

Limited run, big buzz

Amanda Baltazar

It's psychology so well established that we all understand it: We want what we can't have, be it a luxury yacht, Michael Jordan-like skills or a sugary treat.

The latter has zoomed up on the desirability charts since Dominique Ansel Bakery launched its signature Cronuts in its New York City store last May. The creations (which are half croissant, half doughnut) are so popular that customers are limited to two apiece, and if you come too late in the day—after, say 10 a.m.—they'll all be gone. Demand has customers lining up at 4:30 a.m. to ensure they'll get a fix when the bakery opens its doors at 8.

What's going on—why the scarcity? Is this simply a buzz-generating marketing tactic or is there a practical reason for the rationing of high-demand dishes? Turns out it's a little of both.

Gramercy Tavern only sells 20 of its burgers each day

“because that's what we've allotted for burger production,” says Executive Sous Chef Howard Kalachnikoff. Every week the restaurant buys a half steer that it butchers in house into items including grillable and braisable meats and Kielbasa sausage. “We use every part of the animal, so we have everything allocated. This allows us to have no waste.”

“The limited nature entices people,” says Holeman & Finch's Best. “It's incredibly difficult to procure one of our burgers, and it has the media hype of being a destination burger.” What has really amazed him, though, he says, is the continued success of the dish five years in. “Many people think it was a marketing strategy, but we fell into it head first.”

Indeed, drumming up Cronut-size buzz is like trying to catch lightning in a bottle. Ultimately, it's about creating a great item that's buzz-worthy. “The product has to be differentiated and exceptional,” says Arlene Spiegel, restaurant consultant with Arlene Spiegel and Associates in New York City. “If it's not good, it doesn't matter if they run out.”

That doesn't mean operators can't stoke the fire. To dramatize the nightly burgers at Holeman & Finch, at 10 p.m. a bartender pulls down a bullhorn, turns off the music and calls “Burger Time” with a big to-do. “It's about the wait, the burger call, seeing them cooked through our glass window,” Best says.

When Hostess (makers of the iconic Twinkies) announced last fall that it was filing for bankruptcy and therefore no longer making the snack cake, drink.well piggybacked on that news with tweets and Facebook posts reminding customers that there was still somewhere they could get Twinkies.

Making limited offerings part of an overall branding strategy makes good business sense. “It allows a brand to position itself as being innovative and fresh,” says Spiegel. “What they're saying is, ‘Hey, pay attention to us. We're doing something innovative; we're relevant to your dining decision.’ You need to have a strategy. [In this case,] selling out is part of the overall strategy, even if it happens by accident.”

