

Portion Optimization

Using plate waste analytics to size portions and sides for the way guests actually eat.

Portion size is the one lever that touches food cost and food waste at the same time — get it right and both improve together; get it wrong in either direction and a kitchen either loses margin on every plate or sends edible food back to the kitchen uneaten. Most portion sizes on most menus were set once, by instinct, and never revisited since. Optimization means replacing that instinct with a measurement.

What a Plate Waste Audit Actually Measures

- **Over a defined sample period** — a week is usually enough for a high-volume dish — weigh what comes back on the plate for a target set of items. Start with your five highest-volume dishes rather than the whole menu at once.
- Separate what's untouched from what's simply picked at: an entirely uneaten side tells a very different story than a garnish left behind.
- Note any pattern by day-part or day of week where it's visible — a lunch crowd often behaves differently on the same dish than a dinner service does.

The Patterns Worth Looking For

- **The default-side problem** — a starch, a bread basket, and a rice pilaf all landing on one plate because each was added independently, at different points in the menu's history, without ever being evaluated together.
- **Portion creep** — sizes that have quietly grown over time as different cooks eyeball rather than weigh, with no one noticing until an audit puts a scale on it.
- **The one-size mismatch** — a portion sized for the heaviest eater in the room, served identically to every guest regardless of appetite or how many other dishes are already on the table.

Dish	Audit Finding	Adjustment
Grilled salmon, rice, veg	Rice returned ~40% uneaten	Reduced rice portion; kept protein size
Steak frites	Fries consistently finished; sauce often left	Kept fries; reduced sauce pour
Pasta primavera	Large minority of plates half-finished	Introduced a smaller lunch-size option

Illustrative example — replace with your own audit findings once you've measured your top-selling dishes.

Making the Adjustment Without Losing the Guest

- **Reduce filler, not flavor** — cutting a redundant starch entirely is usually less noticeable to a guest than shrinking the show-piece protein.
- Offer choice instead of a blanket cut: a smaller default with a "make it heartier" add-on preserves guest control and often nets better margin than a single fixed size for everyone.
- **Reframe with plating** — a slightly smaller portion, plated with intention and negative space, reads as considered rather than short-changed. Guests measure value by the whole experience, not a ruler.

Making It Routine

A quarterly re-audit catches drift before it becomes the new normal — palates, suppliers, and cooks all change gradually enough that last year's "right" portion may not be this year's. Treat portion specs as a living part of the recipe card, updated with the same rigor as an ingredient substitution, rather than a decision made once and left alone.

CHEF'S NOTE

Start with your single best-selling dish. Weigh what comes back for one week, and you'll usually find your answer before the week is out.