



# Tableside Cooking

## Consider it for Your Dining Program

by Rocky Dunnam, CEC, CDM, CFPP

**T**here are many definitions for the word “art,” but if you ask me to name one, you can bet the farm that I’ll say *tableside cooking*. Some say that tableside cooking is a lost art in modern eateries. A person with the skillset to flambé apples, toss fettuccine Alfredo, or pan sauté vegetables on a tableside cart without the adherent risk of customer injury seems to be the unicorn of our industry. And yet there is something interesting and elegant about witnessing a trained pair of hands creating a masterpiece

before our very eyes—which is why we gravitate to cooking shows like *Top Chef*, *Chopped*, and *Iron Chef America*.

So why don’t more restaurants do it? Or better yet, why do our non-commercial dining rooms rarely, if ever, offer tableside cooking? I believe it’s because we are at a unique point in the evolution of dining that remembers such showmanship as reserved for fine dining, and only recently have we begun seeing casual eateries lay claim to the concept.





DISCOVER THE  
LOST ART OF  
TABLESIDE  
COOKING



Offering tableside guacamole, for example, is fairly common in Mexican and Tex-Mex restaurants, especially throughout the southwest. And we are willing to pay a premium for this dish. Why? Is it because guacamole is rare, expensive, or even really that impressive? Of course not. We are paying for the experience—the show that takes place when the avocado is cut, mixed with onion, jalapeno, garlic, tomato, and then seasoned with salt, pepper, and a hint of lime. The same is true with tableside Caesar salad, bananas foster, etc. This is also why many of

us gravitate to the sushi bar at any of the approximately 4,000-sushi restaurants in America, where we watch the dance that pits man and food in a display of precise sequence.

So is this art form just going to fade into oblivion? Will the days of tableside cooking be forever remembered as a decades-old practice reserved for country clubs and private resorts? Well no, it's not.

Some say that the average customer doesn't appreciate the artistry of such cookery. Others say that it's simply not feasible to hire and train staff capable of showcasing such a display of skill and beauty. Maybe it's a liability issue; in some cases we are talking about setting fire to a pan of boiling liquid mere feet from our guests.

**TABLESIDE GUACAMOLE** is fairly common throughout the southwest. We are willing to pay a premium for this dish—for the experience.

This isn't something new. In the 1800s most food was served cold and typically only the wealthy were served while seated at a table. It wasn't until the French Revolution that actual restaurants began to develop. Then along came a chef named Auguste Escoffier, who forever changed the way people think about food and the way they dine. Escoffier began to produce items like Peach Melba, which was peach poached in syrup before being served with ice cream and sauce. It was desserts like this that challenged the mindset of elegant dining. Escoffier himself faced sharp criticism on occasion because he was changing the way we view dining by combining food with fashion, show, and pizzazz. This notion is partly why chefs worldwide know of Escoffier today. He didn't become the "Father of Modern Cuisine" by fearing change, or even by being the best at what he knew. He became a legend by challenging the way we view dining and cooking. Much the same is true for you in your current role. Let's challenge

*Continued on page 24*

“the way it’s always been done” with some different concepts and ideas.

As we shift focus toward a person-directed style of service, we must look at such ideas as tableside cooking and how it will impact our service now.

Ask yourself three questions before you turn on your creative flow:

1. Do I have the budget necessary to create a tableside cooking experience?
2. Do I have the skilled staff required to operationally function?
3. Will my clientele really even care?

If you’re like me, your initial answers go something like this:

1. No.
2. Not really.
3. Probably not.

And you would be undoubtedly wrong!

The cost of tableside cooking can range from essentially nothing (utilizing the equipment and tools you already have) to thousands of dollars. Your staff does an incredible job of preparing the same items in the kitchen, so doing it tableside won’t be too challenging. Clients nationwide are proving that they have high expectations of a dining experience, and tableside cooking is one component that will impress every single time.

## EQUIPMENT AND SET UP

### Tableside Cart

The carts designed for tableside cookery today are phenomenal. You can purchase a cart with refrigeration to hold ingredients. Some have built-in burners for sauté applications. And yet some are very basic “tables on wheels.” I’ve even seen some places use a centrally-located stationary table for demo cooking—not exactly “tableside” cooking, but it provides a similar experience.

### Burners

There are dozens of varieties of burners. The two most common are gas-fueled or induction (electric). Now for the purpose of tableside cooking, which type you choose is purely preference (and possibly regulatory

code influenced). I personally prefer to cook with gas, which produces a flame that allows for applications such as flambé that wouldn’t be viable with induction. On the other hand, induction heats much more evenly and consistently, which requires far less applicable skill. Or, you could decide that your establishment only wants to prepare cold items tableside (like Caesar salad, sundaes, etc.), which will eliminate the need for a burner entirely.



### Tools

This topic is as broad as the industry itself. Your tableside tools can range from the most basic sauté pan and tongs, to elaborate saucing spoons, squirt bottles, shakers, and garnish knives. Typically, I will change the tools according to the dish being prepared. For a Caesar salad, I only require a cutting board, chef knife, mixing bowl, squirt bottle filled with dressing, and a microplane. For more complex items though, I require various others tools according to the task at hand. Take care with your tools and equipment to prevent customer injury.

*Continued on page 26*

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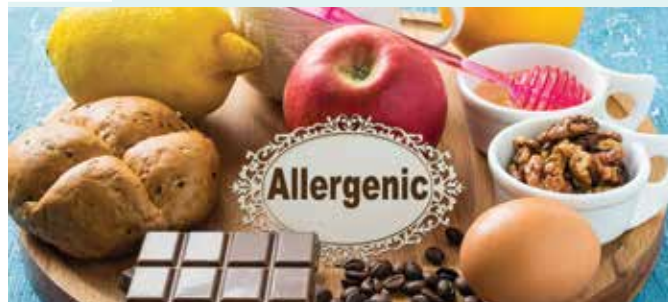


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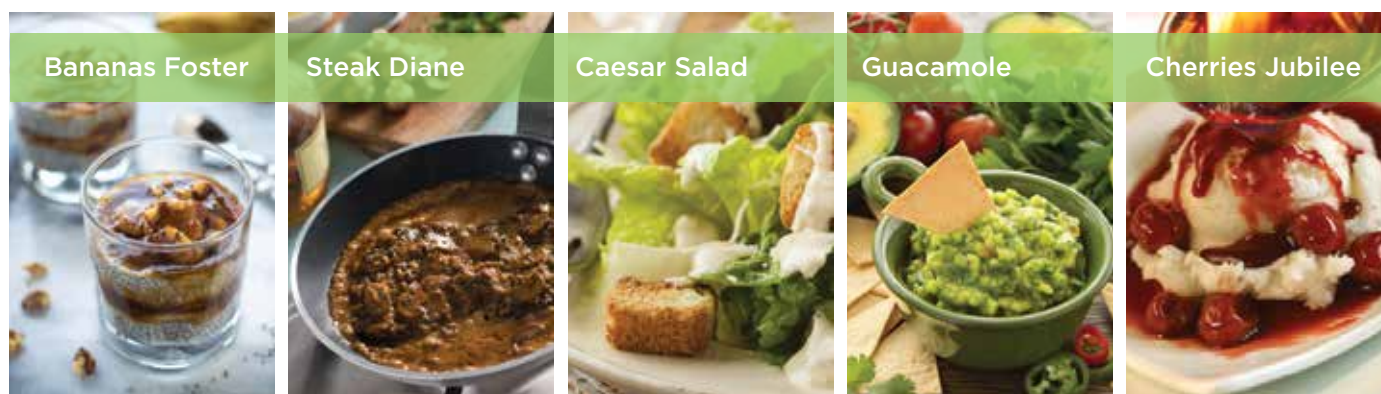


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## Rocky's Tableside Favorites:



### Appearance

Don't overlook this one, as we are in fact cooking tableside as a tangible means of enhancing the elegance and experience in our dining rooms. Who should do the cooking and what should he or she wear? For years in fine dining, we've seen the maitre d' perform such tasks in a shirt and tie. More recently, the chefs themselves are stepping out into the dining room for the experience wearing the white double-breasted coat and toque (the tall white hat that chefs are known to sport). And yet, in casual settings we've begun to see the server cooking tableside in their uniform consistent with the environment. Determine what looks best aesthetically for your setting, and keep consistent with that. Whatever is worn while cooking tableside, make sure it's clean and stain-free.

### NOW WHAT?

We've looked at how history has shaped our modern dining experience, and how the days of fine dining and cooking tableside are making a serious comeback. We have outlined the set-up for such an endeavor down to the details. Now it's time to choose what to cook or assemble for guests tableside.

### WHAT'S COOKIN'?


Start small. Maybe pick one day each week that works best for your schedule, your environment, etc., and cook a component of that meal tableside. For example, if your Thursday lunch feature is chopped steak with mashed potatoes, step out into the dining room and sauté some onions and mushrooms to top the dish. Or maybe you're having a dessert that could benefit from a sauce prepared

a la minute. Get creative here. There's absolutely no need for you to implement an entire tableside menu that many fine dining restaurants struggle to execute. Start with a salad that you toss in a mixing bowl with cherry tomato, cucumber, celery, croutons, etc., according to the guests' preferences (maybe even a variety of dressings to seal the deal). See how easy this is when we don't overcomplicate things?

And now you've begun an innovative process that is fun, creative, and elegant. Maybe one "Tableside Cooking Day" turns into every day, or maybe not. But there is one thing I know is true from personal experience. When you step into the dining room and prepare something simple tableside, you establish a relational connection that is meaningful. Satisfaction increases as you interact with each guest, and your environment instantly becomes a place of pleasure and enjoyment. And you are the "Escoffier-like" innovator that made it all happen simply by showcasing your sincere love for food, hospitality, and the dining experience. **E**



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