

FLAVOR & THE MENU

Changing Tastes

From salty to sour to umami, the basic tastes we know and love are taking on unconventional roles

By Cindy Han

Not long ago, American diners expected entrées to be savory and desserts to be sweet. Clearly, times have changed. The embrace of global cuisines and flexible dining styles—from all-day breakfast to small plates to mash-ups—drive more adventurous eating and new flavor applications.

“We are seeing culinary exploration within the different taste categories over recent years,” says Technomic’s Editorial Manager Laura McGuire. “Much of this interest in discovering what each taste category has to offer comes from Millennials, a generation that has demonstrated more adventurous eating habits compared to older consumers.”

Along with the shift and expansion of dining preferences come new roles for the five basic tastes: sweet, salty, sour, bitter and umami. A look at each category gives us a glimpse at larger flavor trends—and, more than anything, we find that the role of each basic taste is trading places with its counterparts. Sour is making bold strides across the whole menu. Sweet, of course, is pushing boundaries, offering counterpoint or unexpected flavor in intriguing ways. Everything’s in flux.

“Flavor trends across each of these taste categories can be traced back to trending cuisines and a balancing act between each part of the menu,” says Brian Darr, managing director at Datassential. “Sweet counters spicy ethnic flavors, sour and bitter produce items refresh the palate after rich and salty bites of meat, and umami elevates dishes to new levels.” He also attributes the shift to an increasing focus on authentic regional ingredients and cuisines, a macro-level trend that is pushing interest in new and different taste combinations.



Showcasing a blend of savory, salty and sweet in a modern format is this dish of poached eggs with tasso ragout, fresh pork leg and andouille sausage, created by chefs Jose Enrique Montes and Pedro Alvarez of San Juan, Puerto Rico, at the National Pork Board’s recent Pork Summit.
PHOTO COURTESY OF NATIONAL PORK BOARD.

SHIFTING SWEET SPOT

Change is evident in the sweet category. The leading sweet ingredient, sugar, is no longer the only road to sweet—nor are desserts the only forum for sweet. Other sweet ingredients are trending, from honey to agave nectar and from fruit juices to vanilla. The payoff, beyond flavor, in these “new”

sweeteners comes in two forms—a boost in better-for-you positioning, and a step toward enhancing regional or local touches. Think of Vermont maple or Tupelo honey, for instance.

“Honey has surged in popularity,” says **Rob Corliss**, chef and founder of ATE culinary consultancy. “Honey provides an evolved sweetness via the beauty of its colors, the viscosity of its texture, and depth in its varied sweetness—including floral, caramel, bitter, woody or fruity.” Honey is also on the rise due to the popularity of Southern cuisine; it shows up in barbecue sauce and in the form of honey butter, accompanying biscuits or fried chicken. Global cuisines, from Asian to Hispanic, makes use of honey in marinades and sauces, such as teriyaki or honey-habanero. And better-for-you options also embrace honey as a sweetener with a health halo. According to Datassential, honey-balsamic is on the rise as a salad dressing (up 76 percent since 2009).

Maple is a familiar and comforting sweetener that succeeds across the menu, most often in a sweet-savory pairing, such as with bacon or used in barbecue—maple-ancho pork is just one example. “Maple is increasing on menus as part of the sweet and salty trend,” says Justin Massa, founder and CEO of Food Genius. Maple also taps into the current embrace of American regional flavors. It’s tied into the Southern chicken-and-waffle craze, which Massa sees showing up on chain menus: Burger King is testing a new chicken and waffles sandwich, while Taco Bell and White Castle are using sweet waffles as a carrier for salty breakfast meats.

The sweet shift is evident in potatoes as well. “Sweet potatoes in particular are one of the trendiest, well-penetrated items on menus,” says Datassential’s Darr. He says sweet potatoes are mentioned on 20 percent of menus, up 54 percent since 2009. Sweet potato fries are trending even higher, up 101 percent since 2009. Newer treatments include desserts, such as the sweet potato arancini with lime sorbet, halva cream and pho spice-orange supremes at Vedge in Philadelphia. Another application: ethnic soups, such as a Thai-style sweet potato, coconut and curry soup.

When consumers think of vanilla, they generally associate its aromatic flavor with the sweet side of the menu. But vanilla’s sweet and lingering flavor is making moves beyond dessert. “We are seeing vanilla cross meal parts,” says Technomic’s McGuire. She cites Bacchanalia in Atlanta, where the Gulf Crab Fritters combine blue crab with Thai chiles, garlic, avocado, Asian pear, grapefruit and both vanilla oil and vanilla salt.

WORTH ITS SALT

Call it fair trade: While sweet is encroaching into salty’s world, salt is moving in on sweet. “In desserts, savory flavors are among the fastest growing ingredients,” says Darr. Desserts that include bacon are up 59 percent since 2012. “Salt [on the dessert menu] is up 84 percent since 2012—often incorporated in salted caramels and/or paired with chocolate.” At Girl & The Goat in Chicago, the dessert menu weaves in salty touches, like the Miso-Butterscotch Budino, an Italian-style custard with bacon toffee, glazed pineapple and candied cashews.

Salt has also found new ways to present itself on savory menus. “There is a perpetual evolution of salts,” says **Corliss**. “Global sea salt varieties are being flavor-jacked with smoke, chiles, sriracha, herbs, sweetness, vanilla, wine, green tea, truffle, porcini and vegetables.” At Megu in New York, a green tea salt adds dimension to the Black Shrimp Tempura. **Corliss** points out that an added reason for chefs to explore different salts is the variety of textures they can bring to a dish, from coarse grains to flakes.



Specialty fries are everywhere, thanks to the surging popularity of small plates that rely on saltiness to boost their craveability. City Tap House in Philadelphia offers these Parmesan Fries with Truffle Aioli as a savory side.

Saltiness is a key element of many global cuisines, and when diners embrace these flavors, they embrace the savoriness that defines those dishes. Where would Asian cuisine be without soy sauce? And trending cuisines like Brazilian make liberal use of salt in grilled meats and fried street foods.

Meanwhile, within all-American cuisine, salt is driving the boom of craveable snacks and bar bites, such as specialty fries, which are growing in popularity as a salty appetizer or small plate. Garlic fries appear on menus 57 percent more than in 2009, and waffle fries are up 33 percent since then, according to Datassential.

“The simple fact is: People crave salt—it stimulates the appetite and heightens flavors,” says **Corliss**. “The judicious use of salt has always been a part of a chef’s flavor arsenal.”

THE POWER OF SOUR

Sour is making big moves, as we called out in our annual Top 10 Trends issue earlier this year. Yogurt, with its puckering tang, has always been associated with breakfast, but now it’s moving into appetizers, dinner and desserts. “The new news is savory yogurt,” says **Corliss**. He says vegetable purées are being folded into yogurt, and savory yogurt can be used as a dip, dressing, sandwich spread or soup enhancement. “It’s intriguing when an ingredient with traditional flavor and daypart connotations can be taken into a new culinary arena.” Yogurt is also more present these days in desserts as part of the movement away from too-sweet offerings. At Mindy Segal’s Hot Chocolate in Chicago, the strawberry cheesecake gets a tinge of tang from lambic frozen yogurt, combined with “cloud” cake, strawberry compote, elderflower candy and graham cookies.

Corliss also mentions buttermilk as going beyond the usual pancakes and dressings; it’s now used more in desserts like pound cakes and panna cotta. And buttermilk can bring a sour touch as a brine or tenderizer as well as in dips and sauces. Sour cream’s applications have expanded in similar ways.

Sour also lays claim in the dessert realm, usually through counterpoint. But we’re seeing newer flavors featured here, beyond lemon and lime, like sour cherry and pomegranate. McGuire mentions the Brown Butter Panna Cotta at Del Posto Ristorante in New York City, with sour cherry marmellata and pasta frolla.

The other unmistakable trend in the sour category is pickled and fermented food. And sour really just touches the top notes of this flavor trend, which folds in pleasingly musty, lingering notes, too.

“Pickled everything is big right now, including specialty and housemade pickles,” says McGuire. “Consumers are seeking new flavor experiences beyond sweet and salty, and exposure to global flavors has spurred an interest in pickled tastes.”

Darr points out that certain global cuisines prominently feature pickled, fermented or sour ingredients. Peruvian cuisine utilizes super-sour Key limes in ceviche and cocktails. German cuisine has its pickled vegetables and a wide range of mustards. Scandinavian seafood is usually pickled or fermented. And Korean kimchi, pungently sour and spicy, is central to the cuisine. According to Technomic’s MenuMonitor, kimchi grew 52 percent on U.S. menus from 2012 to 2014, while items featuring a pickled presentation increased 20 percent during this period.

“Creative operators have been pickling non-traditional fruits, vegetables and proteins to create unique dishes and flavor profiles,” says Darr. “The trend toward seasonal ingredients grown locally has spurred more establishments and individuals to preserve a portion of their homegrown harvest.”

LEAVING A BITTER TASTE

Despite the traditionally unpleasant associations, bitter has grown on diners and is being used increasingly across menu parts. “Bitter is making noise on the culinary scene,” says **Corliss**. “The popularity and exploration of bitter is propelled by healthier lifestyle choices and the adventurous palates of Millennials.”

The term “bitter” is only on 1 percent of menus, but is up 35 percent since 2009, according to Technomic. It shows up as a descriptor for beer and other beverages, dark leafy vegetables, dark chocolate and more.

“Cruciferous veggies are the trendiest vegetable group on menus today, sought out for their nutritional profiles and crunchy texture,” says McGuire. Bitter but beloved Brussels sprouts jumped 101 percent on menus from 2009 to 2013, and kale shot up 421 percent during that period. Arugula, broccolini and collard greens are surging right now, as diners learn to embrace the bitterness they bring to a dish.

Also giving bitter an extra boost is the interest in craft beers and cocktails. “Craft beers with high hop contents are rapidly trending,” says McGuire. “The demand for IPA varieties with increasingly bitter flavor profiles speaks to a portion of the population that enjoy bitter flavors.”

Bitters themselves are one of the hottest flavoring accents behind the bar, and spirits from amari to vermouth have made a comeback for their vibrantly bitter notes. Bitterness in beverages is a good foil to the global flavors that continue to push flavor trends.



Multiple hits of umami come from Asian ingredients in Houlihan’s Miso Grilled Salmon, served over stir-fried quinoa with steamed edamame, pickled cucumber and shaoxing sauce
PHOTO COURTESY OF HOULIHAN’S.

UMAMI DEAREST

While chefs are increasingly aware of the power of umami, the earthy/savory fifth taste, diners often are unaware that umami is what makes a dish delicious. “The typical consumer most likely doesn’t discern a distinct umami taste like they do with the other tastes. It’s a beautiful stealth flavor working behind the scenes,” says **Corliss**.

Foods that fall into the umami taste category are definitely on the rise. “Umami-focused dishes are trending due to the intensifying interest in vegetable-centric dishes and authentic Asian ingredients,” says Darr. “More umami-rich ingredients are also being produced as chefs continue to experiment with curing and fermenting techniques.”

Whatever the cuisine, umami ingredients add depth and accentuate the other tastes.

Some global applications of umami, according to Datassential: charcuterie (Mediterranean) appears on menus

164 percent more often than in 2009; oyster mushrooms (multicultural) increased 126 percent; and fish sauce (Asian) is up 19 percent and growing.

“Because Asian cuisine is associated with having a strong umami presence, more and more consumers are discovering the taste sensation of umami as Asian fare continues to be explored,” says McGuire. Soy sauce, miso, fish sauce, seaweed and mushrooms all introduce diners to the appeal of umami. Houlihan’s has an umami-packed Miso Grilled Salmon—miso-marinated Atlantic salmon over stir-fried quinoa with steamed edamame, house-pickled cucumber and shaoxing sauce.

Other sources of umami—Parmesan, goat cheese, feta—are also easy-access ingredients for which chefs are finding new uses. “Umami brings savory depth and rounds out the other tastes,” says **Corliss**. “From a chef’s perspective, this is a delightful opportunity for menu and ingredient exploration. If all the buzz and ingredient manipulation brings a wave of positive innovation, then we will all be the better for it.”