

Overcoming Flavor Obstacles

Diners are more open to experimentation when new flavors pair up with familiar favorites.

Sometimes the most innovative and flavorful menu item created by the greatest culinary talent experiences a short life span once it hits the menu. One of the reasons for this may be the use of unfamiliar flavors, ingredients or cooking techniques, which can intimidate the customer. This presents one of the greatest challenges menu strategists face — creating new menu items with exotic ethnic flavors that enable their customers to comfortably venture into new dining experiences.

Today's dining public is far more educated, sophisticated and demanding than ever. When it comes to food, they want bigger, bolder flavors and visually exciting plate presentations. Independent and chain operators alike are looking abroad for ethnic

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Ceviche made with more familiar seafood options helps bridge diners into otherwise unfamiliar territory.



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inspiration and new flavor profiles. However, while diners' expectations are greater than ever, nobody wants to be intimidated reading a menu or hearing specials with unfamiliar culinary terms, ingredients or preparations.

APPETIZER OPPORTUNITIES

The appetizer category is truly the entry point for adventure in flavor. Savvy operators are using this menu category as a springboard to introduce new ethnic flavors and preparation techniques.

For the consumer it's a low risk proposition — if the appetizer did not meet the guest's expectations, then the entire meal wasn't lost. But in order to create trial of these ethnic-inspired and flavor-charged appetizers, familiar ingredients are essential.

One successful strategy of introducing new flavors and creating new trial is a method we've come to call "bridges and spins." By utilizing familiar ingredients or cooking techniques as a "bridge," operators can introduce new flavors with ethnic "spins" while remaining approachable to the customer.

For example, many operators have successfully used calamari as a bridge to introduce ethnic flavors. Oyster's Restaurant in Corona Del Mar, Calif., offers a very innovative spin on this popular appetizer — its version is stir-fried with a spicy Kung Pao sauce and topped with black and white sesame seeds.

The reformulating of this popular item traditionally served with marinara sauce and Parmesan cheese results in a dish with a real ethnic spin, yet still approachable to the diner.

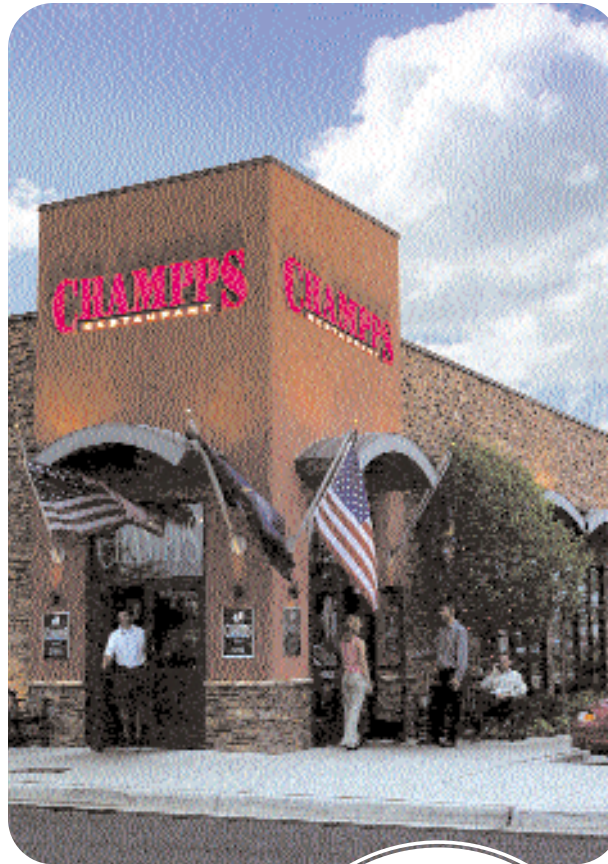
The Cheesecake Factory was truly an innovator with its Avocado Egg Roll — avocado, sun-dried tomato, red onion and cilantro, deep-fried in a crisp Chinese wrapper, and served with a tamarind-cashew dipping sauce.

Looking for every competitive edge possible, operators have found that using products like Asian wrappers as a bridge, and ethnic-inspired fillings as the spin, creates menu items that are familiar with ethnic flair.

And take the classic shrimp cocktail for example — casual-theme operators have embraced this timeless appetizer as a bridge to introduce a range of new and bold flavors. Champps Americana's Thai Shrimp Martini has a definite spin, and one with a dramatic plate presentation as well. Reformulated with an Asian flair, this trendy and visually exciting dish is served in a large martini glass with a Thai dipping sauce. The fantastic presentation always gets a reaction, and the new flavors are well received.

EXOTIC OPPORTUNITIES

Flavors of Latin America and the Caribbean are very much in demand today. Foods and flavors of the Caribbean include exotic fresh fruits, sweet and spicy flavors, and tropical rum drinks. To gently introduce flavors from these hot cuisines, we'll focus on three of the regions' most popular offerings: ceviche, sugarcane and mangoes. All three are easily translatable to American menus, and



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Chain operators like Champps Americana are enhancing their menus by putting ethnic spins on American classics.

Five Points

to remember when using the bridges-and-spins approach in your menu development strategy:

- 1- Foods and flavors must be approachable; avoid uncomplicated ingredients and preparation terms.
- 2- Reformulate comfort foods to introduce new flavors.
- 3- Use serviceware that complements your choice of ethnic flavors.
- 4- Go for the "Wow Factor" with dramatic plate presentations.
- 5- Look for eatertainment and guest interaction opportunities at the table.

can safely bring ethnic excitement to flavor-seeking consumers.

Ceviche is a popular Latin American appetizer consisting of raw fish marinated in citrus juices. But the preparation of marinated raw fish can present an obstacle for mainstream American diners. By slightly modifying the dish with the addition of cooked seafoods like shrimp or crab, the concept is still possible.

Using familiar seafoods as the bridge, a Hand-Shaken Seafood Martini — shrimp, crab, scallops and avocado topped with a Caribbean-inspired sauce and served in a martini glass — could easily become a favorite signature menu item. A fun opportunity with a menu item like this is that the sauce, while prepared in the kitchen, can easily

be shaken in a martini shaker and poured over the cocktail at the table. This form of "eatertainment" is a great way to gently offer new flavors from around the world.

Sugarcane has a seductive, exotic quality and is commonly associated

with making Caribbean rum. At Darden's Bahama Breeze restaurants, sugarcane is pressed for its exotic juice and used in the chain's classic Mojito cocktail. To add additional flair to the drink, sugarcane sticks are used as a garnish for this trendy Cuban drink.



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The use of sugarcane in food preparation has many opportunities, and many independent operators are using it as a bridge to ethnically-inspired Caribbean and Asian foods.

At Le Colonial in Los Angeles, sticks of peeled sugarcane are used as skewers for Vietnamese-style grilled shrimp. And in Asia de Cuba's Panko-Crusted Coconut-Fried Shrimp, sugarcane is used to bring elevation and authenticity to the dish.

Mangoes are one of the hottest flavors contributing to the Caribbean craze. They provide a sweet tropical flavor and are perfect for pairing with spicy ingredients to create a "sweet heat" which diners crave.

In many parts of the country, mangoes are considered to be an exotic fruit eaten only when on a tropical vacation.

A simple way to spice up the menu with the flavor of mango is to pair it with familiar sauces and salsas. By using barbecue sauce and ribs as a bridge, mango can become the spin on a Mango-Habanero Barbecue Sauce to baste Caribbean-Glazed Barbecued Ribs. Many operators incorporate diced mango into their salsas to create a tropical sweetness. The Grand Lux Café features Jamaican Pork Tenderloin seasoned with Caribbean spices, and serves it with a sweet-hot mango salsa.



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The popularity of Asian wrappers provides opportunity for exotic fillings.

COMFORT OPPORTUNITIES

American comfort foods are the ideal bridge for introducing new ingredients and flavors — after all, they are the familiar flavors that many of us grew up with. Because they are easily recognizable, they can be a perfect way to finesse new flavors and ingredients onto the menu.

Mushroom gravy is a classic comfort food, and chefs nationwide are finding it to be a great opportunity to introduce more exotic and flavorful specialty mushrooms. And traditional meatloaf and mashed potatoes gets a contemporary spin when it is prepared with applewood-smoked bacon, served sandwiched between garlic-mashed potatoes, and topped with a rich portobello mushroom gravy.

By all measurable standards, bread pudding would certainly be classified as comfort food. Today, both independent and chain operators are looking at classic desserts like this as a bridge to introduce more exotic flavors to their menu. By incorporating fresh bananas, coconut milk and rum into the preparation, this ordinary dessert becomes the extraordinary. Top it with some tropical Bananas Foster and vanilla ice cream, and you have a menu finale that is familiar with a spin. Introducing menu items using a bridges-and-spins concept satisfies today's diners looking for a flavor adventure without having to venture too far.

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