

AMERICAN ETHNIC:

A Growing Nostalgia



*Pictured: Braised pork tenderloin
with rice, mashed potatoes and pineapple*

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

At the same time as consumers are embracing ethnic fusion, they're also rediscovering an appreciation for regional American foods. Today's focus on local, in-season ingredients certainly qualifies as a top trend, but it's also a rediscovery of forgotten traditions, a yearning for a pre-industrial, pre-biotech age and "the way things used to be." You can see it in the rising menu mentions of heirloom produce varieties, and farmers' efforts to bring back heritage breeds of livestock.

A growing nostalgia about traditional rural lifestyles is partly responsible for a renewed interest in such all-American cuisines as Pennsylvania Dutch, and the "cowboy" cooking of the west and southwest. The Pennsylvania Dutch (or Amish) people are famous for their simplicity, and cowboys ate what was available and what sustained them through long days of hard work.

What opportunities does this provide for the modern-day chef? Here are some ideas that fit the season – and current dining trends – to help keep your fall menus both focused and profitable.

BRAISE A TRAIL TO PROFIT

Slow-cooked meats are rich, flavorful, and filling, and they start with inexpensive cuts that can more than offset the added cost of ingredients such as heirloom vegetables and house-made condiments. "Whole animal" cooking is coming into its own, and customers are curious about what they've been



missing by only focusing on the choicest cuts. Hanger and skirt steaks, for example, are gaining popularity on menus, and, in the hands of creative and talented chefs, customers will even order such things as blade, belly, and cheeks. Even tripe, which not too long ago was considered just offal, is finding a niche in a variety of slow-cooked recipes.

While braising does take practice to acquire mastery, one of the key advantages is that you don't have to worry about cooking the dish to order or getting the temperature exactly right – perfect for your busiest nights. Once the meat is fork tender and the sauce is thick and rich, all you have to do is let the flavors intensify as you plate the rest of the dish.

USE BEER AND CIDER

Stouts, ales, and lagers have been an American staple since the Jamestown Settlement days, and the Northeast was once a major hops-producing region for the country. Likewise, apples may not have originated in the U.S., but they have certainly proliferated here, cultivated with great care.

More recently, growers have focused on apple varieties that, although dry and even bitter to the taste, produce wonderful, spicy, and aromatic ciders. You can substitute cider for wine in a wide variety of dishes to transform their flavor profile; just use your judgment and imagination, and know that customers will welcome the variation.

Beer offers all kinds of benefits in cooking, and is especially helpful for tenderizing meats such as the cuts described earlier. The wide variation, from stout to pilsners, accommodates most types of meat, including chicken (e.g., beer-can chicken) and even fish (beer-battered cod). Interestingly, beer also works well with certain baked goods, such as dark stout in pumpkin cake, helping to add moisture, flavor, and lift.





EXPLORE WINTER SQUASH AND SWEET POTATOES

Few things are as American as winter squash; in fact, the word squash derives from a Native American word. And it's abundant in the fall, as well as trending higher in customers' value perception. Butternut squash, for example, with its mild flavor and relative ease of use, is a fantastic substitute for potatoes. It also makes naturally creamy and soul-satisfying soups. And, as you already know, the wide variety of shapes, sizes, and colors makes for lovely centerpieces for fall-themed banquets.



Sweet potatoes are also extremely popular right now. They're showing up in restaurants everywhere, as fries, in a colorful medley with Brussels sprouts, and with an incredible array of stuffings such as coconut curry, spinach and corn, and twice-baked variations with maple syrup and toasted pecans. Use your creativity and knowledge of flavors, or simply bake them until completely soft, and serve with fresh rosemary and a pat of butter.

ESTABLISH YOUR SENSE OF PLACE

In the last issue of *Essence*, Chef Eamon Lee emphasized the importance of terroir, the ingredients and flavors that define your sense of place. Remember that until the middle of the 20th century, Americans had no choice but to eat locally grown and raised foods. When you source locally grown produce, cheeses, and pastured meats from within your region, simply naming the source of your ingredients on your menu, or the breed of chicken or pork you are using, will go a long way toward communicating the authenticity you are trying to capture through your cooking.

Look around at what's growing locally through the fall season – Brussels sprouts, kale, carrots, cabbage, beets, parsnips, cauliflower, grapes, and more – and seek out variations in the standard offerings that can help your dishes stand out. When writing your menu descriptions, use the distinctive names of the vegetable varieties that you are using, such as dwarf blue kale, golden beets, and snowball cauliflower. In addition to naming the varieties, you can present the delightful color variations – purple cauliflower! opal basil! – to instantly communicate the care and attention you give to each of your dishes.

▼ *Today, there is more competition for customers' dollars, from more places, than ever before. While staying current with the trends is an ongoing challenge, it's a crucial part of success in today's restaurant landscape. Maines Corporate Chefs Jake Hizny and Eamon Lee are available to consult with you on ways to cater to customers' ever-evolving*

tastes. Talk with your Account Manager about Maines' complimentary recipe-development and other business-optimization services.





THE PENNSYLVANIA DUTCH TRADITION

Today, restaurants across the country are embracing the famous cuisine and traditions of the Pennsylvania Dutch. Pennsylvania Dutch food, in terms of being a regional American cuisine, isn't much different than Cajun or Creole or the food of the Pacific Northwest. It's a wonderful regional cuisine, but it is just starting to find its place in fine restaurants across the country. Set your restaurant apart from the competition and become a trendsetter by celebrating the season with the traditional farm-to-table cuisine of the Pennsylvania Dutch. It will both intrigue and satisfy your customers looking for a modern spin on comfort food.

The blending of recipes from many homelands produces tasty dishes and recipes that have been handed down for generations. The cooking is simple, plain and hearty. The cuisine often mixes sweet and savory or sweet and sour foods all in the same dish under the rubric that "seven sweets and seven sour" should be represented. The traditional "sweets" are primarily based on locally-grown fruits—apple, quince, berries, candied watermelon rind, schnitz (dried apples), shoofly—the "sour" are pickled onion, chow-chow, beets, cauliflower, tomato relish, spiced cucumbers and other specialties that reveal definite German influences.

The Pennsylvania Dutch are famous for their pickles, relishes and condiments, often served as part of the traditional 'sweets and sour' with a large meal. Chow-Chow is made up of a variety of vegetables

that are in season near the end of the summer. Although there is sugar in the liquid, it's that sour taste that everyone remembers.

The Dutch used every edible part of the meat and it is from this thrifty economy that the specialty Scrapple was derived. Scrapple is made from pork, sage, spices and grain such as cornmeal, oatmeal or buckwheat. After the scrapple had been prepared, it was stored in a cool place and set aside for future use. When served, it was cut in thin slices and fried in butter or bacon fat until crisp.

Most meals incorporate the fresh produce and seasonal ingredients, which are found in such abundance in the region. In the spring, the dandelion season gives us one of their choicest salads. Each fall, barrels of apples are converted into apple butter, a regional specialty that is spread on bread or toast or used as a filling for baked goods. Corn is a year-round Dutch standby. It appears in endless guises. Cooked with bacon, onion and minced green peppers, it is used to stuff peppers. It appears in omelets, hash, noodles, fish cakes and waffles. It also used in pies, salads and soups.

Food is abundant and appetites are hearty in the Pennsylvania Dutch country. The traditional dishes are relatively simple and unlike most regional cookery the ingredients are readily available. This is a vital cuisine, the ancestral food that many people in the region treasure as a link to both the American and European aspects of their history.



Pennsylvania Dutch Apple Butter

- 10 pounds apples
- 6 quarts cider
- 4 pounds sugar
- 2 tablespoons ground cloves
- 2 tablespoons ground allspice
- 3 tablespoons ground cinnamon

Wash and quarter the apples. Boil the cider for 20 minutes; then put the apples into the pot with the cider and cook until the apples are very tender. Press through a sieve to remove skin and seeds. Add the sugar and spices to the pulp. Cook until as thick as desired (a soft paste); stir frequently to prevent burning.



Chow-Chow

- 1 cup chopped green tomatoes
- 1 cup chopped bell peppers
- 1 cup chopped cabbage
- 1 whole cucumber, chopped
- 1 cup chopped onions
- 2 quarts water
- 1/4 cup salt
- 1 cup chopped carrots
- 1 cup chopped green beans
- 2 teaspoons mustard seed
- 2 teaspoons celery seed
- 2 cups vinegar
- 2 cups sugar

Soak tomatoes, peppers, cucumber and onions overnight in water and salt. Drain. Cook carrots and green beans for 10 minutes and drain. Combine vinegar, sugar, salt, mustard and celery seed in large stockpot. Bring to a boil, dissolving sugar and salt. Add all vegetables, bring back to boil, then reduce heat to medium low and simmer for 10 minutes. Refrigerate 24 hours before serving.