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MENU

[Home](#) / [Articles](#) / [2018](#) / Current Trends in Flavors are Trending Toward the Exotic

## Current Trends in Flavors are Trending Toward the Exotic

Fruit flavors, ethnic flavors and spices are major ingredient categories—and the newest ones often come from far away.

By Pan Demetrakakes, Senior Editor

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What's so good about exotic flavors? Or to put it another way: What makes exotic flavors so good?

Ingredient suppliers say three of the fastest-developing flavor categories are ethnic flavors, fruit flavors and spices—with, obviously, some overlap between the first and the other two. To some extent, the newest entries in these categories are actually older ones getting fresh attention. But more prevalent in all three are flavors unfamiliar to most Americans, many of them sourced from far away.



Synergy Flavors has developed a cookie made with cardamom, ginger and black pepper as a way to show how savory flavors can be used in confections.

In many cases, new flavors enter the American retail mainstream through the time-honored path of foodservice, especially small restaurants, often ethnic-themed. "As a flavor company that provides flavors mostly to retail, we kind of use what's happening on menus as a forward-looking innovation tool," says Lindsey Oostema, senior marketing specialist at Synergy Flavors ([www.synergystaste.com](http://www.synergystaste.com)).

Synergy has access to databases of foodservice menus that track trends in flavors before they reach retail shelves in large numbers. "Fifteen years ago, they came out with salted caramel, and it trickled down to fast-casual and then to Starbucks, and now it's everywhere on the retail shelves," she says. "So we're looking to what can we take advantage of that is in an introductory stage on menus that will go into the mainstream eventually; [something] we can capture now and provide as an innovation to our customers."

Oostema says when exotic flavors are breaking into the mainstream, they're more likely to be in products and packages that allow consumers to try them out without too much of an investment. "Consumers feel more comfortable in trialing a new flavor in smaller packaging or single-serve," she says. "So when I think of trying a new flavor, I think of trying it in a drink. You can get one drink, see if you like it, and then you can always go back and buy more. But if you don't like it, you don't have an entire case or box of something."

Melissa Abbott, vice president of culinary insights for the Hartman Group ([www.hartman-group.com](http://www.hartman-group.com)), agrees beverages are a good delivery vehicle for exotic flavors. "Let's face it, if you buy a beverage and you're not that crazy about it, and it has acerola cherry or Peruvian lucuma in it, it's not going to ruin your meal," she says.

Snacks are another good delivery vehicle, Abbott says. "It's encouraging consumers to be much more adventurous and really participate in a sense of discovery, in ways that we haven't in years past, when we were really entrenched in the three meals a day."

Abbott says that, in general, consumers' tastes are getting more sophisticated, and they're looking for subtlety and complexity in flavors.

"Consumers are looking for a little more sour, a little more astringent — we're not so entrenched in this idea of things have to be sweet or salty," she says. "We're getting a little more nuanced with our palates."

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Yuzu, a fruit from Japan with a lemon-like look and a grapefruit-like taste, is a trending new flavor.

## Fruit flavors

One issue that comes up with fruit as a flavor category, as with all flavors derived from actual foods, is authenticity. How close is the flavoring agent to the food it's based on? There's even a formal classification, "From the Named Fruit," to denote authentic fruit flavors.

Oostema says Synergy bases its fruit flavors on extracts made from the fruit's essential oils. A phrase like "lemon extract" looks better on a label than "lemon flavor," since consumers are liable to associate the latter with artificial flavoring.

Donald Wilkes, president and CEO of Blue Pacific Flavors ([www.bpfavors.com](http://www.bpfavors.com)), says his company has "been developing authentic, true-to-fruit certified organic flavors and natural flavors based on exotic citrus and berry fruits"

to cater to the rise of organic foods. These include alphonso mango, Japanese yuzu, baobab and lilikoi passionfruit.

Cindy Cosmos, principal flavorist at Bell Flavors & Fragrances ([www.bellff.com](http://www.bellff.com)), also named yuzu, which looks like lemon but has a taste more like grapefruit, as a trending fruit flavor. She added, "Tropical fruits are gaining impact, growing from a simple pineapple to mango, passionfruit, soursop, kiwi, lychee, jackfruit and others."

Products that include exotic fruit flavors include: frozen pops flavored with grape plus acai from Ruby Rockets ([www.rubyrockets.com](http://www.rubyrockets.com)); Jun Tonic with dragon fruit from ViDA Juice ([www.vidajuicery.com](http://www.vidajuicery.com)); and blackberry hibiscus gummy pandas from Bissinger's ([www.bissingers.com](http://www.bissingers.com)).

## Spices

Uniquely among flavors, spices have a potential double benefit: Some of them can confer health benefits while enhancing taste.

"In addition to their amazing flavor, many spices, such as turmeric and cinnamon, are being positioned as health drivers," says Dax Schaefer, executive chef at Asenzya. "Turmeric has powerful anti-inflammatory effects and is a very strong antioxidant. Cinnamon can help lower blood sugar levels and also reduce heart disease. I recently went to a café in L.A. and had an amazing turmeric latte. They called out the inflammatory properties as a selling point."

Some of the trendiest spices are familiar ones, such as ginger, cinnamon and clove, that are being used in new applications, especially non-savory ones. Synergy Flavors has developed a cookie to illustrate this concept: It features cardamom, ginger and black pepper, along with peach.

Other hot spices, often literally so, are less familiar to American consumers. They include cascabel, urfa beber and Aleppo chili; Middle Eastern flavors like za'atar, berbere, ras al hanout and shawarma; and Korean flavors kimchi, gochujung, soju and gochujaru.

Recent products that include exotic spices include: honeydew jalapeno and pineapple turmeric vinegar drinks from Element [Shrub] Products ([www.elementshrub.com](http://www.elementshrub.com)); Kitchen & Love cauliflower meal with harissa from Cucina & Amore ([www.cucinaandamore.com](http://www.cucinaandamore.com)); and ghee with turmeric, arjuna and other spices, from Pure Indian Foods ([www.pureindianfoods.com](http://www.pureindianfoods.com)).

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## Ethnic flavors

There is obviously a lot of overlap between this category and spices. When it comes to ethnic cuisine, spices are often as important as main ingredients and techniques. As noted above, Middle Eastern and Asian, especially Korean, flavors are trending.

"Today's consumers are a diverse and growing multicultural mix of individuals," says Catherine Armstrong, brand ambassador for Comax Flavors ([www.comaxflavors.com](http://www.comaxflavors.com)). "Multicultural consumers and the younger generation are driving new flavor profiles. We continue to see influences from Asia and the Middle East, and more recently from Cuba and Brazil." In response, Comax has created flavor profiles for horchata, sriracha maple, toasted coconut flan, za'atar and brigadeiro.

Bell Flavors & Fragrances ([www.bellff.com](http://www.bellff.com)) has developed an entire line of Middle Eastern flavors that has followed its Spark trends program, says Chris Warsow, corporate executive chef. "The line was developed as customer interest in the cuisine grows. The cuisine relies heavily on legumes, grains and vegetables prepared in refreshing and light ways," he says.

"High-quality proteins with very flavorful preparations are also appealing to diners," he adds. Spices and flavors in that line include za'atar, berbere, pomegranate molasses, loomi lime, sumac, preserved lemon and hibiscus.

Edlong, which specializes in dairy flavors, has developed ways to incorporate innovative ethnic flavors into dairy-based foods and sauces.

"Peruvian cuisine has been called the original fusion cuisine as its influences are Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Chinese and recently French," says Beth Warren, Edlong's chief commercial officer.

Edlong has come up with a version of papa a la huancaína, a boiled yellow potato salad with a spicy, creamy sauce, that pairs aji Amarillo, which Warren calls Peru's "star ingredient," with Edlong's all-natural heavy cream-type flavor.

Certain challenges are involved in maintaining a reliable supply of flavor components from remote or undeveloped regions of the world.

"The biggest challenge is getting farmers or their local manufacturing partners to abide by global regulatory and quality management standards," says Wilkes of Blue Pacific Flavors. "This is a barrier for many companies, and requires a significant investment depending on the region and the degree of remote sourcing of the raw materials. Many companies have limited capital resources to expand their manufacturing footprint, so it's important that we address growth challenges early in our business development strategy."

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