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What's Cooking? A Bird's Eye View of Culinary Trends

“I’d like to explore what fragrance and flavor have in common since our industry is based on sensory experiences,” Amy Marks-McGee, president, Trendincite LLC told attendees at the NAFFS 94th Annual Convention. “It is very difficult to have one without the other,” she added.

Because aroma plays a significant role in both flavors and fragrances and creates a personal and often memorable experience for individuals, product developers will look for new and exotic ingredients to create unique flavor directions and enticing market concepts, Marks-McGee said. “It’s all about connecting with the consumer. Ingredients and their origins will also remain important – it’s no longer just vanilla; it is Madagascar vanilla or Tahitian vanilla.”

Color and texture also play a significant role in flavors and fragrances, Marks-McGee added. “Food engages our tactile sense and mouth feel is a key element in all flavored products, such as crunchy, smooth or creamy.” Technology, she said, will continue to drive the industry – whether it’s in new ingredients, new textures, new delivery systems or new experiences.

Marks-McGee reviewed the various definitions of fusion for the audience. “For the purpose of this presentation, I defined fusion as the use of culinary ingredients and cooking techniques from multiple sources to create unexpected flavor and texture combinations,” said Marks-McGee.

As an example of the exploding growth seen in the fusion area, Marks-McGee demonstrated how food trucks are moving from fad to trend. “If you think back to the concept of food trucks, you may think of food carts and vendors such as New York City hot dogs, pretzels and ice cream or the food trucks that came by an office parking lot at lunchtime and had the memorable nick name ‘Roach Coach,’” she noted. “However, today the food truck phenomenon that started in California and crossed American cities all over have created a fleet of gourmet food trucks. You know it has hit critical mass when in 2010 The Food Network launched ‘The Great Food Truck Race,’ where seven gourmet food trucks cross the country to compete.”

Food truck, Marks-McGee said, are a convenient option - essentially bringing the restaurant to the consumer. Some examples highlighted that bring this point home include:

- Marination in Seattle – the Saucy Food Truck described by Zagat as “Korean-Hawaiian fusion serving up a taste explosion of affordable sliders, tacos and rice.” One special they feature is SPAM Musbi described as “a perfectly grilled slice of SPAM makin’ love to a paddy-cake of rice wrapped in a seaweed blanket.”
- Kogi BBQ in Los Angeles – known as the traveling Los Angeles landmark – it began the fusion tacos craze and serves Korean Mexican tacos.
- Fukuburger Las Vegas - offers six Asian-inspired burgers, furikake macaroni salad and garlic fries seasoned with togarashi (a blend of seven Japanese spices), served with banana ketchup or sweet chili aioli. The beef patties are marinated in sake, mirin and yuzu and then seared on the grill and brushed with a special glaze before serving.
- Mexicue NYC – described as “the sweet, sweet love child of red-hot Mexican cuisine and down-home barbecue goodness. They mix smoky and spicy – by mixing green chili sauce with smoked short ribs and poblanos and tomatillo sauce with barbecued chicken.
- M.O. Eggrolls in Los Angeles – “is the first ever Jew-nese (Jewish and Chinese) serving eggrolls and sides made with 100 percent Kosher and natural ingredients.”
- Coolhaus in Los Angeles – a staple ice cream sandwich truck that serves all-natural, handmade and organic ice cream. They use local and seasonal farmer’s market fresh ingredients and each ice cream sandwich is wrapped in a customizable, edible wrapper that is all-natural and calorie-free. According to Coolhaus, they “thrive to push the boundaries of sweet and savory.” Examples of their unique flavors include a ginger cookie and Wasabi ice cream sandwich, brown butter with candied bacon, mango sticky rice, olive oil with rosemary and strawberry Jalapeno.

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“What’s interesting about fusion food is that there is no one defining factor, such as specific cuisine, flavor or dish,” said Marks-McGee. “Instead it’s an eclectic mash up.”

Asian and Mexican food and flavors have influenced a crop of new restaurants, Marks-McGee said. Many of the flavor profiles, she said, combine sweet and spicy by merging ingredients from both cultures. Emphasizing that point, she noted “Taka Taka’s tagline in New York is Mexican Sushi & Japanese Tacos, which serve items such as a shrimp with mango, chili peppers & cucumber roll, ‘sushi bombs,’ rice balls topped with salmon and jalapeno mayo and shrimp tempura tacos with avocado and masago in a flour tortilla.”

Another example – Mr. Robata – combines the “subtlety of Japan and the bold sauces of French cuisine.” Robata is “a rustic Japanese grilling technique” used in many dishes. Some unusual dishes served are Foie Gras Cappuccino – Miso foie gras broth, sansho pepper and orange zest or the Stardust Roll – spicy Yellowtail wrapped in soy paper, coupled with jalapeno, avocado, mango, macadamia nuts and dabbed with yuzo miso and sriracha topped with golden tobiko. For dessert, they offer Eggplant Compote with cardamom-scented Japanese Eggplant, lychee sherbert, sesame coulee and pink peppercorn.

Touching on savory and sweet trends, Marks-McGee said the cupcake trend seems to be here to stay. The newest twist, she said, is infusing the expected sweet cupcakes with the unexpected savory flavors and ingredients. More Cupcakes in Chicago offers a variety of sweet and savory cupcakes, such as Foie gras and sour cherry, blue cheese walnut praline, champagne brie, goat pear walnut, white cheddar truffle and potato sour cream.

Like cupcakes, ice cream is a popular carrier for interesting flavor combinations. Sunni Sky’s famous Cold Sweat Ice

Cream in North Carolina is made with three kinds of chile peppers – Thai, Pequin and Habanero. In order to sample or purchase the ice cream, you need to be 18 and sign a liability waiver. There is also Sweet Republic in Scottsdale, Arizona which features Honey Blue Cheese – a creamy savory combination of blue cheese and local honey.

Identifying trends being translated into consumer packaged goods, Marks-McGee said “Frito-Lay recently launched five new products – three flavors inspired by Tapatio’s Hot Sauce and two Fiery

bell’s has been busy adding line extensions and new products to its V8 V-Fusion franchise,” said Marks-McGee. This year V8 V-Fusion added Concord Grape Raspberry and Concord Grape Raspberry Light. They then launched V8 V-Fusion+Energy drinks in Pomegranate-Blueberry and Peach-Mango as well as V8 Energy Shots.

Shifting her focus over to how molecular gastronomy has evolved and what influence it has had on the culinary world and consumers, Marks-McGee said “Ferran Adria of El Bulli (Spain), Heston Blumenthal of the Fat Duck (UK), Thomas Keller of the French Laundry and Per Se (France and NYC), Wylie Dufresne of wd-50 (NYC) and Grant Achatz of Alinea (Chicago) are many of the pioneers of this movement. These chefs changed the expectations of food and what could and couldn’t be done by creating new textures and mouth feel, combining hot and cold sensations, deconstructing food and changing the presentation of food – making it an art form and making it an entire sensory experience.”

Molecular gastronomy broke traditional rules and encouraged experimentation, Marks-McGee said. “These chefs made dining a sensory experience and have been influential and inspirational. They’ve opened the door to a new breed of multi-sensorial restaurants and experiences.”

Citing examples of recent experiential concepts, Marks-McGee said, “There’s a trend to dark dining, where diners are blindfolded, eat and drink in the dark and have to use all their other senses for the experience.” In New York, Dana Salisbury’s Dark Dining Project has diners blind folded. In addition to experiencing their meals in the dark, artists create music, sound and dance with the space “to heighten the non-visual senses and the imagination” between courses.

savory+sweet



Fusions. The Tapatio seasoning is described as a “perfect blend of heat and smokiness” available in Fritos Corn Chips, Doritos and Ruffles Tapatio Limon, which combines lime juice with the hot sauce. Cheetos Crunchy Fiery Fusion and Doritos Fiery Fusion combine “cheese, herbs and spices with cayenne pepper, vinegar and paprika” and according to the company “it is to create a unique flavor whose slow-burning heat targets consumers’ changing palates,” said Marks-McGee.

Doritos also has partnered with Taco Bell to begin to test market The Doritos Locos Taco, which is Taco Bell’s Taco Supreme inside a shell made from Doritos.

Given the success of fusion in the snack foods area, beverages follow suit. “Camp-

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“iNG (Imagining New Gastronomy) is the first restaurant to use Miracle Berries (a small, red West African berry that tricks the tongue into sensing sweetness) to create ‘flavor tripping’ experiences,” said Marks-McGee. The restaurant features cocktails that change from one drink to another while you are drinking them. For example, “A gin and tonic becomes a screwdriver, as the lime turns into a different flavor. A hot toddy becomes an alcoholic Arnold Palmer. And a margarita morphs into a tequila sunrise.”

Marks-McGee said another intriguing restaurant is Romera in New York, which is based on neurogastronomy. They offer an 11-course prix-fixe tasting menu that is described as “a natural cuisine driven by the importance of the neurosensory perceptions, the taste-memory and the emotions of food.”

A more physical and theatrical experience, Marks-McGee said, is Chin Chin Laboratorists in the U.K. which is the first liquid nitrogen ice-cream parlor. They use liquid nitrogen to freeze their home-made ice cream and then add custom toppings.

Marks-McGee concluded by identifying some hot ingredients to keep on the radar:

- Paprika – this red powder made from grinding dried sweet red peppers has been emerging in consumer packaged goods.
- Sriracha – made from sun-ripened chilies ground into a smooth paste with garlic.
- Kimchi – a traditional fermented Korean dish made of vegetables with varied seasonings.
- Pickling/Fermenting – there has been a resurgence of canning and pickling fresh pickles; house-made pickles are appearing on menu items.
- Cheese – cheese is appearing in unexpected categories and new applications. Of the 11 savory cupcakes More Cupcakes offers, six of them use cheese.
- Nordic cuisine is up and coming – it emphasizes old techniques such as drying, smoking, pickling and curing with a focus on nature and balance.
- Wood – although the use of woody/smoked flavors is not new, avant-garde chefs have been playing with wood. Pastry Chef Jordan Kahn served a Wood Ice Cream with Nutella Custard, Green Tea Vines, Toasted Bread Streusel, Cocoa Sabli Crumbs and Pistachio Crumble.

The industry's need to reduce the amount of salt, fat and sugar, along with consumers' changing palates, will continue to drive the need for more flavorful solutions, Marks-McGee said. To keep ahead of the curve, “look outside of your industry and explore how trends are being translated in other markets. A core value is to enjoy the creative process and engage all of your senses.”