

Embracing Worldly Flavors

Introduction

Cuisine trends follow a trajectory that typically begins in the kitchens of fine dining establishments and often take years to mature. Lately, one particular trend – the embrace of global cuisine – is moving through segments at a fast speed, leaving many operators determined to stay ahead of the pack without alienating their customer base.

In this issue, we will focus on embracing global cuisine, what’s driving it forward, and how it is playing out in all restaurant segments. You will learn which aspects of this rising trend are right for your restaurant menu and how you can successfully introduce them to your customers.



Bonefish Grill's® Fresh Ceviche

Technology & New Restaurant Concepts Drive the Global Cuisine Trend

Through the digital space, Americans have constant access to food-focused blogs, recipe websites, and TV shows. There are a variety of food-focused magazines for them to browse through as well. As a result, the American public is more in-the-know on food trends than ever before. And as their food knowledge expands, so does their palates; they’re looking for new concepts and fresh flavors that allow them to experience in real life what they read about or watch on tv. This has really accelerated the spread of global cuisine adoption through American eateries.

New industry concepts like specialty ethnic restaurants, and inventive fast-casual and chef-casual eateries are encouraging the trend. For example, **Brasa**, which opened in Berkeley in 2012, specializes in the Peruvian dish pollo a la brasa (roisserie-style chicken) with aji amarillo (a peppery chili sauce). The eatery’s contemporary, fast casual atmosphere, coupled with its focused menu of a single Peruvian dish, makes for a progressive and appealing ethnic restaurant concept. Chef-casual joints, which are casual restaurants owned by fine dining chefs, offer consumers the uniqueness and artisan qualities of the fine dining segment without high cost or intimidation. In the past two years, acclaimed chefs Takashi Yagihashi and Sam Gorenstein have both opened chef-casual establishments with ethnic influences – a Japanese comfort-food joint in Chicago called **Slurping Turtle** and a ceviche-themed restaurant in Miami called **My Ceviche**, respectively. Chef-casuals may have relaxed atmospheres, but their specialized menus set them apart from other moderately priced restaurants. Restaurants like these offer exactly what consumers look for these days when dining out: a menu driven by creativity and fresh, quality ingredients, and affordability (which makes trying something unfamiliar less risky).

Food Trucks Offer Ethnic-Influenced Inspiration

Another recent addition to the restaurant scene has really skyrocketed the trend: food trucks. Ethnic and ethnic-fusion food trucks open patrons’ minds and palettes to a multitude of flavors by using two important methods: serving up traditional menu items of a specific cuisine type as well as creating fusion dishes that introduce ethnic flavors using familiar platforms.

Food trucks like **Viking Soul Food** opt for cuisine types that haven’t seen much traction within the industry, hoping to nab a spot at the start of a potentially emerging cuisine type. In the case of this truck, that’s traditional Norwegian cuisine – and with many chefs looking to Copenhagen’s **Noma** (winner of Restaurant Magazine’s “Best Restaurant in



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Culinary Trends

the World” 3 years in a row) for inspiration, Viking Soul Food could very well be at the forefront of a bigger Scandinavian cuisine surge within the industry.

Others, like **Kimchi Taco** and **mmmpanadas**, use familiar platforms (tacos for the former) and ingredients (eggs and bacon for the latter) as vehicles for global cuisine experimentation. Consumers associate food trucks with innovation and forward-thinking menu options, and much of that association comes from truck operators’ embrace of new and exciting ingredients. In fact, these food truck operators are bringing more ethnic flavors and items onto their menus than non-ethnic, brick & mortar restaurants. Though food trucks tend to have a more adventurous customer base, that doesn’t mean operators of other restaurant concepts should shy away from similar inventiveness, especially when it comes to the global cuisine trend.

Introducing Ethnic to Your Menu: What Every Operator Should Know

Restaurant operators can introduce ethnic-influenced items on their menus by infusing familiar dishes with specific ethnic flavors or bringing on an ethnic variation of an established platform. These are a few restaurants that have adopted the global cuisine trend using flavor-driven methods:

- **Atlanta Bread Co.’s Salmon Banh Mi Sandwich:** Wild Alaskan salmon filet topped with sweet and spicy Asian slaw made from cucumbers, carrots and fresh cilantro on freshly baked ciabatta.
- **Bonefish Grill’s Fresh Ceviche:** Chilled bay scallops, shrimp, fresh fish, avocado, peppers, citrus, cilantro and warm tortilla chips.
- **Starbucks’ Chicken Lettuce Wraps Bistro Box:** Chicken, red lettuce, carrots, cabbage, cilantro, chopped peanuts and peanut sauce.

In these examples, operators brought on ethnic platforms – banh mi sandwich, ceviche, and lettuce wraps – and paired them with non-ethnic ingredients. The Vietnamese banh mi becomes more recognizable when it’s called out as a sandwich with a salmon filet, cucumber-carrot slaw, and ciabatta bread. Ceviche seems more approachable when served with warm tortilla chips – already a common partner to other dips involving guacamole, peppers, cilantro, and citrus flavors. The Starbucks lettuce wraps are filled with menu mainstays like chicken and chopped vegetables, but the peanut sauce gives it an ethnic flavor

that’s still understandable within the dish. The key to the platform-driven method is to use ingredients that consumers recognize and enjoy as a means of integrating ethnic appetizers, entrees, etc. Conservative operators can bring these flavors and platforms to their menus with little to no risk involved because they already belong to the mainstream American dining scene. By adding feta or pesto to an omelet, or by adding a quesadilla dish to your appetizer menu, you can safely enter the trend without alienating your customer base.

For a broader look at trendy ethnic food items, the table above showcases ethnic flavors and platforms that have had the greatest menu penetration growth over the past 4 years. Ethnic condiments in particular have gained a significant amount of traction on restaurant menus over the past 4 years. Sriracha and chipotle come from Asian and Mexican cuisines respectively, but their shared flavor components – hot and peppery – are also shared with multiple other cuisine types, which perhaps makes them such successful vehicles for ethnic food trend adoption.

Fastest Growing Ethnic Flavors and Platforms

(% change in menu penetration, 2008 vs. 2012)

| Ethnic Flavors | (% growth) | Ethnic Platforms | (% growth) |
|------------------|------------|-------------------|------------|
| Sriracha | 153% | Brioche | 70% |
| Chimichurri | 115% | Margherita Pizza | 36% |
| Wasabi Aioli | 72% | Thin Rice Noodles | 28% |
| Yuzu | 70% | Lettuce Wraps | 27% |
| Chipotle Aioli | 65% | Caprese | 26% |
| Queso Fresco | 58% | Naan | 21% |
| Habanero | 57% | Breakfast Burrito | 18% |
| Jalapeno Cheddar | 55% | Empanada | 17% |
| Thai Chili | 52% | Samosa | 16% |



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