

## Food Trends 2012: Expect More Global Tastes

Edgier global fusion cooking, beer gardens and more creative comfort foods are among the trends New York City-based consultants Baum+Whiteman International expect to take off in 2012. Here the firm, which creates high-profile restaurants for clients around the world, looks at where the action will be in the coming year.



### 1. Whole World on a Plate

Look for excitement at the lower end of the market where devil-may-care entrepreneurs are piling flavors from all over the globe onto a single dish. Gastronomically, everything goes. Bite into a sandwich of chipotle pork chop with burnt sugar glaze, carrot kimchee and tarragon mayonnaise and your taste buds will announce that these flavors came from a global Mixmaster. This is what's emerging: A multi-ethnic, multi-sensory dining experience where flavors clash on purpose. A multi-cultural zucchini pizza dabbled with hummus and topped with crunchy wasabi peas is from nowhere geographically because it is from everywhere. We can seal our southern border but it won't stop folks from stuffing tacos and tortillas with outlandish things like octopus and feta cheese, or with barbecued chicken gizzards and sriracha slaw. And any day now, someone will stuff a porchetta with bulgogi seasonings. Cooking is at a crossroads...where everything collides.

It's mostly happening at eateries like 100 Montaditos, where food is cheap because the risk is low, for both buyers and seller. Your wallet can't get hurt by a bibimbap burger from a food truck if it only costs four bucks, right? Or fried sushi filled with a cheeseburger? The banh mi, our sandwich of the year in 2011, is now an object of much tinkering around the country; it is a feature on Steve Ells's new Asian ShopHouse prototype, too. Sandwiches are the big focus of this mix-match trend. There's an over-the-top thrill about a sandwich filled with a carnitas, sausage, jalapeno, an egg over easy, and a hot dog with cilantro aioli from roadside shack. The wilder, the better. After all, if your new car's parts come from around the world, why shouldn't your sandwich ingredients? Next up: tortas and cemitas.

### 2. A Widening "Flavor Gap"

The menu items discussed above contain ingredients and multi-ethnic combinations that are alien to your local Panera Bread -- or Pizza Hut or even Five Guys -- because chains' financial stakes are so high, they're compelled to serve the fewest number of items to the greatest number of people. Savvy

independent operators (most of them young) can use this growing "flavor gap" to differentiate themselves from more staid corporate competitors.

### **3. Instead of Bread**

Stretching for even more differentiation, look for sandwiches piled on things other than bread. Arepas, for example. Flattened tostones. Bao. Waffles. Rice cakes. Think of KFC's notorious Double Down calorie bomb...but with more inventive ingredients.

### **4. Innards, Odd Parts**

We said it last year ... and we're saying it again: Tongue -- lamb and beef -- and gizzards are hot. They're moving up from ethnic neighborhoods (think Mexican and Korean tacos) and onto menus of upscale restaurants. Pigs' ears, too, show up on breakfast dishes right through the day to night-time bar snacks. In the year ahead, look for more "wobbly cuts" -- such as tripe, chicken livers that are crunch-fried (a great topping for Caesar salad) and even beef heart (but not brains, yet) -- because customers are increasingly adventurous. Even fancy places will discover that they can sell tongue tacos at the bar and izakaya-style gizzards on skewers, and pigs' ears and ox tails will show up on white tablecloths.

### **5. In a Pickle**

House-made vegetable and fruit pickles will appear on more and more menus as chefs concoct ever more complex ways of making these preserves. They're important because they (a) enliven all those ingredient-laden multi-cultural sandwiches and (b) provide a foil for intensely flavored organs. These are not your grandmother's pickles; chefs are going global with additions of Asian fish sauce, Mexican peppers, ginger, yuzu, smoked paprika, star anise and more. Some are selling bowls of their own pickled products as individual menu items...and there's a kimchee free-for-all, since there's no "authentic" recipe. Kimchee might be the ingredient of the year.

### **6. At Last, Korean Hits the Charts**

Thanks largely to food trucks, Korean food has entered the American lexicon. Bulgogi, kimchee, kalbi, bibimbap are all the rage in Wednesday food sections, which means that shelter magazines will start running dumbed-down recipes in 2012 and we wouldn't be shocked to see Korean-inflected fried chicken appearing on some chain restaurant menus. Look for upscale places to serve items poached or braised in kimchee broth augmented with Asian and non-Asian flavors. You won't find red pepper paste (kochujang) in your supermarket's ethnic food sections next year, but wait until 2013. Reminder: Korean barbecue comes with a barrage of pickled things, making them right on target (see "In a Pickle," above).

Since Koreans run most of the country's sushi bars, expect lots of fusion recipes as they open restaurants beyond the bounds of Korea-towns.

## **7. Not Everyone Is Broke**

About a quarter of America's population is still happily working and another large chunk has a bit less -- but not nothing -- to spend, and after deep psychological retrenchment they'll be returning to restaurant life. They're not burning money, but they're still having fun spending. And when they do, they're seeking fun, interesting food and a sense of adventure. From this, we see the following:

\* Comfort food hits the wall: When the recession hit three years ago, Americans gravitated to "crisis food": homey roast chicken, soothing meat loaf, voluptuous mac-and-cheese, unchallenging sushi and the Holy Cheeseburger. Now we're bored by gastro-nostalgia. Instead, we're demanding new taste thrills and culinary invention. Mac-and-cheese is being reworked with pork rillettes, or with chicharrones for crunch and braised pork necks for depth; or it is being stuffed into sandwiches along with fried chicken or chicken-fried steak. Classic fettuccine recipes are twisted with Asian Bolognese; pasta carbonara, already much abused, now comes with meatballs, with snails and with chorizos...and now shrimp-and- grits is getting worked over. There's no limit to what people will slap onto hamburgers (head cheese, bone marrow, pastrami-and-eggs, Cajun crawfish) as new entrants to the "gourmet burger" biz fall over themselves being creative. Sushi's getting stuffed with multi-cultural ingredients. Plain old roast chicken's giving way to goosed-up fried renditions: highly spicy, highly crisp Korean fried chicken are the most evident, but Latino flavors are being grafted on as well. Guacamole is being spiked with wasabi paste. Hummus comes in a dozen or more flavors. And meatloaf has taken a dive as customers opt for all manner of meatballs at twice the price.

\* Early drinking, late-night dining: People making sales and service calls, and supervisory staff, are spending more time in their cars, so they're shifting social times to cocktails at four and dinner at ten. That's because they've only chatted and texted with colleagues also scattered on the highways, and 4 p.m. is a logical time to rendezvous somewhere, unwind with a cocktail and maybe have lunch that was missed earlier. Hotels are big beneficiaries and they'll be upscaling drink lists, bar food and furnishings. Road warriors and late-working desk jockeys get a second wind long after dark, congregating in better restaurants' bars and hotels that are now revving up flavors and presentations. Smart establishments are still pricing things so that they are affordable luxuries and taking advantage of this demand for late night meals.

\* Round things that go pop in the mouth: Kimchee- and-parmesan-filled arancini, fried goat cheese balls, spherical falafel, meatballs of all kinds, bacalao croquettes, crispy oxtail risotto balls -- all dropped briefly in the fryer and served with multi-ethnic sauces and dips -- are becoming hot-hot sharable bar food. They're contemporary, drink-friendly finger food and no one seems to mind the calories. Also gaining steam: mini-sandwiches with banh mi flavors, Korean meatball sliders, all sorts of global chicken lollipops, ceviches, flatbreads from everywhere, dishes with fried green tomatoes. Next, expect smart chefs to explore the world of Japanese snacks.

## **8. Beer Here**

Outdoor or indoor/outdoor beer gardens will boom around the country, especially from restaurants and breweries with unused backyards, oversized parking lots or available rooftops. The bigger, the better. Good, cheap beer, often at five bucks a pop, and unchallenging food like pretzels, hot dogs and burgers, draw crowds seeking a fresh-air alternative to indoor bars or lounges. Movable roofs and warmers make them year-round businesses. Topping them all, there's Birreria, a Batali/Bastianich 10,000 sq.ft. rooftop extravaganza in New York with its own micro-brewery, wine from barrels, operable roof and terrific "alpine" food.

Also, expect to see more Japanese craft beers. They're already making inroads on beer-centric menus and Asian-inflected restaurants and they give lots of local artisan brews a good run for their money.

## **9. Wheels Coming Off of Food Trucks**

It's already happening, but it will escalate in 2012: Food truck operators will open brick-and-mortar shops. Many will put their vehicles on the block; others will attempt to run both businesses. The reason is clear: There's more money to be made in storefronts now that food trucks -- pioneering in social media marketing -- have proven that eccentric menus have great market potential, and the trucks create strongly branded identities that attract customers and satisfy wary landlords. If they open two or three storefronts, the trucks act as moving billboards. Only danger: They may lose menu focus in trying to keep their new places filled; then they become like the big chains.

## **10. Chocolate "Dirt": The Foragers Are Coming!**

A few years back, an unknown chef at restaurant Noma, in Copenhagen, created a strange series of tableaux on his dining room tables, using tree bark, pine needles, lichens and other things normally grazed by reindeer. So it was that in 2010 the Nordic forager Rene Redzepi displaced the Spanish chemistry wizard Ferran Adria (for whom he once worked) as the world's numero uno chef.

Molecular gastronomy hasn't exactly evaporated, but now you might get trampled by dozens of upscale chefs rushing to harvest dinner from the underbrush and under rocks - or assembling dishes that looked like they might be untamed gardens.

In the U.S., "wildcrafting" is largely, but not entirely, a West Coast trend. Fore runner Jeremy Fox composed beautiful plates at Ubuntu in Napa several years ago; John Sedlar at Playa and Daniel Patterson at Coi, both in Los Angeles, and David Kinch at Manresa in Los Gatos are masters of the style. You'll find similar efforts at McCrady's in Charleston, and Toque in Montreal. Perhaps the most "florid" exemplar is Dominique Crenn at Atelier Crenn (subtitled "poetic culinaria") in San Francisco, with bonsai-like garden presentation. These chefs' horticultural foodscapes appear to have been assembled by gnomes with tweezers and dental instruments. They're sent to your table on slabs of slate, miniature rock slides, primordial wood shapes and thrown glass instead of plates. Their dishes come with lyrical names such as Ocean Creatures and Weeds, A Walk in the Garden, Into the Vegetable Garden, or Le Jardin d'Hiver.

### **11. Forget Skyscraper Architecture.**

Chefs are shifting from stacking food as high as possible to stringing out ingredients in caterpillar-like lines along oblong or rectangular plates. This may look like "dribble art" but at least it keeps the flavors separated. Ceviches, tartars, sushi and sashimi are most often handled this way, with salads as the next frontier.

### **12. Peruvian Gains Momentum**

Peru's food is cross-pollinated by Japanese, Spanish, Chinese, Italian and Andean flavors and cooking techniques. It is the source of the world's most exciting ceviches and tiraditos (another raw fish dish), and it is where pisco sours come from. This past September saw many of the world's most talented chefs in Lima for a conference that put Peruvian cuisine and ingredients into the spotlight. Peruvian chef Gaston Acurio in September opened La Mar Cebicheria in New York, following a success in San Francisco, where the food goes from high note to high note. Mo Chica in LA and Limon in San Francisco are creating their own Peruvian stirs. We predict that this is the next cuisine, so you need to know about causas, lomo saltado, aji amarillo, anticuchos, cuy (whole roast guinea pig, legs, head and all) and tiraditos, along with vibrant, acidic fruits and juices that go into their unique raw fish preparations.

### **13. Hamburgers: Hanging in There, For Now**

We predicted last year that "gourmet burgers" would peak in 2011. But they haven't and we may be premature. Seems that a new burger chain launches every few weeks without regard for the growing density of competition. We think they'll outrun the available demand; they're selling a product that's available everywhere; creativity is running amok as newcomers strain for differentiation; and there's a low barrier to entry. We see a bubble. So wait until next year.

On burgers, anything goes: Eggs, foie gras and beef meet up in Lemaire's Barnyard Burger.

#### **14. Three Cautionary Trends**

\* Misuse of words like "artisan" and "heirloom" and "local" will pollute their meaning, especially as chains co-opt them for marketing slogans. Adding a whole grain to factory bread doesn't make it "artisan" and not all misshapen tomatoes are "heirlooms" from "local" growers. "Green" and "sustainable" fall into this category, too.

\* There's a looming oversupply of farmers' markets.

\* Too many chefs are smoking too many foods.

Source: Restaurant Hospitality