry and roll the pastry around the salmon assembly. Gently pinch the edges to seal. Lightly brush the outside of the rolled pastry with egg wash. Carefully place on a baking sheet prepared with parchment paper, seam side down. Place in the freezer as you repeat the process with the other two rectangles. Freeze rolls until very firm, but not frozen, about an hour. With a sharp knife, slice each roll into 12 one inch pieces and return to freezer to freeze completely, about one more hour. Store in Ziplock freezer bags up to a month. Do this step ahead of time.

Preheat oven to 400°. Lightly oil a large baking sheet and arrange puff pieces, seam-side down. Bake until golden brown, about 15–20 minutes.

Plating: Place one Tbsp. of pesto on plate and swirl to cover plate in "brushstrokes." Arrange 3 puffs on each plate.

Duxelles

- 3 Tbsp. butter
- 2 pounds of button mushrooms, sliced
- 3 medium shallots, chopped
- 1/4 cup good white wine
- 1/4 cup heavy whipping cream
- Salt, pepper, paprika and dried thyme to taste

Melt butter in non-stick skillet over medium heat. Add mushrooms and shallots and saute until mushrooms are just softened and starting to release liquid. Add wine and reduce to a thin syrup consistency. Add cream and reduce slightly until just thickened. Season with herbs and spices to taste. Remove from heat and cool slightly. Transfer to food processor and process until mixture reaches almost uniform consistency. Can be stored in a tight container in the refrigerator for up to three days.

Chef Joe Palcsak specializes in catering small plates parties, barbecues and other events for small or large gatherings. He also provides personal chef services and private cooking instruction. For more information, please call 303-908-7256.