

# The New Customer Profile:

*Meet the  
Adventure Seeker*

## Top Five Reasons Why Today's Customer Wants to Discover Asian Fusion

BY LINDSAY OTT

*In China they're celebrating the Year of the Dragon – considered the luckiest out of the twelve-year zodiac cycle. Here in America, we have entered the year of "Discovery," according to Sensient Flavors, a leading global flavor and fragrance company. Sensient believes customers are seeking out flavors that are "totally new" to them or "reinventions of familiar tastes." Take time to understand the explorer mindset of your customers and why Asian fusion is so popular. Then, introduce them to innovative Asian fusion cuisine (see pages 18 and 24), and you could make 2012 your restaurant's luckiest year yet.*

### 1 ASIAN INFLUENCE: EVERYWHERE YOU LOOK...

From the increase in yoga studios to the popularity of green tea, it's clear that Americans are more open-minded than ever to Asian and Pacific Rim culture. Integrative treatments that combine Eastern and Western medicinal practices are going mainstream at many large hospitals and health centers, like the Mayo Clinic. For example, acupuncture – derived from traditional Chinese medicine – is covered by many insurance plans. People of all ages, and from all walks of life, are embracing Asian influences in health and wellness. They'll be naturally receptive to seeing more Asian influences on your restaurant's menu.





## 2

### READY TO MOVE OUT OF THE COMFORT ZONE

When the economy plummeted in 2008 and stayed at rock bottom, consumers responded with an emotional craving for comfort food. It seemed meat loaf, mac n' cheese, and apple pie were hot ticket items on every restaurant menu. Now, customers are tiring of their safety net, and are ready to explore the culinary world again. In fact, leading research firm Technomic predicts that in 2012 customers will seek a "twist on the familiar" by way of infusing comfort foods with new, foreign flavors. That could mean an apple and goji berry pie (goji berries are a Chinese "super fruit" loaded with Vitamin C and antioxidants) or a spicy Thai meatloaf with a cilantro-lime sauce.



## 3

### CUSTOMERS ARE MORE AWARE OF AUTHENTIC ASIAN CUISINE

Generic Asian menu items won't fly with today's more worldly customer, who will be less than thrilled with Americanized Asian food like a standard Chinese chicken salad or chop suey (see page 8 to delve deeper into the evolution of Asian fusion). Your guests want to experience *authentic* Asian flavors and ingredients in your fusion dishes. That's why on all the 2012 trend lists, you saw cuisine from *specific* Asian regions and countries top the charts. For example, Andrew Freeman and Company's Passion Report cited "Modern Thai Cuisine" and the National Restaurant Association's 2012 What's Hot Chef Survey listed Korean fare as the fifth most popular ethnic influence.

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## 4 FOOD TRUCKS HAVE DRIVEN UP INTEREST IN ASIAN FUSION

Last year, the Food Network's "Great Food Truck Race" brought the innovative concept – and equally inspired fusion fare – of mobile cuisine into American popular culture. While food trucks have yet to show up on the streets of small and mid-size Northeastern cities, the trends have arrived and customers are eager to discover them! Some of the most popular food trucks feature Asian fusion fare such as New York City's Korilla, which serves up Korean barbeque with a twist, such as the Bulgogi Burrito (*bulgogi* is thinly sliced, marinated Korean beef) with a side of BKFR (bacon, kim chee, and fried rice).

And we can thank the Nom Nom Truck (in Los Angeles and San Francisco) for popularizing the Vietnamese baguette sandwich, *banh mi*, which is itself an example of East-meets-West fusion. When the French occupied Vietnam in the colonial period, they introduced the Vietnamese to the baguette and mayonnaise. Today, *banh mi* features those two ingredients as well as traditional Vietnamese shaved meats, pickled carrots, cilantro, and daikon.



## 5 GUESTS ARE LOOKING FOR UNIQUE, HANDMADE CUISINE

Perhaps the best news for the independent restaurant owner is that customers are craving dishes that are unique, hand-crafted and one of a kind. In fact, research firm SPINS believes that use of the word "artisanal" is only increasing in popularity. And leading research firm Mintel believes that items described as "handmade" are resonating with customers who want "more from their dining experience than efficiency." This is where you have an advantage over the big chains: Asian fusion gives your culinary team the opportunity to create truly original dishes featuring unexpected flavors that appeal to customers' sense of adventure. As mentioned in the last issue of *Essence*, Baum + Whiteman International Restaurant Consultants call this the "flavor gap." Big chains don't want to risk scaring away customers with out-there flavor combinations, but the fact is, *customers want to discover them* – and with creative Asian fusion dishes, you can deliver.

A few decades ago, Asian fusion would have scared away typical customers who, for the most part, craved familiar classics. Today, everyone from hip college students to just-retired baby boomers is eager to explore a new world of flavor. Asian fusion also gives you and your staff a chance to broaden your horizons and discover new ingredients, techniques, and trends. The world is only getting smaller thanks to globalization, so make the most of it and give your customers Asian fusion options to satisfy their inner explorer.

