

LEVERAGING ASIAN FLAVORS: *A Chef's Take*

It seems like only yesterday a bunch of us line cooks were sitting around a dinner table, daring each other to be the first. We hovered over a platter of various forms of blue-fin tuna, spicy tuna, salmon, octopus, and yellow-tail, gawking and pretending to know what we were looking at, but secretly not having a clue. The rice we could make out, and the brown stuff looked like soy sauce, but everything else was exotic – and *strange*.

“Dude! *You* eat it! It’s not even seared!” Our first sushi platter stared right back at us, unfazed and, sadly, unappreciated. Newly minted and hidden down a dark side street in a suburb of Syracuse, the new sushi restaurant, we wagered, wouldn’t make it to Christmas. Typical of cooks in their early 20s, we mocked what we didn’t understand. We *did* agree the sushi chef’s license plate was pretty cool – RAWTALNT.

Looking back, I must admit we underestimated that chef, and the potential of the blossoming trend he recognized almost 20 years ago. Asian food and flavors would grow and expand to eventually touch every menu across the country.

Yes, I ate the first piece. And as the exhilaration of wasabi and tannic tuna filled my nasal passages, I knew something else then too: I needed to learn more.

It’s fascinating to think about how far we’ve come as a food-oriented society since then. To help put things in perspective, back in 1995 Charlie Trotter had *one* cook book, and the only



legit cooking show on TV was *Great Chefs*. We were just getting to know Emeril Lagasse, David Rosengarten, and Curtis Aikens. (Don’t remember those last two guys? Well, there you go.) In most kitchens of the day, the Asian ingredients you most likely found in the pantry were soy sauce, sesame oil, and *maybe* wasabi. If you were lucky enough to find a wonton wrapper, it was probably fried and used as a garnish. There was an absolute universe of flavors and sensations that had yet to be discovered.

Asian cuisine is now so popular that even the most ubiquitous chain restaurants are in on the action, injecting Asian flavors or cooking methods into regional dishes from other parts of the world to create what we call “Asian fusion.” But many independent operators still don’t offer a single menu item that features even the most basic Asian elements.

NARROWING THE CHOICES

While reading through any cooking magazine or glancing up at any cooking show, the sheer number of options can be overwhelming. You know customers are willing to try new flavors (as indicated by many recent culinary surveys), so demand isn’t the issue. The issue is, Where to begin? Thailand, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, China, and the micro regions within these countries offer so many inspirations that making a decision about where to start can be paralyzing. Couple that with the unfamiliarity of the respective ingredients, and choosing how, where, and what Asian influence to feature can be a daunting task.



I will try to offer some insight and suggestions to help remove the anxiety and frustration that can lead to lost sales, stifled creativity, and bored customers.

Many restaurants have wrapped their arms fully around Asian concepts. I've seen Americian restaurants with full-blown sushi bars in the lounge, glorious Thai curries nestled on menus between Chicken Fricassee and Braised Short Ribs, authentic Korean Pork Kim Chee next to Veal Parmesan, and Vietnamese Spring Rolls next to French Onion Soup.

In many of these cases there is a true reverence for Asian classics, but the position on the menu or in the restaurant is akin to a fly in a bowl of milk. In all cases, the identity of the restaurant is compromised due to an out-of-left-field placement of an Asian item, and no effort has been made to *weave* Asian influences into decidedly Continental American fare. Here's a typical result – "It's a dead mover and we took it off the menu." When pressed for a reason, the chef might say, "They didn't come to my restaurant (or pub) for Korean food!"

Good points, and well taken. I used to catch a lot of heat for not incorporating sushi into my menus – menus that were largely based on regional-seasonal American cuisine. My come-back was always the same: "If I didn't apprentice as a sushi chef for seven years, fanning rice for three of them, I have no right to disrespect a proud and traditional cuisine by hacking out bad sushi. Besides, the sushi guy up the street is going to make it a hundred times better than I ever will, and that's what his customers and mine would both expect."

So, instead of forcing Asian dishes into menus, why not select Asian flavors and cooking methods that segue into what is already on your menu and in your kitchen? Many menus already include influences from Italy, France, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Spain. Why not Asia?

If you silently answered that you don't know enough about Asian food, my first advice would be to encourage you to go to the ATM, hit the nearest Vietnamese, Thai, Korean, or independently owned Chinese restaurant, and *eat, eat, EAT!* Tell the chef you're new to their respective cuisine and you just want to test the waters. They'll probably be happy to answer your questions. Fill the table with different dishes and ask yourself, "Which of these wonderful flavors remind me of what's on my menu? What flavors am I tasting and how can I work them into my menu? What ingredients are being used that give these dishes their overall character?"

SPICY ROASTED CHILI AND GARLIC MARINATED PRAWNS WITH CILANTRO AND LIME

YIELDS: 5 Appetizer Portions



Chef Eamon Lee

137529	15 ea. 13-15 Raw Tiger Shrimp
002301	2 Tbsp. Oyster Sauce
304760	1 Tbsp. Soy Sauce
006411	1 Tbsp. Fish Sauce
380130	1 Tbsp. Dark Brown Sugar
097210	2 Tbsp. Whole Peeled Garlic, sliced thin
096208	4 Tbsp. Limes, juiced
097537	1 Tbsp. Thai Hot Peppers, sliced thin
097471	2 Tbsp. Scallions, sliced thin
097147	2 Tbsp. Cilantro, chiffonade
006221	1 tsp. Sriracha Chili Sauce
370656	2 oz. Peanut Oil
Asian Market	1 Tbsp. Kaffir Lime Leaves, chiffonade

DIRECTIONS

1. Thaw shrimp under cold running water. Split backs with paring knife and remove any debris. Do not peel! Reserve.
2. Combine oyster sauce, soy sauce, fish sauce, sugar, garlic, lime juice, Thai peppers, scallions, cilantro, and Sriracha in a bowl. Mix well.
3. Remove 5 Tbsp. of marinade for service. Reserve.
4. Marinate shrimp in remaining marinade and toss to coat. Place in zip-lock bag and marinate for 2-4 hours.
5. In a large sauté pan over high heat, add the peanut oil.
6. Remove shrimp from marinade and pat dry. Add to pan and sauté until golden brown and fragrant, 2-3 minutes per side.
7. Place on roasting pan and complete cooking in oven if necessary.
8. Remove from oven and place three shrimp on each plate. Spoon over reserved marinade and garnish with kaffir lime leaf chiffonade.



EVERYDAY INGREDIENTS ...AND THEIR ASIAN COUSINS

BELL PEPPERS	→ Chili Peppers, Thai Chili Peppers
BASIL	→ Thai Basil or Cinnamon Basil
TABASCO SAUCE	→ Sambal, Sriracha, Thai Hot Sauce, Roasted Chili Paste, Sweet Chili Sauce
SALT	→ Fish Sauce, Soy Sauce, Miso
ANCHOVIES	→ Fish Sauce, Dried Shrimp, Bonito Flakes
VINEGAR	→ Rice Wine Vinegar, Plum Wine Vinegar
SUGAR	→ Palm Sugar, Rice Syrup
BBQ SAUCE	→ Hoisin Sauce, Korean Bulgogi, Chinese Char Siu
HEAVY CREAM	→ Coconut Milk
LEMONS	→ Limes, Mandarin Orange, Yuzu
FRESH HERBS	→ Cilantro, Lemongrass, Kaffir Lime Leaves, Mint, Shiso, Garlic Chives
CABBAGE	→ Napa Cabbage, Bok Choy
RICE	→ Jasmine Rice, Sushi Rice
AROMATICS	→ Garlic, Ginger
SPICES	→ Chinese Five-Spice, Szechuan Peppercorns, Dried Chilis
VEGETABLE OIL	→ Sesame Oil, Peanut Oil

Although the ingredients aren't exact matches, the Asian cousins carry a distinct signature flavor, and that's what will set your new menu items apart!

STARTING POINTS

Flavors can be broken down into four basic elements: sweet, salty, bitter, and sour. The Japanese also identify a fifth element, *umami*, which means "savoriness." Ask yourself what ingredients they use to achieve these basic flavors, and what ingredients do you use that are similar and could be interchanged? Once you find the commonality between Asian flavors and your kitchen's palette, you can begin to experiment.

Look at your menu and ask yourself, "Where can I substitute one or two ingredients in an already successful dish with their Asian cousins to create a new dish with an exciting new flavor profile? Let's look at a couple of simple examples.

➤ **BBQ Pork Chop with Cole Slaw and Tomato Cucumber Salad**

The opportunities with this dish are endless! The BBQ sauce can either be enhanced or substituted with hoisin sauce, the cabbage in the cole slaw can be substituted with Napa cabbage and a splash of yuzu juice, and the cucumber salad traditionally paired with basil and oregano can be enhanced with cilantro and mint, leading us to:

Hoisin BBQ Glazed Pork Chop with Napa Cabbage Slaw and Tomato, Cilantro, and Cucumber Salad

➤ **Broiled Swordfish with Lemon-Herb Butter, Sautéed Zucchini with Fresh Basil**

Here's a dish that can be transformed by making a compound butter with lime and lemongrass, and the zucchini can be enhanced with a different basil. The addition of a little roasted chili paste would really put it over the top, giving us:

Broiled Swordfish with Lime-Lemongrass Butter, Roasted Chili-Thai Basil Sautéed Zucchini

➤ **New York Strip Steak with Roasted Red Potatoes and Sautéed Onions and Mushrooms**

Steaks can be upgraded easily with just a few Asian touches. A quick glazing with a Korean bulgogi marinade, a dash of spice on the potatoes, and the substitution of common white mushrooms can make for a nice special, like:

Korean BBQ New York Strip with Szechuan Peppercorn Roasted Potatoes and Garlic-Soy Glazed Shiitake Mushrooms

➤ **Sauteed Shrimp Fra Diavolo over Rice Pilaf with steamed Broccoli**

Shrimp easily translate into Asian dishes as they are a mainstay in the many sea-side regions. The heat in the Fra Diavolo can come from fresh green chilis and sambal sauce, and the rice pilaf can be substituted with jasmine rice, giving you:

Sauteed Shrimp with Fresh Green Chili and Sambal Fra Diavolo Sauce, Jasmine Rice Cake and Steamed Baby Bok Choy

➤ **Roasted Chicken Breasts with Mushroom Alfredo Sauce**

You won't find a lot of cheese in Asian cuisine, but a creamy-textured sauce can come from coconut milk, and the mushrooms can again be substituted with shiitakes and oyster mushrooms. Coconut milk loves fresh herbs, so we could feature:

Roasted Chicken Breasts with Shiitake and Oyster Mushrooms, Coconut Milk, Kaffir Lime Leaves, and Thai Basil

➤ **Steamed Clams with White Wine, Garlic, Crushed Red Pepper, and Parsley**

All shellfish dishes present an open-door policy for Asian flavors. Swap out the crushed red pepper and parsley, and enhance the aromatics to get:

Steamed Clams with Fresh Chilis, Basil, Cilantro, Ginger and Garlic

These examples are simple, but the premise is the same. The critical idea is to examine your menu and identify the opportunities to showcase your creativity, enhance and excite your customers' dining experience, and build value into dishes that may be in need of an upgrade. Your customers will happily pay a little more; one of the great features of Asian cuisine is the leveraging of a lot of flavor for not a lot of money.

Asian cuisine, like many regional cuisines, was born out of necessity and frugality. When positioned on a menu in the right ways, you, as the operator, can reap what has been sown over millennia. Considering that Asian flavors have developed over thousands of years, compared to the few hundred we've had to do it in America, there's good reason to investigate Asian flavors further.



TOP ASIAN FUSION INGREDIENTS

ITEM DESCRIPTION	ITEM #	PACK/SIZE
Vinegar Rice Wine	305065	12/20 oz.
Peanut Butter Creamy	303383	6/5 lb.
Rice Basmati	331102	1/25 lb.
Rice Basmati Fancy Quality	331005	4/11 lb.
Spice Curry Powder	345262	6/17 oz.
Sauce Fusion Teriyaki	234117	2/1 gal.
Sauce Fusion Sweet N Sour	234116	2/1 gal.
Spice Seed Sesame Hulled	345833	6/19 oz.
Soy Sauce Gluten Free	002704	6/1.69 qt.
Tofu Extra Firm	097776	12/14 oz.
Produce		
Snow Peas	097545	1/10 lb.
Napa Cabbage	097460	1/4 ct.
Ginger Root	097216	1/5 lb.
Peeled Whole Garlic	097205	1/5 lb. jar
Thai Pepper	097537	1/5 lb.
Lettuce Spring Mix	097399	2/1.5 lb.
Lettuce Jammers	097367	1/5 lb.

