

Letter from America: Small is hitting the bigtime

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Peter Knight says straitened circumstances might inadvertently lead the average American to a more sustainable lifestyle

At the New York cupcake chain Melissa you won't find any of the monster cakes popularised in Sex and the City. Melissa makes colourful cakes no larger than a chocolate truffle – perfectly formed micro-cakes that sell for a dollar each and can be consumed in one, swift, guilt-free mouthful.

Melissa is not alone, merely ahead of the culinary fashion curve, which started with something called “small plates”. Conventional American restaurants used to pride themselves on serving jumbo portions. A chef's salad, for example, contained so much finely chopped iceberg lettuce that even a hungry goat would demand a doggy bag.

High-end chefs came up with the wheeze of small plates, a sort of tapas arrangement that forced you to buy lots of individual dishes in order to have a moderate meal. The practice – excellent for the waistline but terrible for the wallet – is firmly embedded in US cities.

But the question is how will small plates play in Peoria? This saying – the equivalent of the Man on the Clapham Omnibus in the UK – emerged during the variety era when troupes would travel from New York to Chicago, stopping to test their acts in this Illinois manufacturing town situated in the agricultural heartland of the mid-west.

On a recent visit to Peoria I asked about the fortunes of a newish “locavore” restaurant – specialising in locally sourced products – that had been favourably reviewed in the Wall Street Journal. Apparently it is doing very well, but diners note that the delicious portions are disturbingly small.

Cars are shrinking too. Detroit used to hate small cars, much preferring the thirsty, more profitable monsters that epitomised the American dream. This attitude changed dramatically following the General Motors and Chrysler bailouts. Ford survived without government money, largely because it was better connected to its markets and had smaller, more fuel efficient vehicles to offer a cash-strapped nation facing ever-higher gasoline prices.

One of the best-selling domestic cars is the Chevy Cruz, a sort of Vauxhall Cavalier that appeals to commuting drivers who have to cover considerable distances. The recently launched Chevy Sonic – an even smaller “sub-compact” – has received wide acclaim because it looks good, has a bit of zip and is well appointed inside. All those attributes were lacking from earlier, ghastly small-car offerings from GM.

Low-emission diva

And guess who is selling the Fiat 500 in television ads? Jennifer Lopez. In the old days, this super-star diva would not have been seen in anything smaller than a Range Rover, the essential blacked-out transport for urban pop stars. But now we can watch J-Lo driving her Fiat back to her old 'hood where she and the itty-bitsy 500 are adored by the street kids.

A Fiat 500! In America! In the 'hood! Truly A-mazing.

Reflecting this social acceptance of small from a totally different angle is the national icon of Coca-Cola, which proudly advertises its smaller-portion drinks, or what it calls its “mini can”. You can now get 7.5-ounce (220ml), 90-calorie serving of Coca-Cola, Cherry Coke, Sprite and Fanta Orange. This shift was a response to pressure from the health lobby, which is concerned about the role of sugary drinks in obesity. The drive to small reverses an earlier trend to big drinks – or “gulp” sizes.

In government, both state and federal, small is definitely trending big. Under relentless pressure from fiscal conservatives, libertarians and the far-right Tea Party, legislators are trying to cut the size of government, and in so doing, shrink the deficit.

Small government is hot at the moment, and calls for it to get much, much, smaller play very well in Peoria. Presidential contender Rick Perry's now famous brain freeze during a TV debate was triggered by his inability to remember the three departments of federal government that he was promising to cut.

A nation eating smaller portions from smaller plates, driving smaller cars while drinking smaller Cokes, and being ruled by a smaller government sounds rather sustainable. But unfortunately the slimming of America has got nothing to do with the realisation that the world's dominant economy should really reduce the size of its bloated environmental footprint for the greater good of the planet. That could be the consequence but it's not the impetus.

Small is big in America because past excesses have battered the economy and Americans are shrinking their consumption simply to get by. The good news is that this will benefit the environment while helping the nation adapt psychologically to playing a smaller role in the world. Make mine a single.

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