

# Creating a Great Plate



CULINARY CONNECTION



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Painters have their canvas and paint palette. Sculptors have their base and medium. Musicians have their instrument and/or voice. And, just like these artists, culinarians have their own tools of the trade: the plate and food. It's easy to take for granted the small details of our artistry, like the plate or a garnish, when we are busy plating hundreds of meals or more each day. But what separates the great from the mediocre is in the details.

We need to consider several details when plating the food we've spent hours or even days preparing. Aesthetically, we look at details like *color*, *height*, and *negative space*. Then we must think about mouthfeel in terms of the *texture* and *flavor profile* of our dishes.

It's when all these details come together that we create a masterpiece that is visually appealing and positively affects multiple other senses.

Let's look at the factors noted above that impact the overall perception of our plated dish.

## COLOR

The attention to colors on a plate is queued well before the plating process itself. When developing menus, we must use our mind's eye to picture the final dish. We also must think about color when cooking. At one time or another, most of us have accidentally turned our broccoli

*Continued on page 2*



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*Continued from page 1*

to an odd brown color, or our roasted vegetables lost the vibrant color they had when raw. So we have to be aware of techniques that can maintain color in many of nature's most beautiful foods. One tip that works well with most vegetables, including broccoli, is to *blanch and shock* these veggies before your final preparation step. To do this, simply drop the vegetables quickly into boiling water until you see the desired hue, then "shock" them in ice water to seal in that color. Now when you go to plate the bright green alongside a contrasting color, like white mashed potatoes and brown roast beef, each color pops off the plate. The goal here is to use as many contrasting colors as possible, while still maintaining flavor coherency.

### HEIGHT

Height, in my opinion, is easily the most impressive "look" to a well-presented plate. Often, we see components of a dish placed beside one another in an effort to fill the plate. This is functionally incorrect. We perceive the world in 3-D, meaning we lose an entire dimension when we don't have height on a plate. There are a few simple ways to add height to any plate. Don't be afraid

to stack, layer, or shingle the different components that go together. For example, you can put mashed potatoes in the center of the plate, and place the roast beef directly on top of the potatoes. Then spoon the gravy or au jus over the entire dish. Now, when you add a few florets of that bright green broccoli around the outside edges of the plate, you've composed a beautiful, three-dimensional dish.

be honest, that crowded plate may overwhelm and detract from the individual elements.

In direct contrast, French cuisine utilizes the idea of height (which creates negative space) to create a clean, elegant look to any dish. It's no wonder then that French cuisine is most closely associated with fine dining.



### NEGATIVE SPACE

Negative space is simply the space around the rim of the plate that does not contain any food. Many people feel the need to fill the entire plate, all the way to the rim. However, this practice appears haphazard and usually pretty sloppy. Often in Mexican cuisine we see something on every inch of the plate. Now don't get me wrong, I love Mexican food...but let's

### TEXTURE

Appearance is only part of the detail-oriented process we think through to create a great plate. Another is the concept of mouthfeel or texture of each component of the dish. The different properties in a dish that comprise how they feel to us when we take a bite are impacted by one or more of the approximately

*Continued on page 4*

Following is a blog entry by Hoffmaster addressing how colors impact dining and appetite—beyond the plate.

## SET THE MOOD WITH COLOR THEORY

Experts agree color affects everything from our mood and attitude to our sleep habits and appetite. Color specialist Latrice Eiseman points out the parallel between how color impacts human behavior and how color behaves in nature. For example, the color blue, often associated with blue skies, evokes feelings of stability and calm as the sky is always present.

We all have our personal preferences, but authorities on color recommend delving into the psychology behind color in lieu of choosing color schemes on design trends alone. Learn more about the psychology of color and food, and how color theory can be used to set the mood for any culinary event or occasion.



**RED** is associated with happiness. It stimulates energy, raises excitement, and promotes liveliness, which makes it the perfect color for dinner parties and gatherings. Behavioral investigator Vanessa VanEdwards describes red as passionate, attention-grabbing, and appetite-stimulating. If you don't plan on painting the walls with it, but want that pop, try red table covers and tulip cups to rouse both appetites and energy.

**ORANGE** is another appetite stimulant. It can energize, stimulate, and increase oxygen supply to the brain. Mary Lawlor, manager of color marketing at Kelly-Moore Paints, says that orange is a color "...best reserved for the kitchen or dining room."

**CHOOSING THE RIGHT COLORS** to accompany your cuisine is as important as the ingredients that go into it. Color can affect appetite, attitude, mood, and more. Look to color theory and the psychology behind color and food to ensure you set the right tone when you set your table.



**BLACK** is dramatic and modern and works great as an accent color. Known for eliciting feelings of staying indoors, it is often used in tandem with other colors to create a pop. Try it in small doses, perhaps for beverage napkins.

**GREEN** is very prevalent in nature and suggests restoration, comfort, and relaxation. Natural tones of green can encourage patrons to sit back, relax, and stay awhile. Restaurant management software company Upserve® says it is also "...a great color for restaurants trying to communicate freshness and healthy options." Feng Shui expert Dana Claudat Green points out that browns and wood paired with green are making an appearance in many health food restaurants.

**WHITE** suggests brightness, purity, and cleanliness. When it comes to plates, it is a common color chosen by restaurants. Some chefs say it not only makes the food look better, but taste better, too. Although many agree there is a place for color on plates, the round, white plate takes the cake.

For ideas on how to make your tables and trays more attractive, visit [www.hoffmaster.com](http://www.hoffmaster.com)

See next page for CE questions.

20 separate perceived textures. A few of the prominent textures we perceive easily include dryness, gumminess, hardness, uniformity, and smoothness. In the previous example of using roast beef, we see a dense cut of roast beef paired with a smooth, creamy mashed potato and the perfect viscosity in au jus, gravy, or demi-glace. Then you add the perfectly al dente broccoli and a nice garnish (like a fried onion or cuts of scallion that bring a crisp component).



### OUR TONGUE (palate)

has five separate sensory perceptions that are distinguished on the taste receptor cells.



When we utilize multiple and varied textures, the composed dish is now visually and texturally appealing.

### FLAVOR

Now let's discuss the most obvious but often overlooked detail of a plate—the flavors of the food itself. Much of the same artistic detail applies here, too. The more complementary flavors we use, the better the foods taste. There's a very scientific reason for this, but luckily for you, I'm a chef and not a scientist. So I'll break it down in terms we use.

Our tongue (palate) has five separate sensory perceptions that are distinguished on the taste receptor cells. They've been scientifically identified as salty, sour, bitter, sweet, and umami. They are located on different parts of the tongue. Let's look deeper at those perceptions.

#### Salty

Our tongue perceives salty flavors on the front of the palate to either side. This is why we tend to feel a "sting" on the end of our tongue when we taste something that is overly salty. These receptors detect an obvious ingredient...salt.

#### Sour

The sour receptors are located on the back of the palate to either side. This is why we tend to clench our jaw at its hinge when we taste something sour. These receptors detect ingredients like citric acid, vinegar, and many popular candies.

#### Bitter

We perceive bitter flavors on the very back of our tongue. This is why we make that "pucker" face when we taste something ultra bitter. It's our face's response to the bitter receptors. Ingredients like coffee, beer, and citrus peel trigger this reaction from our taste buds.

#### Sweet

The perceptions that most of us love are those that come from the sweet receptors located on the tip of our tongue. By grand design, this is the receptor that perceives first when we take a bite. It's also the area that's smallest, meaning that we can overload our sweet receptors rather easily. Obvious ingredients, like sugars, are tasted here.

#### Umami

Umami translates roughly from Japanese as "delicious." This perception is felt literally on the entire palate. Rich and savory ingredients that are perceived as umami are things like meat, fish, shellfish, mushrooms, and butter.

So we have to look at ways to add combinations of these perceptions to influence multiple points on our palate. In doing so, we make the tongue very happy. Easy ways to add more flavors include sauces like gravies (where we experience umami, salty, and sometimes sweet), reductions (where we have concentrated flavors of salty, sweet, umami, and sometimes sour), gastrique (sweet and sour), and the ever-popular vinegar and oil (sour and umami). These components can easily be added to virtually any dish. In our roast beef example, we can add vinegar when cooking the roast to increase its acidity, add butter to the mashed potatoes for more of an umami feel, and a pinch of salt to elevate our au jus.

### SUMMING IT UP

We need to keep the concepts outlined above in mind as we prepare and plate food for our clients. Dishes should combine multiple flavors, textures, colors, and depth to create an eye-appealing plate that brings a flavor and mouthfeel that's sure to delight the diner. **E**

## CE Questions: Culinary Connection



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1. What are some of the details that go into plating?
  - A. Height, texture, and flavor profiles
  - B. Time, speed, and force
  - C. Vegetable, tuber, and protein
2. What is a common technique for maintaining the color of vegetables?
  - A. Add food coloring
  - B. Serve them boiled in salty water
  - C. Blanch and shock
3. Why is height so important to a plated dish?
  - A. Makes servers balance better
  - B. Adds a third dimension to the plate
  - C. Makes the food sit closer to the mouth
4. What is negative space?
  - A. The clean area around the rim of the plate without food
  - B. The void in the solar system that we cannot see
  - C. The area of the kitchen where a negative person works
5. How many taste perceptions are there?
  - A. 2
  - B. 10
  - C. 5
6. What does umami mean?
  - A. Half of a tropical storm
  - B. Delicious and savory
  - C. Root vegetable
7. What is an easy way to add another complementary flavor to any plate?
  - A. Sauce it
  - B. Only boil or steam most food
  - C. You can't add more flavors to many plates

