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For Global Cuisine, It's A Small World

Increased access, both online and through small foodservice and retail venues, sparks interest in new ethnic foods and flavors.

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Aug 03, 2018

Authentic ethnic cuisine used to be served from a pushcart. Sometimes it still is, but now that “pushcart” is likely to have four wheels, an engine and steel walls with a big window. And a website.

Food trucks have become a popular way to introduce multicultural dishes and flavors to American consumers. So have e-retailers and online platforms such as Pinterest and Instagram. But while the media may be relatively new, the methods are timeless. Food trucks are small, mobile specialty restaurants; e-retailers are virtual specialty stores; online postings are digitized word of mouth. All are time-honored strategies for introducing new cuisines.



“It’s created a scenario where consumers feel they have accessibility to things,” says Melissa Abbott, vice president of culinary insights for the Hartman Group (www.hartman-group.com). “They don’t have to rely on their local retailers to be on the food journey that they’re on right now.”

Traditionally, ethnic cuisine has gotten a foothold in America through two channels: specialty retail and small restaurants.

“The path with any sort of ingredient is usually introduced through foodservice channels,” says Salima Jivraj, managing director for multicultural at Nourish Marketing (www.nourish.marketing), a Canadian ad agency that specializes in food marketing. “So a restaurant, a chef, a chain, a franchise will introduce something such as sriracha. The

demand and taste and palate grows for that, then consumers want it in their own homes, so they look for it on grocery shelves.”

Restaurants have the obvious advantage of experts on hand to prepare the food; they also have the more subtle one of menus and waitstaff to impart information about it.

“If you go to foodservice and you see bulgogi, there’s signage or there’s someone there to explain it to you, and you’re, ‘Oh, Korean barbecue, I get it,’” says Dax Schaefer, executive chef at ingredients supplier Asenzya (www.asenzya.com). “When you’re talking retail, you can only go as far as the consumer’s been educated for it.”

Starting small

Ethnic groceries, usually small ones, are another step in the process. Most of their customers are members of the ethnic group in question, or at least familiar with what's being sold. But newbies sometimes turn up. And it often happens that products gravitate from there to general-purpose supermarkets, where they're more likely to find more mainstream buyers.

The difficulty for bigger supermarkets is that buying these products through a specialty distributor means a markup of about 15 percent, which cuts into their thin margins. When a specialty food starts gaining traction, that gives the supermarket (or its wholesaler) more of an incentive to deal directly with the manufacturer.

One way it can gain traction is online. The internet has sped up many aspects of life, including information about novel foods. This takes place not only through conventional portals like online sales and recipe sites, but through social media, which has the added cachet of objectivity. (Under FTC regulations, content providers must disclose if they're paid to tout a product online.)

"I absolutely think that through Pinterest or the videos of people making them in their own kitchen, describing them, realizing that, yeah, kids will now eat these things, [ethnic foods are] something that you can serve to the whole family," says Karen Buch, a dietitian consultant and founder of Nutrition Connections LLC (www.karenbuch.com). "Now there's more confidence, kitchen confidence, in bringing ethnic dishes to the home kitchen as well."

Many like it hot

When it comes to ethnic foods and flavors, the hottest ones are ... well, the hottest ones. High-impact spices, and foods flavored with them, have drawn consistent interest.

"We just want spice in America," Abbott says. "Sweet spice is something we can wrap our heads around."

According to the 2018 Flavor Forecast from McCormick Foods (www.mccormick.com), up-and-coming flavors include Ethiopian berbere, a blend that includes red pepper, coriander, cardamom and other spices. It also mentions Tanzanian barbecue skewers called mishkaki, prepared with a marinade that includes red pepper, curry and garlic.

Another page is devoted to hot pot, which involves dunking proteins and vegetables into hot cooking liquid at the table. Mexican and Caribbean versions include spices like ancho chile, turmeric and allspice, with garnishes like chile papaya pica sauce.

Ingredient supplier Kalsec (www.kalsec.com) has "a long history and deep expertise in heat management," says Anna Cheely, chef and senior scientist. "Kalsec has a line of Mexican blends including chamoy which presents a well-rounded flavor profile that would be found atop any fruit strand medley. Using combinations of pepper extracts, an ideal pungency can be achieved. Kalsec also has many Asian blends, such as tom yam, kimchi and Thai green curry, where the appropriate type of heat adds the true flavor profile of the blend."

Cultural interest

Sometimes other aspects of a country's or region's culture can heighten or complement interest in its cuisine. Korean food and flavors, especially hot ones like gochujang red pepper paste (which Matthew Kang, an editor with the foodie website Eater.com, calls "Korean ketchup"), are being helped by a more general interest in Korea.

"The last few years has been a boon for Korean culture and food," says Jennifer Yoo, marketing communications manager for CJ Foods (cjfoods.com), a processor and distributor of Korean and other Asian products. "The Korean 'wave,' aka hallyu, brought Korean pop music (K-Pop) and Korean dramas. With the popularity of Korean pop culture growing in the U.S., it was the perfect storm to also introduce Korean food and flavors."



For CJ Foods, this includes a new launch under Bibigo, its Korean food brand: Mandu, a traditional Korean dumpling stuffed with bulgogi (beef marinated with garlic and pepper).

Of course, many consumers like to stick with long-established ethnic foods. In these cases, industry observers say, the trend is to bring more authenticity to cuisines that in some cases have become “Americanized,” such as Italian, Mexican or Chinese.

A popular way to do this is to break it down by regions within a country. Instead of Italian, there is Tuscan, Sicilian or Piedmontese; instead of Mexican, there is Oaxacan or Yucatan. For example, this year Conagra Brands expanded its Bertolli line of pasta sauces under the Bertolli brand to include two new organic alfredo varieties, which it advertises as “cooked lightly using the Tuscan Way to lock in layers of flavor.”

Conagra also has P.F. Chang’s, a line of frozen Chinese food cobranded with the restaurant line; all items are developed in consultation with chain founder Philip Chang and the restaurant’s executive chefs.

A processor that is trying to decide what global cuisine or flavor to invest in next would do well to pay attention to the pipeline by which they reach the mainstream. Visit, in person or online, small ethnic restaurants and groceries. Pay attention to foodie websites and social media influencers. Above all, says Hartman’s Abbott, pay attention to authenticity.

“If you are really trying to build a brand or build a category based on what’s happening in food culture, and you want it to be more of a trend than a fad, then you really need to understand the ins and outs of the cuisine and the culture of that country, or that region of the world, that you’re going to be incorporating into that food product,” she says. “It’s absolutely critical.”



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