

TOP TREND

Five Reasons Latin-Inspired Cuisine Is Here to Stay

Whether you call it Nuevo Latino, Bistro Latino, Floribbean, Pan-American, New World, or just inspired cooking, Latin flavors continue to heat up menus across all sectors of the restaurant industry. Here are five reasons that help explain the popularity of Latin American cuisine and why it is likely to grow in influence.

1 LATINOS BRANCHING OUT

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the Hispanic population rose by 29% between 2000 and 2010, accounting for more than half of the U.S. population growth over that period. Hispanics now make up 16 percent of the U.S. population, up from 13 percent in 2000. While the majority of Hispanics is of Mexican or Puerto Rican origin, a rising number are from Cuba, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Colombia, Honduras, Ecuador, and Peru. Trends are usually fanned by the young, and Latinos now make up a quarter of the U.S. population under 18. Significantly, the Latino population is dispersing across the country, with some of the highest percentage increases in metropolitan counties of the Midwest, West, and Northeast. More Latinos in more regions of the country not only means increased Latino food consumption, it also provides a foundation for greater diversity and awareness of Latin styles and contributions to the culinary landscape.



2 THE TEST OF TIME

Here's what People magazine said about Patria, the nuevo Latino restaurant opened by Douglas Rodriguez in New York City: "Superchef Makes Latin Food Haute Haute Haute!" That was in 1994. And just last year, the American Culinary Federation (ACF), the National Restaurant Association and the Institute of Food Technologists' 2011 Top 10 Trends Report put ethnic fusion, including Latino American/Nuevo Latino cuisine, at #2 on its list, with "Regional Ethnic" cuisine at #1. It's that kind of staying power that separates fads from trends.



3 AT YOUR FRIENDLY GROCER

Lasting food trends follow a recognizable pattern. They first become popular through upscale restaurants (and, increasingly, food trucks). They get coverage in the media. Then certain dishes and key ingredients become available at chain restaurants and high-end grocery stores. And finally the trend goes mainstream. This pattern is clearly visible in Mexican cuisine (also sushi), with adobo, chipotles, papayas, and tomatillos now widely available. Latino cuisine is also far along this progression; although it may never become truly mainstream (it does require knowledge of an entire continent, after all), Latin America is heavily represented in food magazines and television shows, and many of the ingredients are easy to find.

4 WHERE THERE'S FLAVOR

One reason Latin cuisine continues to be a rising trend is that it is part of a larger trend toward lower fat, high-flavor foods. The Technomic 2012 Restaurant Trends survey puts "consumers seek a twist on the familiar" at #1, with "diners demand simple preparations of fresh ingredients" at #2. And the McCormick Global Flavor Forecast for 2012 puts foods that "balance modern flair with cultural authenticity" in the #1 spot. Latin American food, with its amazing diversity of ingredients and cooking styles, offers endless options to stand out.

5 MEETING IN THE MIDDLE

Latin flavors also play well with another rising industry trend toward "fast casual" establishments (e.g., Chipotle, Panera) that combine some of the qualities of upscale restaurants (high-quality ingredients, signature dishes, tasteful decor) with the reasonable prices and quick service associated with traditional fast food. According to the NPD Group, fast-casual restaurants saw an approximately 17% increase in traffic over the past three years, leading upscale and fast-food restaurants alike to emulate their strategies. Because food is the key differentiator among fast casuals, these restaurants absolutely have to innovate. Latin cuisine is among the obvious directions to go.

