

With sauces and
condiments, the more
ethnic, spicy and
international the better for
today's consumers



BREAKING

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Rules are made to be bent, or even broken, in the sauces and condiments category. It is not just ketchup and barbecue sauce any longer.

Today, the category is an anything-goes arena with an emphasis on international and spicy flavors, said Yuji Iwasa, head development chef at P.F. Chang's China Bistro, the Scottsdale, Ariz.-based restaurant chain.

"Sauces and condiments are getting spicier these days, and herbs and unique oils are trendy," Mr. Iwasa said. "We're finding

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Yuji Iwasa, head development chef, P.F. Chang’s China Bistro

that our guests are looking for brighter and fresher sauces, and while that’s true, we still find the most popular [at our restaurants] to be sweet and sour.”

That said, the more unique and unusual, the greater attention they receive from restaurant-goers seeking more adventurous fare.

“I feel that today’s consumers are not shying away from bold and savory flavors,” Mr. Iwasa said. “People want that ‘bam!’ in-your-face experience — it’s exciting and lasting.”

What advice would Mr. Iwasa offer product developers wanting to offer tempting new flavors to customers? Use them in moderation. Less is more when creating a new entree.

“Since ethnic flavors can be very polarizing, [they should be] used cautiously to create balance and not to offer any off-putting flavor notes,” he said. “Sauces can mask food, so I think it’s important that they are used to elevate

and layer foods within a dish.”

In Mr. Iwasa’s opinion, leading flavors in today’s marketplace include Asian, Hispanic and Middle Eastern. Favorite Asian flavors include the perennial favorite chili paste as well as sriracha because it offers not only spice but depth and body as well; and fish sauce because the umami behind it elevates food and its “craveability.”

For Hispanic flavor profiles — popular because of the burgeoning Hispanic population and the growth of ethnic restaurants — Mr. Iwasa noted chili peppers and chipotle are at the top of the list. Specifically, he said, chili peppers lure consumers because “a lot of flavor development occurs during the slow cooking of them.”

Chipotle’s popularity, according to Mr. Iwasa is based on “the smoked elements of it (that) have hidden flavors that elevate an already tried-and-true recipe.”

With regard to Middle Eastern flavor profiles, Mr. Iwasa said preserved lemon is one condiment that may quickly

heighten and refresh many dishes. He added that sesame (tahini) is used in many parts of Middle Eastern cooking and offers good body and flavor for enhancing hummus, soups and stews.

And just as a good musician hopes to find the right composition, so, too, does a chef.

“The biggest challenge with any part of cooking is to find the right balance, sweet and savory, hot and cold, spicy and sweet — the calibration of flavors to hit the right note,” he said.

Taking an adventurous approach

The Food Network has given consumers insights into flavors from exotic parts of the world where “a whole new bounty of ingredients and techniques give chefs a new way to accentuate flavors, especially big, bold flavors,” said Craig “Skip” Julius, manager of culinary services for Sensient Flavors, Hoffman Estates, Ill.

Regional Asian and Latin varieties are the current flavor kings, and Mr. Julius expects the trend to last for quite a while. He added that Middle Eastern is



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Craig “Skip” Julius, manager of culinary services, Sensient Flavors

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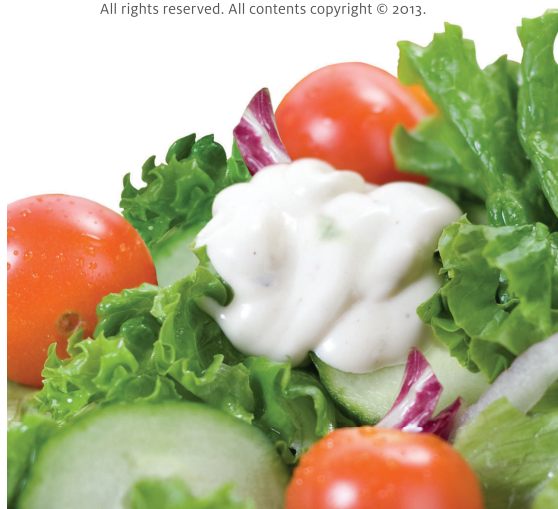
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gaining traction with Americans.

In order to stay true to the techniques of the regions, there are techniques chefs may use.

“Using a mortar and pestle is essential to creating many of the curries, chili pastes and rubs found throughout Asian and Indian cuisines,” Mr. Julius said. “The same holds true with moles. Using a Robo Coupe or Cuisinart is far faster and easier, but they just won’t yield the same texture and complexity of the traditional methodology.”

Sometimes adding an ethnic flavor profile to a sauce or condiment to create a new, distinct flavor may require a bit of travel around the globe.

“Many [product developers] are taking excursions to different regions in China, Thailand and Mexico to learn more first-hand about the nuances of ethnic flavors,” said Gerrie Bouchard, marketing manager for Vineland, NJ-based Eatem

Foods Co. “It’s no longer learning from a textbook or making assumptions — they are immersing themselves to define their palates.”

Using fancy footwork

One of the most significant challenges for mass-marketing a sauce or condiment involves staying authentic while delivering something that is also accepted by consumers as a new flavor trend.

“It’s a dance,” Ms. Bouchard said. “Sourcing exotic ingredients can also be a challenge as ingredient statements, allergen statements and, of course, the cost of the products is always a concern.”

Ms. Bouchard not only sees sriracha as “on fire” right now, but also a Middle-Eastern condiment staple that has become mainstream for most Americans.

“From a sauce and condiment standpoint, I see hummus breaking away from the dip category and being used more and



“We are seeing a growing interest and acceptance of products from and inspired by Israel, Turkey and Morocco.”

Gerrie Bouchard, marketing manager, Eatem Foods Co.



Marc Halperin, chief operating officer of San Francisco-based CCD Innovation

more as a sandwich spread,” she said.

Like Mr. Julius, Ms. Bouchard sees a lot of potential with Greek yogurt.

“We are seeing a growing interest and acceptance of products from and inspired by Israel, Turkey and Morocco,” she said. “The insurgence of Greek yogurts may have played a role in this exploration where consumers are asking, ‘What else does that region have to offer?’ From these regions, we are seeing trends developing with more yogurt-based sauces like tzatziki or cacik, as well as flavored hummus, baba ghanoush and chutneys.”

Marc Halperin, chief operating officer of San Francisco-based CCD Innovation, said that a broad interest in global flavors today, particularly among Gen Y or millennial consumers, will only grow in the future. He pointed out umami-rich foods, harissa and gastrique are a few of the popular choices among chefs.

“And in addition to the above flavors noted, popular ethnic flavors also

include peri-peri, chimichurri, romesco and aioli,” Mr. Halperin said.

Clean label challenge

Barbara Zatto, director of culinary for Mizkan Americas Inc., Mount Prospect, Ill., said she is getting quite a few calls for authentic Asian and Latin ingredients. She explained that research chefs are trying to straddle the line between authentically ethnic and how the American palate will accept new flavors.

“Sometimes this is seen in the form of sauce kits that enable the consumer to control the outcome,” Ms. Zatto said. “Culinologists are trying to import with limited success many ingredients from Asia and Latin America, as well as Africa and the Middle East.”

Sometimes integrating exotic, authentic sauces and condiments in the United States may be difficult, especially when it comes to food safety and clean labels.

“Traceability is an issue,” she said, “and authenticating a clean label ingre-



Barbara Zatto, director of culinary for Mizkan Americas Inc.

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dient from something that is imported is a challenge.”

Among the condiments getting a lot of attention today, according to Ms. Zatto, is everything from homemade pickles to mint and tamarind chutneys to many curries. She added that gochujang and kimchi “are being seen on almost everything.”

She suggested that takes on Korean banchan (side dishes) are becoming mainstream. Sauces made with spirits and fruits are seen much more today, especially when used with pork.

With so many new sauces and condiments today at restaurants, Ms. Zatto explained consumers even may be confused about how to use the items.

“[For consumers,] a good question to ask is: ‘Is it a sauce, side dish or accompaniment to a meal?’” she said.

For Daniel Messmer, R&D chef for Beloit, Wis.-based Kerry Ingredients & Flavours, it’s not just consumers but also chefs who may find it difficult to figure out how to work effectively with some of the sauces and condiments.

“It’s not just the ingredients that are the challenges that we face, but how they are used,” he said. “Examples are the time some homemade recipes take to toast all of the spices to bring out and change the flavors of the spices in a good curry, for example, or the freshness of the peppers and tomatoes in the salsa that is made fresh every day. To convert those types of flavor profiles over to something that can be manufactured with an extended shelf life in most cases is challenging.”

For creative culinologists, however, the latest generation of sauces and condiments provides a world of opportunity, in more ways than one. ●