

Infuse Your Menu with the Flavors of Asia

And Discover a New World of Profit

Americans have always had a fascination with the East, and when it comes to current culinary trends, the appeal of Asian cuisine is stronger than ever. But today's increasingly sophisticated customers aren't looking for menu concepts directly imported from Asia, they want to see foreign flavors meshed with familiar favorites. They want inspired, adventurous dishes where East meets West in unexpected ways. They want Asian fusion, and here's how you can deliver at all dayparts and on all parts of your menu!

APPETIZER: START WITH STREET FOOD!

If you're looking for a foundation on which to build a fusion appetizer, look to Asian street food. Street food is similar across the globe: typically involving a starch, protein, and rich flavors – so it's a great way to test the fusion waters with your customers! Street fare from Asian countries is as wildly varied as what you'll find in a typical American city (think of the many hot dog variations: chili dog, coney dog, corn dog, and the list goes on). Try *nikuman*, a small Japanese steamed flour dumpling typically filled with ground pork. To integrate the fusion element, try stuffing the dumpling with a sweet Italian sausage and fresh herb mixture. Or, take an American appetizer staple – like stuffed mushroom caps – and give them an Asian twist with panko crumbs, crab meat, and black sesame seeds.



THE MAIN DISH: FIND THE GRAY AREA

Fusion is not about filling half the plate with American standards, and the other half with Asian menu items – even if they go together. Fusion means integrating different ethnic flavor profiles into a single dish. Fusion isn't black and white: it's the gray area where multiple culinary traditions find common ground. If you've served classic American steakhouse cuisine for decades, but want to capitalize on the rising popularity of Korean food, don't serve an all-Korean main dish like bulgogi (thinly sliced marinated beef) with an all-American side of au gratin potatoes. Not only will you run the risk of scaring away customers with a completely foreign dish, you'll miss an opportunity to show off your creativity. Instead, try an upscale bulgogi burger made with Angus or Kobe beef served with a side of kim chee potato salad. Kim chee, a spicy Korean favorite, could also easily be integrated into a coleslaw.



DESSERTS: UNLIMITED POSSIBILITIES

If customers are open to the hot new trend of house-made vegetable ice cream (squash blossom sorbet anyone?), then they'll also welcome Asian influences on your dessert menu. Try offering a red velvet cake made with red bean (azuki) paste. Red bean paste is a key sweet ingredient in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean cuisine, and it boasts a robust, yet not cloyingly sweet flavor. It's a key ingredient in one of China's most popular and upscale desserts, the moon cake, which is made with a thin, cakey exterior surrounding a dense, sweet filling. The moon cake is served during the mid-Autumn festival, and like American cakes, the varieties are endless. Experiment with different moon cake fillings that integrate red bean paste and more familiar ingredients like chocolate or coconut.



BEVERAGES: LIQUID CREATIVITY

Just like desserts, don't forget to focus on your beverage offerings. On the kids menu, try creamy, sweet Thai-style iced tea (it will be the second most popular beverage of 2012 according to the NRA What's Hot Chef Survey). Give Thai iced tea the fusion treatment by adding an American flavor syrup: strawberry or chocolate, and position it as a twist on the typical chocolate milk. For the grown-ups, an Asian fusion cocktail packs a serious punch of value perception to your customers. And we're not talking about Mai Tai mixers here; today's best Asian fusion cocktails boast exotic fruits from far-away places, like rambutans (from Southeast Asia, similar to a lychee) or kumquats (a small, citrus-like fruit native to China). Reinvent classic cocktails with flavors from the East, like a sidecar made with a lemongrass syrup instead of lemon juice. Ginger is also an excellent Asian flavor element to integrate into your cocktails.

