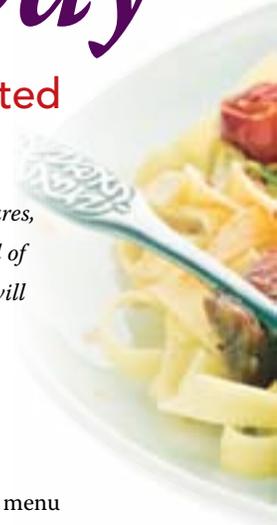


Focus on Fusion this VALENTINE'S Day

It's the Ideal Occasion for Pairing Up the Unexpected

Everyone knows an odd couple: Polar opposites who make the perfect pair. When creating your VALENTINE'S Day menu, take an unconventional approach to matchmaking and pair up textures, flavors, and ingredients from different culinary traditions. Your goal should be a menu that's full of surprising twists, but not too "out there." Try a few of the following fusion tactics, and the result will be love at first bite for your customers this Valentine's Day...



CONVENTIONAL + GLOBAL

One of the most powerful – and cost-effective – ways to infuse your menu with innovative flavors is by “globalizing” conventional condiments, sauces, and dips. Remember, VALENTINE'S Day dinner is a special evening out – what couple wants shrimp with standard cocktail sauce? Offer global dipping options like a roasted tomato and Peppadew pepper chutney (an Indian sauce), or a smoked paprika and heirloom tomato cocktail sauce (Hungarian-inspired). Condiments with an ethnic flavor are a perennial favorite or a hot trend according to over 80 percent of the chefs surveyed in the 2012 National Restaurant Association's What's Hot Chef Survey! And don't stop with adding just one globalized condiment to your dish; combine multiples in One-Dish. This is called the multi-ethnic or “multi-culti” trend, according to Baum+Whiteman International Food and Restaurant Consultants, and they predict it will be a very big deal in 2012. An example would be a tuna steak crusted in crushed wasabi peas and panko breading (Japanese), topped with a queso blanco cream sauce (Mexican).



HIGH + LOW

In fashion, top stylists often highlight their skills by creating looks that integrate both high-end brand names and lower-cost labels. “High-Low” cuisine is a white-hot trend right now, and is an opportunity for your culinary team to showcase its creativity. Experiment with making casual, ethnic street food into an upscale main dish. Try *Muu Bing*, a common Bangkok street food consisting of pork skewers marinated in coriander root. Presentation can take an informal item like *Muu Bing* to a new level (and price point): Serve it over fragrant jasmine rice with edible flowers and capture the romance and elegance of VALENTINE'S Day that your customers are looking for.





THE FLAVOR GAP: YOUR INDEPENDENT ADVANTAGE

Singles don't feel so lucky on VALENTINE'S Day, but independent restaurants have an advantage over the chains when it comes to capitalizing on the current "multi-ethnic flavor trend." According to Baum+Whiteman International Food and Restaurant Consultants, the chains can't deliver the complex global flavor profiles that customers are craving today, because by nature, chains are "compelled to serve the fewest number of items to the greatest number of people." Use your ability to constantly create innovative flavor combinations to your advantage...

COMFORT + CULTURE

The novelty of plain, predictable comfort food has worn off, leaving customers hungry for something to "tingle their taste buds" according to Technomic's report on Top Restaurant Trends for 2012. Give standard comfort food a culture shock, like spaghetti and meatballs with a Japanese twist: Substitute soba noodles (made with buckwheat flour) for standard pasta, and add rich, shitake mushrooms to your sauce.

Or offer a Greek version of macaroni and cheese, featuring Kasseri and feta cheeses, garnished with fresh oregano. In fact, using ethnic cheeses is one of the easiest ways to imbue a comfort food staple with a hint of culture — and, as an added bonus, the 2012 NRA What's Hot Chef Survey ranks ethnic cheeses as a current "top 5" ingredient.

SAVORY + SWEET

Meshing sweet and savory flavor profiles is a great way to add excitement to a VALENTINE'S Day menu. If this sounds daunting, consider how savory, salty bacon has made its way into chocolate bars, which you can find on the shelves of your average grocery store. Speaking of chocolate, a savory dish such as a house-made beef stew gets an instant upgrade with the addition of Mexican baking chocolate. Or try topping steak with a rich mole sauce, a traditional Mexican sauce made of chocolate. Your guests will love the creative use of chocolate on a VALENTINE'S Day menu.

AREAS OF INTEREST

Types of Cuisine Topping the Charts of the 2012 NRA What's Hot Chef Survey.

Mix and match flavors, textures, and ingredients from the following culinary traditions to capitalize on the "multi-ethnic" trend. Interestingly, Peruvian cuisine was tied with fusion cuisine as the number-one ethnic cuisine, proving that customers truly want the whole world on a plate.

- 1) Peruvian
- 2) Cuban
- 3) American Regional
- 4) Southeast Asian (Thai, Vietnamese, Malaysian)
- 5) North African/Maghreb
- 6) Korean
- 7) Latin American
- 8) Mediterranean
- 9) Nordic/Scandinavian
- 10) Middle Eastern