

At Wish in Miami Beach, seafood is slow-poached in a Mason jar and served tableside for a zuppa di mare presentation that's both homey and sophisticated.



A Passport to PROTEIN

Chefs know no international boundaries when it comes to infusing the center of the plate with global flavors, techniques and treatments

BY KAREN WEISBERG

As the economic reality turns more vacations into “staycations,” getaways on a plate are a welcome indulgence for diners. But even before the downturn curtailed travels abroad, chefs realized they could keep their menus fresh with flavorful dishes featuring the herbs and spices of other climes and cultures. Taking an international approach to using protein can prove both cost-effective and attention-grabbing.

International meat preparations are embraced even in traditionally meat-and-potatoes markets like Nashville, Tenn., where chef/owner Debra Paquette has made a mark with Mediterranean-inspired Zola, or in Boise, Idaho, where John Berryhill infuses his Northwestern cuisine with global flavors.

Berryhill, chef and owner of Berryhill & Co., uses Idaho-raised Kobe beef in dishes with South American flair. Argentine Matambre (translated as “hunger killer”), is one of his restaurant’s most successful appetizer specials.

WAGYU GOES LATINO

“In Argentina, almost everything is sirloin,” Berryhill points out. “This dish is like a chef salad wrapped up in a butterflied, tenderized, herb-marinated Snake River Farms’ Kobe flank steak.”

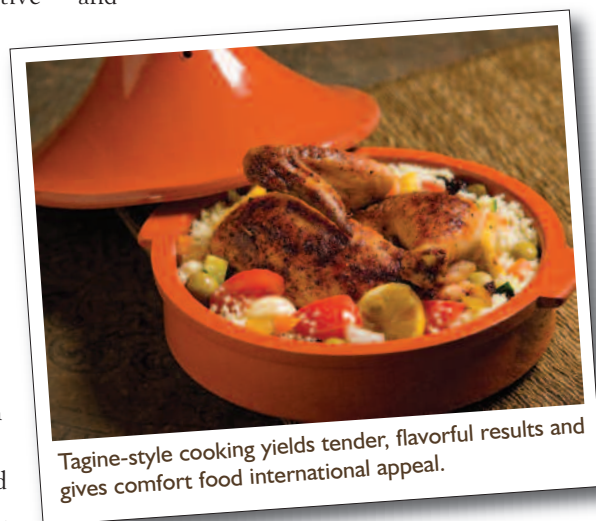
The dish calls for a tasty, colorful combo of ingredients, including hardboiled eggs, raw spinach leaves, carrot sticks and red onion slices, along with a sprinkling of parsley, chile flakes, salt and pepper, all rolled up tightly inside the flank, rolling with the grain, and tied securely.

After the roll is seared in oil on all sides and covered in stock, it cooks in a 350-degree F oven for about an hour.

Next, the Matambre is removed to a sheet pan and topped with another sheet pan weighted with “2 or 3 pounds of pots, pans — even books will work,” Berryhill

grins, describing his “low-tech” pressing technique.

After the roll is refrigerated for two to four hours, Berryhill slices it thinly and serves it as an hors d’oeuvre with preserved lemon chimichurri, the quintessential



Tagine-style cooking yields tender, flavorful results and gives comfort food international appeal.

GILROY FOODS & FLAVORS



NATIONAL PORK BOARD

Using protein trim and other extras in wonton wraps is a cost-effective hit on any appetizer list.

Argentinean herb sauce, which goes wonderfully well with beef, lamb or chicken.

“Of course, cumin [one of Berryhill’s favorites] is one of the herbs in the sauce; I think anything with cumin in it feels ‘ethnic’ in some way,” he says.

Berryhill finds uses for the Kobe trim, eliminating as much waste as possible. He uses small pieces in gyoza, little wonton pockets, served five to seven per plate as a starter.

“You fill the pockets with chopped or cubed rib-eye trim, scallions, crushed ginger and radicchio, then sear them in Kobe fat. With a chile and maple-soy glaze drizzled on top, it has a real Asian feel.”

NASHVILLE ON THE MED

When Paquette opened the 90-seat restaurant Zola in 1996, she found the main challenge was the limited palates of her Nashville-area customers.

“The menu is very Mediterranean-influenced; I’m about really big flavors. I aim to create ‘Watusi on the tongue,’” Paquette quips. “I love to use pork — although they don’t really eat ‘pig’ in that region of the world. But pork takes on every flavor,” says this 2008 National Pork Board Celebrated Chef.

One of Paquette’s best-selling entrées is Pork Rioja, or Catalan Pork, featuring 1 1/2-inch pork tenderloin medallions seared in porcini dust and sautéed “tenderly” in a bit of oil on medium heat.

“I make a reduction of Spanish-style fish stock combined with chicken stock, plus a splash of Rioja wine,” she says. “We’ll add a pinch of mushroom dust to thicken — or picada, a nut-based roux, for a whole different flavor.”

To prepare picada, Paquette blends toasted bread crumbs with olive oil, almonds, walnuts, parsley and garlic, creating a richer, subtler Mediterranean flavor to contrast with the mushroom dust.

The finished dish includes mushrooms, perhaps chanterelles, sautéed with a bit of butter in the picada reduction, as well as roasted potato layered with caramelized, house-made chorizo and cheese. The sauce reduction tops the chorizo and cheese, and a bit of truffle oil is added just prior to service.

MED GOES WEST

Though her maiden name is Insalata, Heidi Krahling, chef and owner of Insalata’s in Anselmo, Calif., doesn’t focus on menuing

The FLAVOR PAYOFF

Three Tips for Introducing New, Globally Inspired Menu Items

By chef Stephen Goldmann of The Culinary Edge, a product- and menu-development consultancy in San Francisco

1) BUILD A BRIDGE When developing a new, global item for a mainstream customer base, consider whether you offer your guests context for the dish. When McDonald's launched its Asian chicken salad with edamame and a soy-based dressing, it did not ask guests to take the leap from burgers and fries to Asian chicken salad without first helping them believe that they could do salads well. Ensure that any new dish has a relevance to your client base through a proven menu category.

2) LET THE BRAND BE THE BASE Often, chefs rely on culturally authentic touchstones for their interpretation of new flavors and techniques, but within chain development, the brand can play this role as much as the culture being interpreted. Houston's restaurants offer a great example: Although the culinary style is classic American grill, the menu offers a Thai Steak & Noodle Salad. On the surface, this may seem out of place, but it is tied to the brand by its hearty, abundant and fresh approach. Is Houston's attempting to deliver an authentic Thai salad? No. Rather, the brand has created a distinctly Houston's salad with a nod to a globally authentic dish.

3) BLEND CULTURES WITH CAUTION Tuscan Teriyaki Burrito or Beijing Tagine Salad may be creative approaches to fusion, but blending global cuisines with no basis for doing so will likely come across as confusing to your customers. As a counterpoint, Noodles & Company is known for its multi-cultural approach, but its menu illustrates a clear definition of cultures. The chain offers both pad Thai and a Mediterranean salad, but each stays within its culinary boundary and does not come into a confusing cultural conflict by trying to merge into one dish.

A finishing drizzle of aromatic za'atar gives chef Heidi Krahlings' American lamb skewers a Lebanese flavor profile.



AMERICAN LAMB BOARD

Italian leafy greens but rather on Mediterranean cuisine.

"We look at the flavor profiles of the individual countries — Italy, Spain, North Africa, the Middle East — then match up the seasonings," she explains.

Insalata's grilled domestic lamb with house-made grilled flatbread, za'atar, lemony greens, tomatoes, cucumbers, onions and cumin yogurt, a take on the Middle Eastern/Moroccan profile, is one of the most popular dishes on the menu, Krahlings reports.

Here, lamb sirloin cubes are marinated for a minimum of four hours in a tantalizing mixture of cumin, coriander, paprika, garlic, lemon and olive oil, then threaded onto skewers.

"We finish the dish with a drizzle of za'atar, a heady Lebanese aromatic spice blend [with sumac, sesame seed, parsley and olive oil] that we make in-house," she says. Menueed for lunch only, the grilled lamb is served on two skewers, plated with a chopped salad of cucumber, romaine, red onion and tomato, with mint as garnish.

When the seasons bring a chill, Krahlings' lamb-tagine-inspired stews shift the protein from grilling to braising, proving lamb is suitable for all seasons and all cuisines.

"We braise the stews in big rondos and serve in individual, one- or two-portion tagines," she says.

MEAT AS A GREEK ACCENT

As assistant general manager and director of culinary operations at the Westchester Country Club in Rye, N.Y.,

Certified Master Chef Edward Leonard aims to give customers a very familiar feel while showcasing creativity — "something that will grab them."

Like many Mediterranean preparations, one of Leonard's signature dishes uses meat as an accent, not as the main focus. The first plate on his starters menu is Greek Stuffed Artichoke Hearts, sous-vide style, which Leonard reports is a crowd pleaser, because the flavors of this dish, with ground lamb, artichoke, feta, oregano and olive oil, marry very well.

“Basically, the concept came from a Greek salad; here, we used artichoke as a base. The flavors are simple with some elegance.”

ITALY IN A MASON JAR

Marco Ferraro, executive chef at The Hotel, Miami Beach, Fla., generates rave reviews with contemporary American cuisine in which eclectic global touches are evident. Ferraro was born in Calabria, Italy, 29 years ago and raised in Brooklyn, N.Y., from the age of three. He received his culinary training in France and soon after worked with Jean-Georges Vongerichten in New York.

At Wish, Ferraro’s poached seafood, like many of his dishes, not only boasts layered flavors that unfold with each bite but also is “fun.” In this dish, served as both an appetizer and an entrée, calamari, clams, mussels and shrimp are slow-poached “to ultimate tenderness” in a traditional Mason jar.

“We use a lot of Mason jars in the south of Italy for preserving olives, and my mother uses them for canning tomatoes. I wanted to integrate them into a dish, so this is my version of zuppa di mare,” Ferraro notes.

After he reduces and strains the fish stock, he infuses it with lemon grass and basil. The seafood, tossed with a bit of olive oil, salt and pepper, is placed in a Mason jar; Ferraro prefers the type with a metal seal closure.

He adds enough cold broth to fill the jar about a quarter of the way, along with a little toothpick skewer to infuse more flavor; on it are garlic cooked in oil, a piece of mild Fresno

chile and a snippet of lemon grass. The sealed jar is placed gently in a water bath to simmer very slowly for seven to nine minutes.

“We serve tableside, presenting the Mason jar on a rectangular plate with a bowl of firm, white-corn polenta to absorb the broth, plus some Parmesan cheese and one heaping tablespoon of red salsa,” says Ferraro.

“The server pours the liquid first — holding back the fish ingredients with a fork — then removes the fish, piece by piece, placing each morsel on the plate. The Mason jar remains on the table for discarded shells. The main thing is all this fish — there’s a subtle and distinct flavor — and, since it steams slowly in the Mason jar, everything is super tender.”

FUSION, REINFUSED

While fusion cuisine earned a bit of a bad rap after some over-reaching in the ’80s and ’90s, many chefs are resuscitating its image, reminding diners that many regions of the globe have been enjoying culinary exchanges throughout history.

Singapore native Chris Yeo opened his first Straits Café in San Francisco in 1987; this fall he opened an outpost in Houston, the fifth in a chain of Straits Restaurants begun in San Francisco. Yeo explains that many versions of dishes, such as Rendang Beef, described on the menu as “spicy braised curry beef with kaffir lime and a side of pandan polenta,” are “Nyonya cuisine,” with broader Southeast Asian influences.

“Nyonya is a Malaysian word, and the story goes that a Chinese man [Baba] married a Malay woman, and their offspring are Nyonya,” says Yeo.

For Beef Rendang, beef shoulder slow-cooks for about two hours (Chicken Rendang would cook for one) in a mixture of lemon grass, onion, garlic, chile, galangal and kaffir lime leaf.

“Initially, it was hard to get customers to appreciate our recipes,” says Yeo. “I don’t like to modify recipes too much, but I do in order to cater to a wider clientele. [In Houston], we menu Tamarind Beef — a wok-fired filet mignon and watercress with black pepper and oyster sauce.”

Skewering meatballs for dipping and wrapping in soft pita bread is a Mediterranean idea ready for American lunch menus.



TYSON FOOD SERVICE



LEGENDS

He admits it's a "made-up" dish (filet mignon isn't in widespread use in Singapore), but it works well as a quick stir-fry in a very simple sauce of tamarind juice, fish sauce and sugar.

"Filet mignon is an easy meat to sell and adds variety to the menu," he says. "Also, the Southeast Asian profile remains recognizable."

A LIGHT THAI TOUCH

With a desire to keep the menu interesting for his year-round clientele, and not just for the summer visitors at 13-year-old Legends restaurant in New Suffolk, Long Island, N.Y., Executive Chef Ralph Foulkes is always looking to expand his repertoire of international dishes. He confides that his Thai Sausage-and-Shrimp Wonton Saucers are always evolving.

"We started with hot sausage, but it was too dry, too hot, so we used sweet sausage to balance the flavors with the Indian hot sauce," explains Foulkes. "For our curry sauce, we wanted more layers of flavor and nothing too sharp, so each flavor could be enjoyed."

After much experimentation, he hit upon green curry paste with a milder profile. "We used pork stock and added the paste to it, which made it a bit more brothy. We knew we

liked it, but we were pleased when it really took off."

Indeed, that's the name of the game in tailoring global flavors to the center-plate protein that Americans expect when they dine out: Tinker to perfection, one dish at a time. ☺

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Thai sausage-and-shrimp wonton cups became a winning appetizer idea when paired with green curry paste at Legends in New Suffolk, N.Y.


TAKE-AWAY TIPS

SWITCH FORMATS: Stuff paella into artichokes, try a Mediterranean stir fry or roll a salad inside a thin filet; think globally to inspire form as well as flavor

TRIM IS IN: Use small pieces of prime protein to stuff into dumplings, pirogies, empanadas and other global small bites

BE SPICE-INSPIRED: Let a single spice like anise or a blend like za'atar lead you on a culinary exploration

STEP AWAY FROM THE PLATE: Poaching in a Mason jar, presenting in a tagine or serving in a hot pot — global presentations help protein venture past the center of the plate



STRAITS RESTAURANTS