

Flavor Bridges and Spins

Guidelines for offering ethnic ingredients and flavors in a customer-friendly format

Today's culinary compass points to ethnic cuisines, foreign flavors and imported ingredients. To keep ahead of the competition, restaurant operators must first keep up with the foods and flavors that are sparking their customers' interests and heating up restaurant menus.

Dealing with consumers' changing tastes can be a challenge to the most seasoned chef. Savvy chefs scour the marketplace for innovative menu items that will differentiate their establishment. And, with a little experimenting, chefs can even create new culinary trends.

However, as chefs continue to look for that silver bullet — that new menu item, flavor or ingredient to help them create exciting and innovative culinary concepts — they oftentimes end up with “con-fusion”

cuisine. No matter how exciting new foods and flavors may be, if they are not fully comprehended or are prepared using cooking methods that are not understood, they will not sell, and they will do a disservice to your establishment and reputation.

Creating “bridges and spins” on traditional or comfort-style foods makes a new menu item more approachable and helps to create a new trial opportunity. Take the success of California Pizza Kitchen, a Los Angeles-based casual dining chain. The

chain took advantage of the broad consumer appeal of premium pizzas, and has used them as vehicles to introduce flavors from around the world. Pizza becomes the “bridge,” and flavors and ingredients like tandoori chicken are the “spin,” resulting in a whole new pizza taste experience. By putting a flavor spin on a familiar ingredient, California Pizza Kitchen successfully offers a variety of ethnic flavors and ingredients in a

recognizable and approachable format.

This concept can easily be translated by using a variety of traditional menu items as bridges: salads, pastas, proteins, even desserts. Because customers are more willing to take chances and sample new flavors and ingredients in smaller portions, the appetizer menu provides an excellent format for experimentation.

America's taste for ethnic flavors has grown beyond cuisines and into individual ingredients that make up those cuisines. Therefore, a chef must understand that to create authentic foods and complex ethnic flavors, one needs to use ingredients true to their specific region of the world. To make these flavors easier to understand, use the following pantry lists of ingredients for six of the most popular ethnic cuisines, and follow the core guidelines for introducing these flavors and ingredients.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FLAT TOP GRILL

THAI PANTRY

Basil
Garlic
Bean curd
Gingerroot
Rice
Kaffir lime leaves
Scallions
Shrimp paste
Chiles
Kra chai
Shallots
Lemon grass
Sesame seeds
Cilantro
Soy sauce
Coconut
Mint
Cumin
Mushrooms
Star anise
Noodles
Tamarind
Fish sauce
Galangal
Peanuts
Palm sugar

SOUTH AMERICAN PANTRY

Tomatoes
Limes
Salt cod
Hearts of palm
Black beans
Raisins
Pineapple
Garlic
Oranges
Calabaza squash
Chickpeas
Papayas
Collard greens
Cilantro
Coconuts
Scallions
Peaches
Onions
Grapefruit
Black olives
Coconut milk
Chiles
Rice

VIETNAMESE PANTRY

Coconut
Mint
Lime juice
Fish sauce
Star anise
Shrimp paste
Noodles
Rice
Curry
Coriander
Basil
Rice vinegar
Chiles
Gingerroot
Green onions
Tree ear mushrooms
Garlic
Potatoes
Cucumbers
Asparagus
Rice paper
Bean threads
Lemon grass
Tamarind
Black pepper
Bamboo shoots

CORE GUIDELINES FOR INTRODUCING NEW FLAVORS

Stay true to your concept. Make sure your use of flavors, ingredients and cooking styles fits within the context of your restaurant concept. If your menu items become too far-reaching, your client base will not understand what you're trying to achieve.

The description of menu items is very important. Make sure the customer is going to understand what the meal will deliver through your menu descriptions. Write menu copy that is descriptive and romantic, but not overwhelming to the diner. Menu copy can be intimidating if it's too descriptive or includes ingredients the diner has never heard of. Be selective – it's not essential to include every ingredient used, especially if it will just confuse the customer.

Offer a believable blend of plate ingredients. Feature adequate portions of protein, sides, sauces or relishes so that the entire plate comes together in terms of flavor and appearance.

Keep in mind that flavor is not just about taste. The flavors should be dynamic and blend well together, but texture is important also. Additions like artisan breads and fried tortilla strips add enjoyable mouth-feel to a menu item. ■

JAPANESE PANTRY

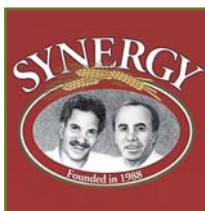
Bamboo shoots
 Garlic
 Sansho
 Gingerroot
 Miso
 Dashi
 Soy sauce
 Ginkgo nuts
 Nori
 Burdock
 Lotus root
 Sesame seeds
 Chestnuts
 Seven spice seasoning
 Dried bonito flakes
 Chinese cabbage
 Matsutake mushrooms
 Shiitake mushrooms
 Cloud ear mushrooms
 Enoki mushrooms
 Chrysanthemum leaves
 Watercress
 Persimmons
 Sweet potatoes
 Eggplant
 Plums
 Dry mustard
 Sake
 Mirin
 Rice vinegar
 Fish paste
 Wasabi
 Tofu
 Brown rice
 Buckwheat noodles

MEXICAN PANTRY

Tomatoes
 Nopales (cactus leaves)
 Tomatillos
 Pumpkin seeds
 Dried beans
 Squash
 Sesame seeds
 Banana leaves
 Cocoa
 Annato seeds
 Raisins
 Vanilla
 Red onions
 Cilantro
 Chayote
 Cinnamon
 Corn husks
 Almonds
 Cloves
 Jicama
 White rice
 Coriander
 Masa harina
 Ancho chiles
 Pasilla chiles
 Jalapeño chiles
 Poblano chiles
 Mulato chiles
 Chipotle chiles
 Garlic
 Avocados
 Oregano
 Limes
 Cabbage

CARIBBEAN PANTRY

Rice
 Thyme
 Curry
 Bananas
 Yams
 Cilantro
 Mint
 Garlic
 Limes
 Cassava/yuca
 Avocados
 Tomatoes
 Salt cod
 Plantains
 Coconuts
 Calabaza squash
 Allspice
 Raisins
 Soy sauce
 Scallions
 Collard greens
 Dried peas
 Worcestershire sauce
 Mangoes
 Scotch bonnet chiles
 Habanero chiles
 Rum
 Gingerroot
 Jerk seasoning
 Black beans
 Oregano
 Oranges
 Spanish sherry vinegar
 Banana leaves



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