

School of crock

With the lines between casual and fine dining blurring, there's never been a more interesting - or confusing - time for deciding on tableware. So we're here to help. Let the lesson commence...



Whether it's porcelain fish-and-chip boxes at a top-end venue or cocktail jam jars in a fast-casual burger joint, times are changing across the dining sector and tableware must be adapted accordingly. Customers are no longer impressed by a starchy white tablecloth and identikit plates and glasses: they are instead looking for quirky, fun and interesting table accessories to enhance the hard-earned experience of eating out.

Casual-fine dining joints like Ollie Dabbous' Barnyard in London dish up corn-on-the-cob and sausage rolls from enamel mugs and plates with condiments in miniature milk bottles, while top-end restaurants like Fera at Claridge's serve caviar atop a wooden box of polished stones.

Across the board, restaurants are increasingly playing with a variety of different plates and serving methods instead of opting for the one-style-suits-all approach, says Mark Veale, head chef at Thornbury Castle near Bristol. "Tableware is now an integral part of the dish," says Veale. "When I'm devising new dishes, I'm not just thinking how it will look on completion, but also how it will look on different materials, shapes and colours. Customers have come to expect a variety of shapes and styles and there is almost disappointment if the order arrives on a circular plate."

Tableware can also be used to justify higher price points, according to Steelite International, which found that 60% of diners expect better quality crockery and cutlery depending on the

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amount paid for their meal. Fish and chips can go from chip-shop takeaway to a premium dinner simply by being served on a different shaped plate, and operators can charge accordingly, so it's well worth putting the effort into developing the perfect tableware.

Restaurant has examined the key trends across the casual-dining, mid-market and fine-dining sectors to show how to ensure your tableware lives up to the food.

Casual-dining

With everything from kimchi tacos to homemade gyoza dumplings on offer at the average outdoor market, it's fair to say that street food has come a long way since the days of greasy individual pizza slices and flaccid, boiled burgers.

Its popularity shows no sign of abating, and this is reflected in an increased demand for a more relaxed, street-food-style presentation within casual dining restaurants. Operators can capitalise on the street-food trend and compete with outdoor vendors by using innovative accessories and serving vessels, according to Richard Johnson, author of *Street Food Revolution*.

"Street food should be a liberating experience, free from the traditional plate flanked by a knife and fork," he says. "The more creative the presentation - bowls, paper wraps, baskets, platters, griddles, woks and sauté pans - the closer the experience is to real street food."

With this in mind, Bunzl Lockhart has created a Street Food Collection, which includes white porcelain fish-and-chip boxes, stainless steel sauté pans, extra-large serving bowls, wooden chopping boards for sharing, rustic wood crates and food baskets.

Tableware makers are also adapting their ranges to cater for restaurants that have an emphasis on sharing. "One of the strongest trends we have seen is the growth of casual-dining," says Gill Head,

marketing manager at Artis.

"People are moving away from the formality of fine dining to a more relaxed atmosphere and menu. This is having a big impact on the Artis portfolio."

Artis has introduced sharing platters, small plates for tapas and oven-to-tableware, and has also worked on presentation methods, including slate and wood, both of which are increasingly popular replacements for porcelain.

The popularity of fusion food in casual-dining venues, such as the recent boom in





American- and European-inspired ramen restaurants, has led to greater demand for colourful and varied crockery to suit all tastes, adds Artis, which has developed an Oriental range to meet this need.

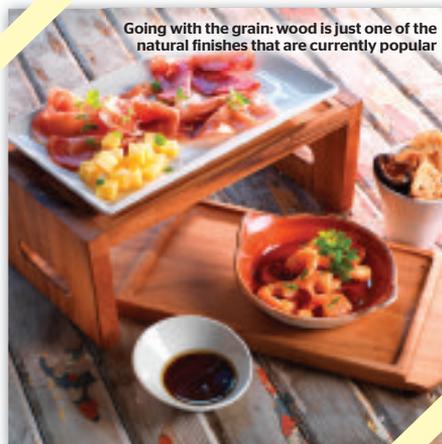
As more places continue to move away from starched linen tablecloths, suppliers are being more inventive. Paper tableware maker Tork has introduced a range of mix and match decorated napkins and tableware in four themes - authentic retro, natural spirit, sweet pop and industrial chic. Paper napkins are also increasingly being used for marketing and quirky messages, with lunchtime sushi-maker Itsu advertising its daily half-price closing sale on its napkins.

The rise in bespoke crockery has also moved from fine-dining tables to the casual sector. "We recently helped with a concept for a boutique bowling alley that aimed to combine great quality American diner-style food with bowling, ping pong and other activities," says Valda Goodfellow, from London tableware company Goodfellow & Goodfellow. "We supplied them with some aged stainless steel trays, mixed with pewter enamelware and printed greaseproof paper.

"The UK, and especially London, is the world's most exciting and diverse dining scene. Gone are the days when you could send someone a catalogue and expect them to be happy buying off the page."

Key trends

- Street-food accessories
- Asian-inspired tableware
 - Slate and wood
 - Paper and coloured tablecloths
- Mix-and-match tableware



The mid-market

With the rise in sharing across mid-market restaurants, seafood and tapas implements have become key in adapting to modern trends. At Tapas Bravas in London's Saint

Katherine's Docks, the innovative service style includes tapas dishes in specially made goldfish-bowl-style wine glasses presented horizontally, and seafood dishes served with stainless steel pincers, making for a more intricate eating experience.

In keeping with the sharing trend, Artis has developed a seafood collection with lobster-claw pincers and forks, a vintage-style classic oyster plate, new mussel casserole

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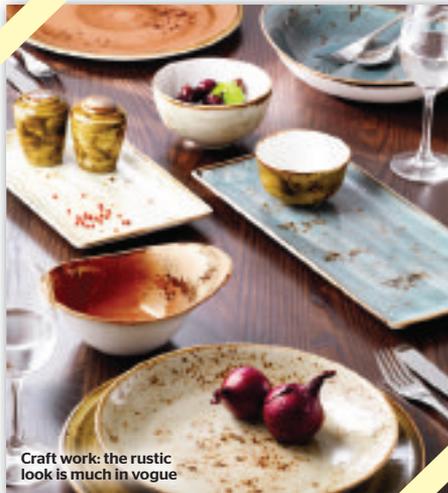


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Lotta bottle: drinks come in containers of all shapes and sizes



Craft work: the rustic look is much in vogue



Vintage vessels: interesting and quirky are top of the shopping list

dishes and a glass seafood bubble that can hold ice in its base. These presentation techniques allow restaurants to adapt to changing demands, such as the desire to eat oysters and caviar in an informal setting, or fish and chips in a more formal environment.

Another key mid-market trend is Peruvian food, particularly in the capital, where ceviche has become especially popular. This has led to amorphous-shaped dishes, including the wide variety of different shaped bowls and serving slates at Lima Floral, the latest London venture by Peruvian chef Virgilio Martinez.

At Martin Morales' all-day Peruvian restaurant Andina in Shoreditch, meanwhile, food comes served on a variety of glass, wooden and porcelain dishes on simple brown-wood tables to reflect the rustic Andean feel.

Water presentation is increasingly important, in line with the growth in filtered water. Quirky jugs are always an option, while many restaurants now opt for swing-top glass bottles or screw-top cylinders. Vivreau's water bottle includes the Designer Swing bottle with a sleek but traditional design to match a rustic interior, or Designer Twist bottles with a twistable lid.

"Keep the look and feel consistent by choosing water bottles that complement your rustic restaurant theme or minimal café design," says Vivreau managing director Stephen Charles. "After all, aesthetics form the first impressions of your customer's visit, so every little detail counts."

While good water presentation should be the bare minimum in a restaurant, service of everything from cocktails to hot drinks is equally important and operators are getting increasingly imaginative in terms of glassware. With the trend for pared-back, classic cocktails, there's a strong demand for vintage glasses, including

Key trends

- Sharing dishes and platters
- Implements for seafood and amorphous ceviche bowls
- Bespoke water bottles
- Vintage glassware

champagne coupes. Companies such as Artis are adapting their ranges to suit the market's needs after noticing bar managers were scouring car boot sales for old glassware.

"There is a trend for mixologists to source vintage, mismatching glassware for cocktails," says Ian Jelley, Artis sales and marketing director. "Martinis, in particular, are enjoying a resurgence and there seems to be a strong trend for serving them in 'not-for-purpose' champagne coupes. Classic cocktails are being brought bang up to date by presenting them in a fresh way, with a vintage edge that is really elegant."

Fine-dining

From The Ledbury to L'Enclume, theatricality is moving further and further to the fore in fine-dining restaurants, and tableware has an important role in enhancing the experience. At The Clove Club in London's Shoreditch, buttermilk chicken is served on a bed of pine needles, while the bread at Tom Sellers' Restaurant Story is served with beef dripping in the form of a candlestick. Unconventional and unexpected forms of tableware have become a vital part of telling a story through a meal.

With the popularity of tasting menus, miniature versions of service vessels are also emerging as a real trend, according to Paul Nieduszynski, managing director at Bunzl Lockhart. "Restaurants are trying to find interesting and quirky new ways to bring some real theatre to their table presentation and smaller versions of unconventional pieces provide a simple and practical way to achieve this."

While presentation styles are constantly evolving, Kathryn

Oldershaw, marketing director of Utopia Tableware, says classic shapes and styles will always fit perfectly in fine dining venues. "Understated fine crystal enhances the experience without overshadowing the star of the table - the food. It's essential at this level to match glassware to the beverage, be that tumblers, water goblets or long-stemmed flutes. Each commands its place at the table."

With almost two-thirds of the over-50s eating out at least once a week, according to Allegra Strategies, the 'silver pound' is also increasingly valuable to operators. These diners have the highest expectation that tableware should rise with the cost of the meal, according to Steelite. Chipped tableware is a major no-no, with almost half of diners saying they would complain if their plate was damaged.

"It's important that the quality of the tableware matches the quality of the dish," says Thornbury Castle chef Mark Veale, who uses Royal Porcelain's Royal Bone China range. The range, available from Nisbets, is robust but attractive, according to Heather Beattie, Nisbets' product brand manager. "People will judge a restaurant on its tableware and presentation, so get it right by ensuring you get the best you can afford," she says.

That said, fine-dining doesn't have to equate to crisp, white linen - operators are increasingly thinking outside the box for styles and décor. This has led to a blurring of the lines between top-end restaurants and more casual offers.

Key trends

- Unconventional serving vessels to enhance theatricality
- Miniatures for tasting menus
- Top-quality tableware
- Experimental, informal designs

"What Jason Atherton has done with the 'social eating' concept has totally changed the market, taking great cooking and combining it with eating in socially informal and casual environments," says Goodfellow. "There is no compromise on quality or the level of cuisine, but he serves people his food in a presentation format that makes them feel they can enjoy the experience rather than sit and gaze in admiration." ■