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## Authenticity is a Prime Ingredient in Ethnic Foods

Whether traveling to distant places or just wishing to, consumers are looking for authentic global and regional flavors, and food processors are differentiating products that spark the imagination.

By Lauren R. Hartman, Product Development Editor

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Americans of all backgrounds are discovering ethnic foods and beverages spanning the globe, incorporating a broader array of flavors and experiences than ever before. The young and more educated are leading the way, wandering ever farther from culinary "home," says the Hartman Group ([hartman-group.com](http://hartman-group.com)), Bellevue, Wash. From the explosion of poke bowls, the sweet-heat wave, Cuban sandwiches, Korean barbecue and the use of North African spices, ethnic foods' popularity continues to rise, and more exotic fare from different countries is becoming sought after.

According to Mintel's latest research, ethnic dishes are favorites, but most important to consumers is authenticity. Two-thirds of Mintel survey respondents who eat ethnic food at home say authentic or traditional flavors are the most important factor when buying or eating ethnic food. Authenticity is what consumers look for, as they associate that term with "real" and "natural" attributes, as well as quality, value and trust.

As the desire to be healthier seems universal, many food formulators also are featuring clean ingredients in their ethnic products, free of GMOs, additives, gluten and preservatives. The number of ethnic products launched on the market doubled from 2012 to 2016, according to Innova Market Insights ([www.innovadatabase.com](http://www.innovadatabase.com)), which finds hot flavors on the rise, including Thai, Indian and Mexican, the last of which is stretching into new geographies.

Likewise, more than 120 million people in the U.S. are multicultural Americans, so this large, young and growing segment is bringing its tremendous culinary influence with it. In fact, multicultural consumers are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population and were responsible for 92 percent of the population growth from 2000 to 2014, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Much of this is the result of immigration into the U.S. and Canada. At the same time, palates that favor multicultural flavors are influencing the taste preferences of non-Hispanic whites and society in general.



Nielsen also finds this influence of flavors is attracting millennials and mainstream consumers alike. Nothing illustrates this better than the phenomenon of sriracha, which has found its way into the homes of 5 million non-Hispanic white households each year.

Americans cannot get enough of ethnic spices, including harissa, curry, za'atar and turmeric, which all originate from Africa and the Middle East. These spices could be the result of "migratory meals," stemming from refugees from the Middle East and Africa showcasing their heritage and certainly causing the upward spike in trendy ethnic cuisines.

Ethnic grocery stores are popping up and ethnic sections are expanding in supermarkets, replacing natural and organic specialty formats. Hispanic-focused retailers are also increasing, as the U.S. Hispanic population is expected to double by 2050, according to Acosta Sales and Marketing. Hispanic customers tend to buy more groceries and shop more often than other demographics in the U.S.

## Melting pot of flavors

Although encompassed in one large trend, ethnic flavors each have their own segments, everything from briny olives on appetizers to snacks adapted from street foods.

"Menu trends today are beginning to shift from ingredient-based items to concept-based ideas, mirroring how consumers tend to adapt their activities to their overall lifestyle philosophies," notes Hudson Riehle, senior vice president of research at the National Restaurant Assn., Washington.

Americans now look for flavors such as sriracha, sambal, chimichurri, gochujang and zhug from African, Asian, Middle Eastern and Latin origins on everything, including breakfast menu items such as Spanish chorizo, congee (rice porridge) and Mediterranean shakshuka.

The popularity of Indian food and flavors continues as major food and beverage retailers add or expand the aromatic, intricate cuisine into their product mix. Millennials generally are more adventurous when it comes to Indian food, but it's becoming a favorite this year, according to research from various vehicles including Nation's Restaurant News. Curry is on a roll, it says.

An ingredient that can make an Indian entree truly authentic is the use of the fenugreek herb. An Indian household cannot do without "methi," or fenugreek seeds and leaves. Used in most every Indian preparation, the seeds are somewhat bitter tasting and have a flavor similar to celery, maple syrup or burnt sugar. The leaves are eaten in India as a vegetable and are a favorite ingredient in Indian curries, but can add tasty pizzazz to a bland dish. In India, fenugreek seeds are even roasted and ground to make coffee.

"The use of fenugreek is pretty common in Indian cuisine and is considered very healthy," affirms Shashish Hodlur, general manager of R&D at Tasty Bite ([www.tastybite.com](http://www.tastybite.com)), Stamford Conn., one of the first companies to launch shelf-stable pouches of vegetarian products in the U.S. "The ingredient is used as fresh leaves, dried leaves and in seed form. The fresh leaves are sautéed in garlic and onion to create a stir-fried vegetable dish or added in a rich cashew nut based sauce."

Tasty Bite uses dried fenugreek leaves in its vegetable tikka masala entree and tikka masala cooking sauce to give it a sharp aroma and distinct flavor note. The company has been making healthy, authentic and wholesome Indian, Asian, Thai and rice and noodle products for U.S. home cooks since 1995, starting with a handful of pouched entrées.

"The team at our research centre ensures the recipes we develop are the closest to the authentic flavors with every cuisine," Hodlur says. Entrees such as Thai Cashew Curry, Thai Vegetable Peanut and Thai Bangkok Vegetable use ingredients that are as clean as possible.

"Developing new products, our R&D team researches popular recipe approaches in addition to relying on traditional recipes," he adds. "This ensures we don't become so 'authentic' that we forget that palates shift. It's more important

to appeal to consumers that stay within some rigid norm of 'authenticity.' All ingredients are authentic to the recipe, such as Channa Masala, which uses a spice mix made with authentic coriander, cumin and cardamom spices."

## A world of flavors

The presence of artisanal craft and local flavors is more prominent than ever, says Global Food Forums, which especially underscores the East-meets-West trends of green tea, honey, mango lassi (an Indian yogurt drink) and matcha. Once rare and unfamiliar sauces and dips are showing up on menus and store shelves – items such as black sesame tahini, habanero jam, ghee, date syrup, plum jam with chia seeds, beet salsa, Mexican hot chocolate spreads, sambal oelek or piri piri sauce, Mina Harissa and frontera adobo sauces.

Condiment makers are packaging the flavors of assorted cultures in marinades, sauces and spreads that aim to satisfy immigrants' cravings for foods from their heritage. They also facilitate at-home cooking "travelogues" for mainstream shoppers seeking global flavors.

At the IFT 17 expo in June, Kikkoman Sales USA Inc. ([www.kikkomanusa.com](http://www.kikkomanusa.com)), San Francisco, featured savory yakiniku-flavored potato chips and beet poke that tasted like sashimi-grade tuna. Yakiniku translates from Japanese to grilled meat and is a flavor blending garlic, sea salt, apple cider vinegar, Kikkoman's granulated gluten-free tamari soy sauce and superfine sugar, explains Joseph Leslie, manager of national industrial sales and marketing.

Many product developers are picking up on such international flavors for snacks. Eastern cultures like Vietnamese, Korean and Filipino balance sweet, tangy and salty flavors while Jamaican jerk flavorings provide a spicy accent to chips, nuts, popcorn and meat snacks.

Filipino flavors could be the next big trend, with pancit noodles and adobo, a marinade of vinegar, soy sauce and garlic, typically used on meats and vegetables, says Roger Lane, marketing manager of Sensient Savory Flavors North America ([www.sensientflavorsandfragrances.com](http://www.sensientflavorsandfragrances.com)), Hoffman Estates, Ill. "We also see fragrant warm spices found across North African and Middle Eastern regions becoming very popular, according to our global customers. Mintel found that 36 percent of its consumer survey respondents are interested in trying Cuban cuisine. Cuban mojo, traditionally used with pork, is a simple marinade and dipping sauce bursting with tropical flavors of garlic, citrus, oil and oregano," Lane says.

Schwan's Co. ([www.schwans.com](http://www.schwans.com)), Marshall, Minn., has launched two Pagoda Asian wonton snacks: Honey Sesame Chicken and Korean BBQ Style Beef Wontons. The flavors are an example of the brand's commitment to flavor exploration driven by millennials looking for more ethnic and global cuisine at retail, says Carla Wendorff, brand manager at Schwan's Consumer Brands.

The wonton snacks include on-trend dipping sauces: Lime Ponzu and Sweet Chili. Commonly found in Japanese cuisine, Ponzu is a tangy soy-based sauce made with vinegar and citrus fruit for a complex umami quality with a kick. "Our product development team works diligently on evaluating taste profiles to look for new flavors that have mass appeal with consumers," Wendorff says. "Lime Ponzu and Sweet Chili flavors are on-trend improvements that bring 'news' to the brand and the category."

## Beyond umami

While umami is Japanese for "delicious taste," and is considered one of the hot culinary trends that can help reduce sodium, kokumi is a term denoting heartiness, mouthfulness, richness and deliciousness. Kokumi might be considered the sixth flavor, except the tongue doesn't perceive its taste. Discovered in 1908 by a Japanese chemist and developed by scientists from Ajinomoto North America Inc. ([www.ajifoodsolutions.com](http://www.ajifoodsolutions.com)), Itasca, Ill., kokumi, translated from Japanese, means rich (koku) taste (mi).



"Many of these cuisines utilize very traditional processes where basic tastes like umami and rich flavor impact like kokumi play an important role in helping deliver authenticity to the finished dishes," says Joe Formanek, Ajinomoto's director of savory applications. "Products in our Savorboost line of yeast products, such as Savorboost UM for umami and Savorboost K for kokumi, can help deliver these important characteristics to dishes while staying true to the tradition of the cuisines."

Ajinomoto also is seeing one trend that started here in America work its way into ethnic dishes. "Middle Eastern, Southeast Asian and floral flavors are of great interest but at the same time, consumers are weary of the amount of added sugar in their diets," says Ihab Bishay, senior director of sweeteners at Ajinomoto. "Thus, product developers are charged with delivering authentic flavors while at the same time minimizing or even eliminating added sugar with high potency sweeteners such as our Advantame."

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