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Business Lunches Beat the Clock

Restaurants Court Diners With No Time to Spare; Soup to Pastry in 30 Minutes, Hold the Chitchat

By ALINA DIZIK

Time-pressed executives are ordering something new for lunch—fine dining at the speed of a drive-through window.

In cities from New York and Chicago to Dallas and San Francisco, many white-tablecloth establishments are catering to their booked-solid clientele with a formal lunch that takes 30 minutes, from ordering through dessert. It's not exactly fast food. But the format does bring a new level of efficiency to a business ritual that otherwise can go on for an hour or more.



Eli Meir Kaplan for The Wall Street Journal

Clockwise from top right, chilled English pea soup with fresh mint; Virginia red beet spring mix salad with Vermont goat cheese and truffle mousse, black olive tapenade, and red beet puree; pan-seared soft-shell crab with roasted tomato polenta and arugula salad with sauce vierge; and a raspberry tart.

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to be a chicken salad and iced tea."

Il Fornaio's single-plated lunches, the "Piatti Unici," make up 30% of lunch orders at the company's 22 restaurants, says Michael Mindel, senior vice president of marketing for the chain. The menu includes both appetizer and entrée. A plate of rotisserie chicken, potatoes and Tuscan salad costs \$17. Before introducing the speedier menu in 2009, Mr. Mindel was reluctant to have the food served all at once. "But it went over phenomenally well," he says.

Menus and service are modified to fit the 30-minute format. Grilled fish and salads replace pork chops and steak; pastries and other desserts are preassembled. To keep interruptions at the table to a minimum, some restaurants even send out four courses at once on a bento-style china place setting.

Chris Tamblyn, a general manager for Internet service provider [Level 3 Communications Inc.](#), says it helps him persuade customers to commit to a lunch meeting when he tells them it's the 30-minute lunch at Il Fornaio, a chain of upscale Italian restaurants. "We tell them, 'We can get you in and out in about 30 to 45 minutes,' " Mr. Tamblyn says.

Mr. Tamblyn and his colleagues, who are responsible for driving sales, prepare a formal agenda to help make the most of their time. After a quick greeting, Mr. Tamblyn gets down to business. The ordering is more business-like, too, he says. "It's not going to be a glass of wine and dessert," Mr. Tamblyn says. "It's going

The 30-Second Guide to the 30-Minute Lunch



Eli Meir Kaplan for The Wall Street Journal

Now, in less than a minute after a party sits down, the server arrives to take orders; bread and olive oil arrive in less than four minutes. Entrées take about 10 minutes.

The 30-minute moniker appeals to executives worried about slow service. "We're seeing a shift of lunches from social to functional. All of us are working harder than ever and have less time in our day to get stuff done," says Brad Klapper, managing partner at Nourish Capital. The firm invests in new restaurant concepts, although none at present with the 30-minute format.

When choosing a restaurant for a networking lunch, Geri Sands Hansen, chief investment officer at Attucks Asset Management LLC, checked out the 30-minute option and decided on Markethouse, in Chicago. Getting the food fast takes the stress off, so she doesn't have to worry about missing an afternoon

meeting or conference call, she says. "If you're waiting for the food, it just slows everything down," she says.

Some fine-dining restaurants, though, are leery of creating a fast-food mindset just to ramp up their lunch business. After toying with the 30-minute concept last year, Steven Pipes, vice president and managing director of Le Parker Meridien hotel in New York, which owns the restaurant Norma's, decided against offering the 30-minute option there. He says a half-hour doesn't feel like enough time for some of his restaurant's breakfast and lunch items, like foie gras brioche French toast or fried oyster salad. "You can't really do things faster than they take to cook—unless you're preparing things ahead of time and then warming them up," Mr. Pipes says.



Eli Meir Kaplan for The Wall Street Journal

The 30-minute lunch at Ici Urban Bistro on a recent weekday.

And some executives don't want a 30-minute lunch, says Mr. Pipes, who talked to his wait staff and learned that many executives use lunch to build rapport, having informal conversation for almost the entire hour. "The real business takes place in the last 10 minutes of the lunch," he says.

Mr. Klapper, of the investment firm, says he is careful not to rush a potential client through a meal, which can hurt a relationship. "It's not like speed dating," he says.

Some significant menu changes were required to slice the lunch "hour" in half at Markethouse, which is attached to the DoubleTree by Hilton Chicago. Chef Scott Walton realized he was competing not only with other upscale restaurants but also

with fast-food joints. He ate at nearby restaurants, taking notes on menu options and using his watch to time delivery. Still, he wanted Markethouse to stay true to its local-produce philosophy, and he wanted to continue making use of the rooftop garden. "Everything is farm to table, which didn't translate to a speedy lunch," he says.

His 30-minute menu, launched last year, presents options that are local yet casual. Diners can mix and match salads, hand-blended soups and artisanal grilled cheese sandwiches for \$9. Dishes from the traditional menu, like green pea risotto, are still available priced from \$19 to \$35. The quick service has resulted in higher turnover. The lunch crowd has tripled since last year to become more profitable, he says. Recently, a lunch of smoked cauliflower soup and arugula-and-spring-fennel salad was served within five minutes of ordering.

Restaurants at Sofitel's North American hotels offer several four-course options for their 30-minute prix fixe executive lunch. The \$28 "Paris" menu—French onion soup, filet mignon, tuna Niçoise salad, crème brûlée—is a best-seller in New York, says Sylvain Harribey, executive chef at Sofitel New York. The hotel's 30-minute executive option contributes 19% of its lunch orders and 25% of its lunch revenue.

Peter Abrahams, publisher of Modern Luxury Media Inc.'s DC magazine, visits the Sofitel's Ici Urban Bistro in Washington D.C. weekly. Getting all the food at once leaves him plenty of uninterrupted time for business conversation and for sorting through paperwork. "There are times that you endeavor to have a long lunch, but don't want to be eating for a long time," Mr. Abrahams says.

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