

**COVID-19 SPECIAL EDITION**

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## ONE MEAL FITS ALL

### 8 Ways takeout family-style options can cushion the blow of dine-in shutdowns

By Jackie Raposo

#### ► Family-style meals

may not jump off the Richter scale of innovation, but they can be the difference between perishing or persisting when governments shut down restaurants, caterers and other foodservice operations over public health concerns.

A variety of restaurants across the country chose this practice or included an option for takeout when efforts to flatten the curve of the novel coronavirus ended on-site dining.

This move allowed restaurateurs to keep some workers, pay operational costs, reduce inventory and provide free meals to communities in need. In some cases, they outsold individual options, which happened at Chicago restaurants Maple & Ash and Etta, according to chef Danny Grant.

To determine whether family-style offerings are a viable choice after stay-at-home orders are lifted or social gathering bans are removed, gain insights from those who leaned on family meals when the country faced the most crushing human and economic blow in modern history.







Takeout family-style from Etta, left, and veggie paella from Xiquet, below.



XIQUET PHOTOGRAPHY BY JENY BENITEZ



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## STREAMLINE

Ensuring ease and simplicity is crucial, operators say. At Alon Shaya's Safta in Denver, six cooks—a reduction from 32—handle three family meals to provide variety, but they remain consistent day-to-day. The Meatball Shop in New York added a family-style meal option to its robust delivery and pickup menu, but the service needed only four staff members to execute.

To accommodate staff cuts and balance labor costs, high-labor items can't be a part of the mix. And ingredients cannot be hard to source. "We want to make sure we have a core menu of things that we can get readily, that won't spoil, and that are used based on our current pars," says Adam Rosenbaum, The Meatball Shop CEO.

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## PRIORITIZE SEASONALITY

The flexibility of a changing family meal menu helps minimize food waste. At Ralph's on the Park in New Orleans, Chip Flanagan and other chefs first put out dishes that used perishable inventory. Then, they looked to their local purveyors.

Because business losses—85% for Shaya—extend to purveyors, seasonality becomes even more important. "The person growing radishes for the restaurant is just as affected by this," Shaya says. "If we can put them on a dish, then we're helping everybody." Flanagan's prioritized collard greens and beef reserved for him. "We're trying to keep locals going, even though we're cooking less variety," he says.

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## BE TRANSPARENT WITH COSTS

A family meal for two can be subjective, which is why it's wise to add qualifiers and advice, such as, "For larger appetites, consider sizing up." Diners won't balk at costs if the prices are in line with the restaurant's regular price points. Until shortages of premium products arise, menu costs shouldn't increase.

"Right now, we haven't had to make that sacrifice," notes executive chef Harley Peet of Bluepoint Hospitality Group in Easton, Maryland. "If that changes, we absolutely will reflect the price directly to the customer."

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## LOVE REGULARS HARDER

Social media and emails to established customers have greatly helped word get around, chefs say. "I'm not discounting community," says Danny Lledo of Xiquet and Slate Wine Bar in Washington, D.C. "But from what we see of people actually buying, 80% are people that have been here before." Third-party delivery aggregators can help if they reduce or eliminate fees, but Rosenbaum notes that The Meatball Shop's new family meal orders largely come from its current customer base.



"Food is a big part of healing," says Alon Shaya, who comforted New Orleanians after Hurricane Katrina and now guides his community at Safta in Denver. On top of a la carte items, he's added family meals to his to-go menu. "Families can use them as a starting point to discuss what's happening. Is the hummus making you feel better? Is the hot broth helping your sore throat?" he says. "We can still provide some sense of normalcy through all this."



Family meals from Safta's to-go menu.

## THE CHEFS AND THEIR OFFERINGS:

### CHEF: ALON SHAYA

**Restaurant:** Safta, Denver

**Menu:** Three family meal options include a variety of Israeli appetizers, salads and entrees, and generally do not change.

**Cost:** Four to six people; \$60 vegetarian, \$100 for meals with beef or lamb.

"The menu came together based off of stuff that we felt like people really loved at Safta and that they would want when not at the restaurant and at home," Shaya says.



### CHEF: DANNY GRANT

**Restaurant:** Etta, Chicago

**Menu:** Changes nightly with items that include fire-baked focaccia, fluffy greens, cavatelli pomodoro, spice-roasted chicken thighs and dessert from its bakery, Aya.

**Cost:** Two people, \$45. To expand for larger families, \$10 add-ons include pizzas and second proteins.

"In the beginning it was, 'We have all this extra inventory and product and how do we use it? Now it's more, 'What do we want to cook? What do we want to eat?' It's much looser and more playful than our normal restaurant menu," Grant says.



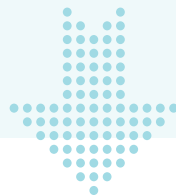
### CHEF: ADAM ROSENBAUM, CEO

**Restaurant:** The Meatball Shop, New York

**Menu:** Two ball and sauce combos, a large salad, a large side, four pieces of focaccia and four cookies.

**Cost:** Four people, \$75.

"The ethos of The Meatball Shop has always been this tribal community sharing. We've always had that version of a family meal; it's just never been available to go. It just seemed fitting to release it to a broader net," Rosenbaum says.



A variety of Israeli appetizers, salads and entrees from Safta, top, cavatelli pomodoro from Etta, middle, meatballs and broccoli from The Meatball Shop, below.







A fish fry with coleslaw and hush puppies from Ralph's on the Park, top, leg of lamb with spring vegetables from Xiquet and lasagna from Sunflowers and Greens.



**CHEF: CHIP FLANAGAN**

**Restaurant:** Ralph's on the Park, New Orleans

**Menu:** Publishes a new menu weekly, offering dishes like grilled steak frites with steamed asparagus bearnaise and cheddar-garlic rolls or a fish fry with coleslaw and hush puppies.

**Cost:** Two for \$25, four for \$50, with a la carte add-ons, like turtle soup and dessert.

"We were thinking comfort food, family-style," Flanagan says. "Customers didn't want our \$28 redfish dish—they wanted something more accessible. Family-style keeps costs low and gets the food sold."



**CHEF: DANNY LLEDO**

**Restaurant:** Xiquet and Slate Wine Bar, Washington, D.C.

**Menu:** Large-scale roasted dinners with varying levels of charcuterie, salads, side dishes and dessert.

**Cost:** Various, averaging \$25 to \$60 per person.

"We worked backwards: What can we do that's different? We're spending so much time with our families at home. It's an important time to relish," Lledo says. "Having something special and unique makes sense."



**CHEF: HARLEY PEET**

**Restaurant:** Bluepoint Hospitality Group, Easton, Maryland

**Menu:** One family meal changes every Friday, such as lasagna with homemade pasta, garlic bread and homemade ice cream.

**Cost:** Four people, \$85.

"To keep all the people putting in hours, down to the bakery doing viennoiserie and laminating and breads every day, we've decided to offer a little bit of each venue out of Sunflowers and Greens. It's very fresh. It's very alive. It changes all the time."

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### MAKE PRE-ORDER A MUST

When customers pre-order, operators have better control over inventory while ensuring products are used responsibly. “The beautiful thing about the family meals is that 80% have been fully committed and pre-ordered,” says chef Danny Grant of Maple & Ash and Etta, both in Chicago. “It created an efficiency that lets us do it without waste, focusing our energy on that meal rather than other items when costing things out.”

Be sure to email menus to customers in advance. Follow up with reminders and update your website so the most recent family meals can be viewed.

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### GO BIG ON FORMAT

Chefs can experiment with family meals, but it’s best to go with familiar items that reflect the brand, which can include full meals from start to finish.

Lledo had just opened his Basque restaurant, Xiquet, before dine-in came to a halt, but he determined that its state-of-the-art rotisserie and wood-fired plancha could make a mark thanks to the unique experience of offering a “feast”—choices of whole-muscle roasts, robust charcuterie spreads, fire-roasted sides and desserts.

For those overseeing multiple concepts, multi-course family meals keep more staff involved. Grant’s menu includes treats from their partner bakery, Aya. With several boutique eateries under his watch, Harley Peet of Bluepoint Hospitality Group combines items from its salad bar, fine dining restaurant, bakery and sweets shop. “It keeps my staff busy, and it’s important to offer a full meal,” he says.

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### SELL BOOZE

States that allow restaurants to sell alcohol should consider offering wine and alcoholic drinks to justify keeping some bartenders and sommeliers on staff and to round out family meals, but understand it’s not a panacea.



The Meatball Shop’s cocktails are pre-mixed, complete with garnishes. Get more insight on alcohol programs on page 18.

Safta offers Israeli wine to pair with its Israeli cuisine; Etta delivers carafes of cocktails and wine; and The Meatball Shop’s new large-format cocktails come pre-mixed in Ball Mason jars, complete with garnishes and instructions. “Allowing booze to go has certainly been a great value-add for the guests,” Rosenbaum says. But Lledo points out that, with liquor stores bustling, only 25% of his customers order alcohol, and he’s had to make deep discounts to compete. Flanagan’s discounted its wine more than 50% just to compete with other restaurants. Delivering alcohol helps move inventory but doesn’t necessarily move the financial needle. See page 18 for details.

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### THINK GOOD WILL OVER PROFIT

No matter the model, making normal profits during a shutdown isn’t likely. The family meal model helps cover food costs, move inventory and keep a few staff on payroll. Purchasing to-go packaging and

donating to community outreach efforts can actually increase costs, which Grant experienced firsthand. That 10% increase was not passed on to customers, but he needed to factor it into operations.

Discounts from purveyors can go toward a profit and loss statement, but in uncertain times, putting them toward good will can deepen relationships. Savings go to feed staff at Safta and some 300 furloughed hospitality workers each day through the Restaurant Workers Relief Program created by Makers Mark and chef Edward Lee; Peet dipped into personal funds to buy product deals for his staff. Lledo is applying for grants so that he can plan for his second opening and bring back staff.

“Every penny is going to save the business and save people’s opportunity to make a paycheck during this time. It’s either staying even or in the red—there’s no bottom line,” Shaya reiterates. “But if it’s helping our team, then we’re happy to do it.” ■