

Cutting Back

Area eateries serve up smaller portions, prices

By SHARIFAH CHAMMAS

The economy may be suffering, but diners at the Sky Room are benefiting.

The Long Beach restaurant, faced with the prospect of declining sales, in January launched its “Lighter Portions, Less Expensive Menu,” which offers customers a 40 percent discount on food and, some nights, even wine. The portions are skimpier, but the live music and views from the supper club, perched atop the Breakers Hotel, are still ample.

The Sky Room’s owner, Bernard Rosenson, has been in the business since the 1970s and is no stranger to the deep freeze restaurants are thrown into whenever the economy cools.

Given the “housing downturn, rising oil prices, the anticipation of less disposable income,” Rosenson said, he conceived the discounted menu to stave off any slump in revenues.

“We are on the upper end of restaurants, and I thought we might see what we saw in the (early) ’90s.”

The discounts on food are available Monday through Friday, but the portions are smaller; the normal 10 ounces of fish is cut to 6 ounces, for example. Wine is discounted 40 percent Monday through Wednesday. The full-price, full-portion menu is always an option.

So far, so good, Rosenson said. February’s sales were ahead of February 2007’s.

The Sky Room’s menu makeover is something of a trend, according to William H. Bender of W.H. Bender and Associates, a restaurant consulting firm in Santa Clara. Slimmed-down portions also appeal to dieters and the health conscious.

“The slowing economy increases pressure on operators to provide value and guest

experience,” Bender said. “Smaller portions with lower price points attract consumers concerned with finances, diet and health.”

A couple of high-end restaurants owned by the Kor Group are cooking up versions of pared-down meals and prices. The Viceroy Santa Monica is to roll out its light lunch menu late this month. And the Blue on Blue restaurant at the Avalon Beverly Hills is unveiling March 3 what it calls a “graze and gulp” dinner menu with single food items costing \$6. However, the low prices end after 7 p.m. weekdays.

Actually, the fine dining sector is just catching on to what several major players in the casual dining sector already figured out.

The Cheesecake Factory Inc., known for its gargantuan portions, offered up a revamped menu of downsized salads and entrée favorites at lower prices in January of last year.

The menu reflects the wants of Cheesecake patrons, according to Howard Gordon, the senior vice president of business development at the Calabasas-based chain.

Gordon said customer feedback is positive and the new menu items are selling well.

The smaller portions were a welcome change for attorney Russ Fields, 44, of Sherman Oaks and his wife, Denise, 37, who recently dined at a Cheesecake in their neighborhood.

“My wife particularly likes the smaller servings,” Fields said.

Also, Applebee’s International, recently acquired by IHOP Corp. of Glendale, last year introduced its “Pick’N Pair” lunch combinations, which are lighter lunches that start at \$5.99.

The move resulted in a dramatic increase in lunchtime sales, reports Joe Herrera, vice president of marketing for Calabee’s, which operates Applebee’s franchises in California.