Debate over pay rates wages on

BY LISA JENNINGS

Since last December, protests by quick-service restaurant workers demanding higher wages and the right to unionize have become commonplace, occurring regularly at select sites nationwide and culminating on Aug. 29 in a 40-city blitz.

At issue are pay rates that put workers below the poverty level and the ability to effectively advocate for better benefits, according to protesters. To rectify the situation, protesters are calling for wages of $15 per hour — more than double the current federal minimum wage of $7.25 — and freedom to organize without pressure from corporate or franchise management.

The gatherings have garnered headlines from Boston to Los Angeles, highlighting stories of single parents struggling to make ends meet and putting the restaurant industry in the crosshairs of the ongoing debate over increasing the minimum wage — a rate few operators say they even pay.

“You have to pay more than minimum to get talent,” said Tom Holz, founder and “chief bread head” of the six-unit, fast-casual Uprise Cafe chain based in Ventura, Calif., where the starting wage is $9 per hour, $1 above the state’s minimum wage of $8 an hour.

Still, labor organizers and sympathetic critics are pushing the Fight for $15 campaign, with the goal of increasing the minimum wage to $15 an hour. Along with showcasing individuals making $7.25 per hour, stories have surfaced of workers pocketing only the $2.13 per hour some states allow employers to apply to a tip credit.

That argument gained traction CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

Amid increased consumer interest in fresh, healthful foods, operators are finding vegetarian offerings like the squash and quinoa dish at Little Market in Chicago to be popular among both vegetarians and meat lovers.

Broadening appeal

Innovative meatless dishes prove popular with vegetarians and omnivores alike

BY BRETT THORN

D Bistro Moderne in New York is well known for Daniel Boulud's highly acclaimed $32 foie gras-stuffed, truffle-laden DB Burger. But after a recent five-week renovation and menu revamp, the restaurant is also finding success with a number of meat-free options.

The famous burger, which retains its place on the menu, is now joined by a section of the menu called Cuisine du Marché, designed to showcase the best ingredients from local farmers markets. It wasn't a deliberate move by the restaurant's culinary team, but in the effort to highlight the best of what's local and seasonal in their area, vegetables emerged as a natural area of focus.

“Four of the six appetizers of our Cuisine du Marché [menu] are vegetarian, and one of the pastas, as well,” DB executive chef Jim Burke said.

Burke said all of the dishes, from the famous meaty burger to the new vegetarian salt-baked celery root, have been selling well since the restaurant reopened in mid-September.

He's not alone in seeing customers take a shine to vegetarian dishes.

While Gallup polls say the number of people who identify themselves as vegetarians has remained steady at about 5 percent since 1999, a growing number of consumers — even meat-loving
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Innovative meatless dishes prove popular with vegetarians and omnivores alike

By Bret Thorn

Trey Foshee, chef of George’s at the Cove in La Jolla, Calif., said many of his non-vegetarian customers will mix and match meatless and meaty dishes, such as an octopus appetizer and a vegetarian entrée.

He usually has two vegetarian entrées on his menu at California Modern, one of three venues at the seaside destination. One that currently popular with meat eaters is his $28 Risotto Verde.

A play on the Mexican dish arroz verde, Foshee starts the dish by puréeing a slow-roasted onion with spinach, cilantro and parsley. He adds that to Spanish bomba rice that he has sautéed in olive oil with diced poblano peppers. He makes a risotto out of that dish, finishing it with roasted cherry tomatoes, chanterelle mushrooms, sautéed summer squash, corn and pea tendrils.

“`It’s a rich, satisfying dish, and completely vegetarian,” he said.

Jesse Kimmel, chef of Memphis Taproom in Philadelphia, found that the restaurant’s focus on craft beer attracted a lot of vegetarians.

“The craft beer clientele are different sorts of people,” he said. “You have the people that want to party because they love beer and want burgers and wings, and then there are people who are more into the craft of it who tend to be vegetarian.”

He developed dishes that appeal to both groups, such as his $11 Smoked Coconut Club. He starts with whole coconuts, cracking them open, scooping out the meat and shaving it thinly. He cures it with brown sugar, salt and pepper, and then smokes it over cherrywood chips.

“It has like a bacon kind of texture and a smoky taste,” he said. “But it also tastes like coconut.”

He said that although the coconut obviously doesn’t have a pork like “tanginess, … raw coconut has an odd taste like an heirloom pig would have,” and it comes through in the sandwich, which also has grilled lemon-garlic tofu, tomato herb mayonnaise and, like any club sandwich, lettuce and tomato.

Kimmel also has been using jackfruit instead of crab in dishes.

He said the idea came from Indonesian restaurants, which braise the Southeast Asian fruit, which falls apart in strings in a way similar to crab meat.

He started by making jackfruit cakes seasoned with Old Bay and is currently offering a Creole-style cake with spicy remoulade, jalepeños and green onions.

“It’s like mini Creole crab cakes — appetizer style,” he said. “They’re priced at $11.”

At Little Market in Chicago, chef Ryan Polland and his vegetarian squid and quinoa dish has gained a following.

He cooks the quinoa in vegetable broth, and serves it with cilantro, lime, jalapeños and avocado. It’s then topped with marinated squid, which is then finished under the broiler.

“People are coming back for the dish, and they’re raving about how good it is,” Polland said.

The vegetarian pasta dish involtini at East 12th Osteria sells well with all of the concept’s customers, according to chef and co-owner Robert Deluco.

Chefs at small chains and independents, in particular, are pushing the limits of vegetarian fare, experimenting with various cooking methods, textures and flavors to give vegetables the same depth of flavor and visual appeal of protein-based dishes.

At DB Bistro Moderne, Burke serves a celery root appetizer made by coating the root in a sea salt crust, baking it, trimming it, slicing it thinly and treating it like a steak, searing it in oil with garlic and thyme and basting it with butter. He serves it with apple confit, apple puree and diced apple mixed with cooked barley and sautéed wild mushrooms.

“We’re taking a few ingredients and maximizing the textures and flavors that we get from them,” Burke said. The dish is $16.

A popular appetizer at DB Bistro Moderne, the salt-baked celery root is seared like a steak and served with apple confit and diced apple.

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Table stock with onion, celery and carrot.

Separately, he braises butternut squash in vegetable stock with fall spices such as star anise, allspice and clove.

At service, he adds some butter to the squash braising liquid and adds pickled cherries, cucumber, chives, parsley and tarragon. He mixes that with the quinoa and toasts almonds. The butternut squash, glazed with butter and topped with sea salt, goes on top of that, and he drizzles it with a gastrique made of Banyuls vinegar, honey, sugar and black pepper. He charges $17.50 for it.

"It's a really popular dish, I think because of the popularity of quinoa right now," Poli said.

"Sometimes I think chefs nowadays put more attention into veg-

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The Risotto Verde at California Modern features cherry tomatoes, chanterelle mushrooms, summer squash, corn and pea tendrils.

but vegetarian dishes," he added.

But vegetarian dishes don’t have to be complex to be loved by everyone, said Bertrand Chemel, chef of 2941 Restaurant in Falls Church, Va.

"People always ask for my grilled sourdough," he said.

He grills large slices of the bread — 4 inches wide and between 8 inches and 10 inches long — spreads them with ricotta cheese, and tops them with cremini mushrooms sautéed with parsley and garlic.

"People really love it," he said.

He charges $8 per slice.

Robert Dertano, chef and co-owner of East 12th Osteria in New York, has a vegetarian pasta dish that sells well with all his customers. His involtini with diced vegetables, basil cream and Pachino tomatoes is made by preparing each seasonal vegetable separately, and then rolling it with soft Crescenza cheese in a sheet of pasta, sprinkling it with Parmesan cheese and baking it until it’s crispy.

"You must cook the vegetables separately so you can taste each one of them," he said. "Once the vegetables are cooked down and have their distinctive flavor, then you can use them together," he said.

Although the exact vegetables he uses change with the season, recently he filled his involtini with diced artichoke sautéd with garlic and parsley, eggplant cooked in olive oil with garlic and mint, zucchini sautéed with oregano, and bell peppers roasted in the oven. The dish is $18.

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