



Looking
ahead to
trending
cuisines
for 2020

FLAVOR FORWARD

BY ANDY NELSON

Demand for ethnic cuisines will remain strong in 2020, but expect more regional twists on current ethnic favorites — and on one that's an old industry standard.

Maeve Webster, president of consultancy Menu Matters, says she'll be interested to see how Israeli and other Middle Eastern cuisine will evolve in 2020.

"I think that while it's certainly not new — we've been talking about it for the last year or two — it still has momentum behind it, and I think we'll see a broader array of flavors, ingredients and formats move into the mainstream."

Hummus has been around forever, but consumers can expect to see more mashups featuring hummus and other variations on the popular item, Webster predicts.

Middle Eastern spices in general also should see an uptick going forward, she says. One in particular that's expected to pop in 2020 is sumac.

"I think there's a lot to be done with sumac and spices in general," she says. "They're so versatile and can be applied in so many different ways."

Also look for continued growth in the use of dukkah, which Webster loves for its versatility, ranging from savory to sweet to traditional Middle Eastern dishes to regional adaptations.

Expect to see that word "regional" a lot again in 2020, says Suzy Badaracco, president of consultancy Culinary Tides Inc.

"Absolutely stick to regional specialties," Badaracco recommends. "You can get a little more experimental with cuisines we are familiar with such as Italy or Mexico. When you're promoting cuisines that are less familiar you should look to that country's national dishes or comfort dishes so they are more approachable."

Look in particular, Badaracco says, for regional takes on South American and Central American cuisine in the New Year.

"It can be very authentic or reflect whatever ingredients are used in a certain region," she says. "For instance, you could have a dish in the American South that includes dukkah but uses pecans instead of pistachios. Dukkah is really easy to apply, it's visually appealing and it has great texture."

Another Middle Eastern flavor, cardamom, is hardly new on the scene. But it will make a big splash in new ways in 2020, Webster predicts.

"Cardamom, for a very long time, has been an under-leveraged flavor, particularly in the U.S. It's far more familiar in not only Middle Eastern but also Nordic cuisine."

It's a flavor, Webster says, that people are familiar with without knowing they're familiar with it. Its broad appeal covers a wide range of savory and sweet applications, including indulgent baked goods. The continued popularity of Middle Eastern foods is somewhat of a paradox,

Webster says. Typically, Americans are interested in the cuisines of countries they want to visit. With the volatility in the Middle East, that is not the case for the majority of Americans today.

"It's a little bit of an aberration," she says. "I think it's interesting that it is growing despite all that."

One reason for the growth is likely an increasing number of Middle Easterners moving to the U.S., Webster says.

What Amy Marks-McGee, founder of consultancy Trendincite LLC, calls "modern Israeli cuisine" is big now. Pioneered by Michael Solomonov of Zahav restaurant in Philadelphia, which opened in 2008, as well as by chefs like Eyal Shani, Meir Adoni and Assaf Granit, it's making a big splash, she says.

In addition, Marks-McGee says, hummus and tahini are slowly making inroads on store shelves, and she thinks falafel may be next.

"Falafels (which are made with chickpeas) fit well with the plant-based trend, and they are a popular Israeli street food, which also fits well with the trend to portable street food," she says.

Other points east

Flavor and cuisine trends for San Diego-based Barons Market often begin in the chain's highly curated frozen foods section, says Rachel Shemirani, Barons' senior vice president.

In the second half of 2019, Barons has seen increased demand for Korean, Moroccan and Middle Eastern flavors, Shemirani says.

"We bring in a lot of spices just to see what will fly," she says. "To my pleasant surprise, spices like sumac and za'atar are selling very well. We've found that our customers are looking for more ethnic spices."

While Mexican, Chinese and Italian cuisines may have dominated the ethnic retail market 20 years ago, consumers today, Shemirani adds, are "going a little deeper."

"Moroccan, Turkish, Vietnamese. Bone broth is a big seller for us. What we're excited to see is what vendors are starting to do with (the different trends)."

Varietal fruits, heirlooms, hybrids, butter and cream and dark chocolate will be among the trending flavors heading into 2020, Badaracco says.

Retailers would also be wise to keep their eyes on global historical blends and spices like sumac, tahini and za'atar; fermented and pickled foods; global cheeses, florals and botanicals; and pandan, tamarind and alcohol-infused foods.

When it comes to the cuisines, meanwhile, Badaracco expects Eastern Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and Russian foods to be in high demand.

Many trending foods come with health claims, Badaracco says, but for them to work, they have to be



Falafel will be among the foods benefiting from a surge in demand for Middle Eastern foods in 2020.



BACON, BOOZE & BBQ

Pekin, Illinois-based Excalibur Seasoning recently introduced a new brat flavor that the company will be promoting during its trade show season, says John Brewer, Excalibur's vice president of sales and marketing: Bacon Fireball.

"Bacon and alcohol flavor pairings have been very popular in our ground beef patty, brat, and sausage blends," Brewer says. "Bacon Fireball plays into this with a new twist."

Natural whiskey flavor and cinnamon gives the taste sensation of Fireball whiskey, Brewer says. Excalibur's R&D team paired this with

bacon flavor and a touch of sweetness.

"It finishes with a sweet heat which is very popular," Brewer says. "We've developed this flavor as a sausage blend to start, but I can predict that the combination will transition into other applications such as a dry marinade for vacuum tumbling."

Pit-smoked BBQ's popularity growth has no end in sight, Brewer says. Food Channel programs devoted to the competition BBQ circuit are fueling home BBQ aficionados' interest, Brewer says, and as they build their skill level, they're spending money on

better grilling and smoking equipment.

"This is the crowd that buys a lot of specialty fresh and smoked sausage," he says. "Sausage blends, and our 'Rump Rub' line of products continue to grow in sales due to the increased demand."

Ethnic foods, Indian in particular, are also trending, Brewer says. Retailers that tap into it by cross merchandising menu options pairing seasonings and components along with recipes will make their respective departments destination points.

Health and nutrition trends also will continue to

play a huge role in what flavors and cuisines will be hot in 2020, Brewer says.

"We have a growing group of customers requesting lower sugar or salt in their blends. Non-GMO, MSG-free, and no nitrite are also hot buttons."

Excalibur's R&D team stays busy reformulating current blends in order to market to the growing health-conscious consumer base, Brewer says. "There are some exciting products out now that allow us to develop blends that are healthy and don't sacrifice flavor or finished product yields for our meat processing customers."



Nothing stands in the way of more massive growth in CBD-infused foods.

organic to the product, rather than superimposed just to cash in on a fad.

"(Health claims) only have a place with emerging flavors and cuisines if they can play the role of the best friend to the leading lady — flavor, cuisine," she says. "You can't just slap a health claim on a product, it must come from a sincere place. It can't be a marriage of convenience."

Recently, there seems to also have been an influx of Australian food and beverages with new bakeries and restaurants opening, particularly in New York City, Marks-McGee says. The Flat White (coffee) and Aussie sausage rolls are two examples.

"Perhaps Australian flavors will trickle into supermarkets and appear in the deli and prepared food sections," she says.

Cannabis madness, tropical trending

Look for CBD-infused foods and beverages to remain huge heading into the New Year, Marks-McGee says.

"Cannabis is currently the wild west of the industry and is a cultural phenomenon that is not fully regulated yet," she says. "I expect to see the continuation of

CBD-infused food and beverages with a variety of flavor profiles and new applications."

Also on the rise are tropical flavors, Marks-McGee says. They've always been popular in spring and summer. Now, she says, tropical is trending year-round.

The meat category has been a surprisingly strong performer when it comes to tropical flavors, Marks-McGee says. Take cold cuts and jerky. Bold Aloha Sunshine Turkey Breast by Boars Head, according to the company, is "expertly coated with pineapple and hibiscus, and lightly charred for a sweet and savory traditional luau flavor."

In addition, Country Archer Jerky Co. offers a Pineapple Pork meat stick that "is bursting with flavor reminiscent of a tropical luau, hints of real pineapple hula with delectable antibiotic-free pork for a savory and not-too-sweet on-the-go treat."

Hello, halloumi

Halloumi cheese is another flavor Webster expects to see popping up a lot next year. The only thing that could limit its growth, she says, is accessibility.

"It's definitely going to take off — we'll begin to see a ton of applications — but it's not something that's

necessarily widely available," she says. Compared to many other cheeses, halloumi is very easy to prepare and use in a variety of settings.

Overall, the food industry could see fewer innovations than normal in 2020, Webster says. That's because it's an election year, and because of the wide divisions in the U.S., passions will be running high and many consumers will be facing an uncertain future.

In times like that, Webster says, people crave comfort foods and often aren't as willing to experiment.

"My guess is we'll still see a lot of innovation from fine dining chefs trying pull in new and unique items, but they'll be driving them more toward comfort food-oriented options. I think what we'll see is more mass market-level iterations of more familiar items."

Look for bowl meals to incorporate more unique items, Webster says. Another traditional comfort option, sandwiches, also should enjoy a robust 2020, but in new forms like kota. "There are a lot of different sandwiches entering the market now."

Other comfort options with a twist might include further variations on the mac 'n cheese theme, with exotic additions adding a twist within a stable format. Or North African twists on popular comfort-food rice dishes.

French connection

Next year will likely also see the return of an old favorite: French cuisine. In keeping with the election year anxiety



Regional variations on French classics should be big next year.

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Suzy Badaracco, Culinary Tides Inc.

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theme, they will lean towards comfort foods taking "risks" that might not be as risky as in other years.

"French is poised to make a comeback. It's already beginning," Webster says. "Coq au vin, a lot of stews, a lot of pastries, kouign amann, more pastries from Breton that are not out of the reach of most Americans."

To some extent, the "return" of French cuisine is cyclical. But every turn around the wheel brings different approaches and incorporates innovations, she says.

"There are a finite set of cuisines in the world. But what you do start seeing is a new look at a familiar cuisine, like with Italy and Mexico 10 years ago. You started seeing a lot of regionality. It's not Italy, it's Sicilian. It's not Mexican, it's Oaxacan. So much hasn't been explored with French cuisine, and so many people are trained in it, they'll be bringing to the fore more regional elements and applying new techniques to cuisines that have been around for a while."

Every week Barons hosts a food panel made up of about 35 buyers and Barons store and deli managers. They review 80 to 120 different, out of which maybe 5 to 10 will make it into a Barons store.

At a September food panel, two prepared foods meals, Moroccan spiced cauliflower and Peruvian spiced cauliflower, were among the big hits, Shemirani says. "You never would have seen something like that five years ago."

Asian desserts, particularly anything "really cute" and "Instagrammable," also are trending for Barons, she added.

"What's happening at local restaurants is driving a lot of it," she says. "Chefs try things, play around with them," and they eventually might find their way to retail.

Health and nutrition are frequent themes in trending ethnic cuisines, Shemirani says. Many hot Korean foods, for instance, are attractive not only for their flavor and other attributes but because they promote gut health. 