

Global Flavor Inspirations

By Christopher Koetke, MBA, CEC, CCE, Contributing Editor

Part of my responsibilities for overseeing culinary programs in nine different countries entails spending time in those countries, often dining with fellow chefs. Along the way, I have tasted new foods and preparations in the context of their geographic home. Countless times, I have mentioned that a particular dish or food would be welcomed in the United States if we only knew about it. (Other times, I have eaten foods that were excellent, but would not find a home in this country; I just don't think Americans are ready for ant eggs, Guinea pig, etc.) But I've run across many foods that I believe fit our food culture and would warrant being introduced to U.S. consumers.

A spotlight on Brazil

Increasing global influence and the upcoming worldwide sporting events in Rio de Janeiro—soccer's World Cup in 2014, and the Summer Olympics in 2016—are propelling Brazil—and its cuisine—into the international spotlight. Brazil's national cuisine is a melting pot from different peoples, including native populations, Europeans (primarily Portuguese and Italian) and Africans. Brazilian food is further divided into diverse regional cuisines, including the Amazon that yields an amazing variety of wild fruits. The açai fruit, lauded for its nutritional value, has found its way into countless products, but açai is only one of many. A quick trip to an Rio or São Paulo juice shop offers an array of fruits with intriguing flavors and textures, including cashew fruit (better than the nut!), *cupuaçu*, *acerola*, *pitanga* and *graviola*. These are ideal candidates to expand frozen-dessert varieties, dessert sauces, juices and smoothies here in the United States. Some of them are already imported as frozen pulp.

According to Teresa Corção, chef at Rio's O Navegador, Brazilians were not originally wheat eaters, but instead were defined by manioc (also known as cassava; tapioca is made from the plant's dried root). She has been researching manioc traditions (in conjunction with Rio's Maniva Institute) and teaching it as part of her commitment to slow food and to highlighting traditional regional foods. Indeed, manioc is everywhere in Brazilian society. In the northeast of the country, pancakes, called *tapioca*, are made with 100% tapioca flour mixed with a small amount of water. They are typically folded in half with either sweet or savory fillings, and have a delightful, chewy texture. They could be a welcome addition to breakfast restaurants and brunch buffets. Puffed tapioca snack foods, called *mandiopã*—very similar to puffed snack pieces seen in the United States—are very common in Brazil. It is also important to note that manioc and tapioca can play an important role in America's focus on gluten-free cooking.

One last mention before moving on—fish. Wholesalers are starting to import fish from the Amazon. In my Brazilian travels, I've found that *tambaqui* (also known as *pacu*) and *pirarucu* (also known as *arapaima*), both very large fish from the Amazon, deserve further attention. Dredging pieces of these fish in cassava flour before sautéing is a satisfying Brazilian twist on a French classic. And grilled *tambaqui* ribs and belly have a remarkable resemblance to their pork counterparts.

Chilean treasures

While Chile borders the Pacific Ocean for 3,998 miles and boasts great seafood, it was the country's lamb prosciutto that struck me as a product ready for an American debut. High-end, house-made, custom charcuterie has flooded the U.S. market, and all things pig have dominated many restaurant menus, but as we search for the "next big thing," this has promise. The lamb I tasted was silky and deeply flavored. Thinly sliced, it would be perfect anywhere pork prosciutto is found, on a panini or other sandwich, diced into a pasta dish, rolled inside a chicken breast, or on its own along with some appropriate garnishes and bread. And, of course, it could be a kosher or halal substitute for traditional prosciutto.

Another treasure from Chile is a simple spice blend called *merkén*, a centuries-old spice mix used by the native Mapuche. It combines smoked *cacho de cabra* chile, coriander, salt and sometimes cumin. I see this as the next step after America's "discovery" of *pimentón* (blends of sweet, smoked and/or spicy paprika) from Spain, since *merkén* also adds heat to the equation. In Chile, *merkén* is sprinkled onto and used in a host of different dishes. For instance, its flavor profile is perfect sprinkled on seafood, added to an omelet, stirred into soup or sauce, or rubbed into meat. It might also be a unique flavor for crackers and flatbreads.

Just as Brazil has its own unique fruits, Chile has *carica*, which is currently imported into the United States packed in low-sugar syrup. Harvested in the country's northern semi-desert valleys, *carica* is a bright-yellow fruit that has a sturdy texture, making it a versatile complement to savory and sweet preparations. Its texture also allows the fruit to be easily grilled or sautéed.

Cocoa from Ecuador

The small country of Ecuador is graced with four distinct regions: the mountainous highlands, the jungle, the coastline and the Galapagos Islands. Because of this geographic diversity, Ecuador has a tremendous variety of products, including many indigenous fruits.

One of Ecuador's greatest products is high-quality chocolate. Because Ecuador has some of the best cocoa beans in the world, it's no wonder that Ecuadorian chocolate is making a name for itself. Certainly, gourmet chocolate is not a new trend. Companies such as Cacao Barry (owned by Barry Callebaut, Zurich, Switzerland) have already focused their efforts on producing terroir-specific chocolate. (Cacao Barry has even moved from country-specific chocolate to plantation-specific chocolate, as in the case of the extraordinary Alto el Sol in Peru.)

Ecuadorian chocolate is sold to the consumer in the form of chocolate bars which tend to be low in sugar and cocoa butter, but high in levels of cocoa mass, which mirrors the attention chocolate has had from a health perspective. The flavor of the chocolate is complex and intense. The labels highlight geographical location (such as Manabí, Esmeraldas or Los Ríos), which is in sync with our attention to local and regional.

In Ecuador, I sampled small-scale, rustic—literally house-made—chocolate that could become a trend here. This chocolate did not have the refined flavors and textures of industrially produced chocolate. At the same time, it was appealing for its individuality, which could find a happy home among our micro-local trends.

Malaysian artisanal inspirations

Among the many varied foods and culinary preparations I tried in Malaysia, the tempeh I tasted was a revelation. Tempeh, a fermented cake predominantly made of soybeans, is increasingly common in upscale grocery stores and is widely respected for its health attributes. What I tasted, though, was the result of small-scale, freshly made production. It came wrapped in a banana leaf and covered with a white, soft, downy mold. Unlike some of the tempeh in the United States, it was flavorful and moist—and perfectly suited for a quick grilling and coating of sambal (pastes of primarily chiles and salt that tend toward highly pungent and aromatic and can include ingredients as diverse as kaffir lime and other citrus, vinegar, garlic, assorted spices, nuts, fermented fish products, etc.).

Already, there are small producers in the United States are making this kind of tempeh, but there are preciously few at this point. This cottage industry could grow much like artisanal American cheese. Artisanal tempeh production is a perfect fit for health and local trends.

Sambals have also begin to make some headway in the United States and can help foster new takes on Asian-inspired sauces for meats, poultry and seafood.

The flavors of Jordan

Jordan's cuisine is steeped in tradition, and several products I tasted there bear further exposure in the United States. The first is the spice sumac, which is starting to make inroads into our culinary culture. Its acidic character, intriguing flavor and beautiful purple color are perfect complements for many products, such as meat, fish, vegetables and breads. Its appearance would make it a great topical addition to crackers and flatbreads. One common Middle Eastern dish that is seasoned with sumac (along with allspice and saffron) is *musakhan*, in which the seasoned chicken is baked with lemon juice. It is then served on flatbreads with caramelized red onion, pine nuts and yogurt.

Sumac is also part of the popular Middle Eastern spice blend called *za'taar*, composed of sumac, herbs (like oregano, thyme and savory) and sesame seeds. It is already used to a small degree in the United States, but we've not yet explored its potential. In the same way that we have Italian and Greek herb blends, or *herbes de Provence* from France, *za'taar* can be further marketed as *the* herb blend of the Middle East. Aside from seasoning meats, it could be routinely put into flatbreads, crackers and other savory baked products.

Another Jordanian product that could ride on the coattails of the mega trend of high-quality, small-scale cheeses. *Jameed* is a rock-hard chunk of dried goat or sheep yogurt that is stable at room temperature. In Jordan, it is an integral part of their national dish, *mansaf* (lamb cooked with the yogurt, then served with rice and flatbread). Once hydrated, the flavor of *jameed* expands, and it can be transformed into vinaigrettes and hot sauces, and can be incorporated into baked preparations.

The streets of Mexico

Of all the cuisines listed above, Mexico has most certainly had the greatest impact on our current culinary culture. While we have learned much about salsa, mole, real tacos and tamales, there is still

much to discover in Mexico that could influence our eating habits. Several street-food favorites have the potential to have a cult following in the United States, including *tortas ahogadas* (meat sandwiches drowned in orange tomato and chile sauce and served with pickled red onions), *tacos al pastor* (little tacos filled with spit-roasted meat and topped with fresh pineapple and salsa), and *guajolota* (a bun filled with a tamale). In line with America's fascination with house-made sausages is *chorizo verde* from Toluca. These sausages, which are literally green from different fresh herbs and green chiles, make deliciously original (and colorful) quesadillas. Another ingredient that has already reached our country is *huitlacoche*, which is a fungus that grows on ears of corn. Originally maligned by farmers here, this fungus is well-respected in Mexico (like wild mushrooms in the United States) and can be incorporated into sauces, soups, tacos, etc.

Perhaps the best way to conclude is with dessert. Numerous trend sources have already indicated that *paletas*, Mexican popsicles, are slated to make a big impact in the United States. Having sampled many of these firsthand, I concur. Even though frozen fruit-based bars have begun to show up on retail store shelves, what makes these appealing is intensity of their flavor. Some of the more-interesting flavors include mango (with or without chile), hibiscus, guava, tamarind, coconut and walnut. Expect these flavors to hit the U.S. dessert scene and impact frozen-dessert flavors in other categories.

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