

FERMENTING

Change

The funky flavor notes of fermented foods are seeing a renewed culinary appreciation

WE'VE SEEN EVIDENCE of a maturing palate in today's consumer. As tastes have progressed from teriyaki to chipotle, a confluence of factors has made foodservice flavor exploration braver than ever before. Those factors — diner sophistication, street-food influence, global ingredient accessibility and craftsmanship — are like steps rising up to meet the lofty, somewhat clouded world of fermented flavors. Are we calling out funky fermented notes as the next "it" flavor? Not quite. But we are saying that bold, fermented flavors, led by star performer kimchi, are moving from the fringe into the outer circle of mainstream.

"The interest in all things fermented shows no signs of abating. They are deeply ingrained in many food cultures," says Melissa Abbott of The Hartman Group. "Today, we love cultured foods for their briny imparting flavors that bring food to life."

Of course, fermented flavors aren't new. Diners have been digging olives, cured meats, breads, soy sauce, yogurt and blue and Parmesan cheeses for a good long while now. But let's call those the amuse-bouches of fermented flavors. Funky

kimchi, pungent fish sauce, fragrant miso? They're the main course.

"It is the funkiness of fermented foods that makes these flavors so compelling," says Sandor Katz, fermented foods expert and author of "The Art of Fermentation" (www.wildfermentation.com). "Some flavors of ferments are not universally beloved — they're an acquired taste. After all, ferments exist in the creative space between fresh and rotten."

Perhaps not the best menu language to use, but Katz's point is well made. Fermented flavors reside in the sweet spot of flavor building. "They're all about flavor — super intense flavor," says Food IQ's Director of Culinary Cari Price. "This has come about as Americans have become more comfortable and accepting of pungency. There is something craveable about these flavors."

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The fermented foods trend is fueled by our increased interest and knowledge of international cuisines combined with the search for big and bold flavors.

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CHRISTOPHER KOETKE

THE FLAVOR OF PRESERVATION

That acceptance and enthusiasm of fermented flavors sits on a solid platform of today's deepest values. Fermenting takes time, craftsmanship, and shows a commitment to old ways that resonates with

At Chicago's BellyQ, crispy mung bean pancakes get a powerful punch from a kimchi and bacon dressing on top, served rolled and sliced, with a black vinegar dipping sauce.



BELLYQ

Why Now This is a low-cost/high-impact ingredient opportunity. Fermented foods deliver on full flavor and a healthy perception. The operator can easily craft complementary flavor profiles by using fermented foods paired with proteins, veggies, fruit and other ingredients. This is about “flavor stacking” bright, bold acidic flavors that add depth to food using simple, impactful ingredients and techniques that are easy to replicate operationally. — ROB CORLISS



THE SOYFOODS COUNCIL

Miso's fragrant appeal comes from fermented soy beans — the base to all variations of miso soup.

today's diner. The burgeoning handcrafted and artisan movement has led loyal foodies from pickles and charcuterie to bolder interpretations like slaws and vinegars.

“It's a great way to serve up the local harvest long after the growing season,” says Culinary Visions' Sharon Olson. Indeed, fermentation pushes the artisan envelope, adding another layer of skill.

“There is a general uptick in DIY culture for old-school traditions such as pickling, canning and home-brewing,” says Steven Goldstein of The Culinary

“ Fermented or naturally brewed foods like soy sauce are classic examples of umami contributors. As Korean cuisine continues to grow in popularity, so does the spotlight on Korean fermented ingredients and condiments such as kimchi and various kinds of pickles and sauces. ”

ANDREW HUNTER

Edge. “Fermentation is a natural continuation of that trend. You could even argue that fermentation is an upping of the ante, as there is more science and skill required to properly and safely ferment your own foods, making it an even sexier challenge for hard-core foodies.”

Hand in hand with DIY preservation techniques, the recent years’ growth of all-things-Korean is to credit for kimchi’s broadened acceptance, in particular. Evidence of fermented flavor exploration is deliciously present already and pushing deeper with every kimchi-laden hot dog, burger or fries sold. Take a look at the traditional treatment of kimchi as a condiment at Korean barbecue houses like San Soo Gab San in Chicago. Or the role it plays in bold bar snacks at places like Barwares in Portland, Ore., where it’s offered in cabbage, daikon and pear varieties, and built into items like Pork and Kimchi Pancakes with crème fraîche for a double-whammy of fermented flavor.

Moving into other forms of ferments, cast your eye over to Shine in Boulder, Colo., which offers a handcrafted Probiotic Slaw Sampler and a Coconut Curry with sprouted quinoa, seasonal vegetables and house-cultured sweet carrots. “Slow-fermented” pizza dough is broadcast on the menu at Massachusetts-based Wicked Restaurant & Bar. Or consider the unique slaw ingredients like apple and roasted fennel or hot pink pickled cabbage at Lambert’s in Austin, Texas.

Fermented ingredients are also being used more as bold flavor-builders in modern mixology, from the revival of vinegar-based shrubs to the growing interest in kombucha, the tart fermented tea that’s been abuzz in health-food stores but is starting to make an appearance behind the bar.

“As chefs have explored making food in house, fermented foods are natural menu additions. They pack an umami punch, making them a go-to ingredient. Differentiating the vinegar used in a dressing or pickle conveys the fermented flavor message; ‘cider,’ ‘barrel aged’ or ‘rice wine’ say flavorful and tangy, not just sour.”

PRISCILLA MARTEL

FLAVORFUL Ferments BY GERRY LUDWIG

The next wave of fermented flavors may come via chefs creating housemade vinegars. While not a widespread trend, a growing number of West Coast chefs are making their own vinegars as a way to utilize leftover wine. At the Culinary Institute of America in Napa Valley, chef instructor Lars Kronmark has developed a repertoire of artisanal vinegars in flavors such as strawberry rhubarb, elderflower, quince, cherry and white peach.

Kronmark makes the vinegars by combining alcohol and fresh juices with a vinegar “mother,” which initiates the fermentation. These vinegars are an obvious choice for creating signature vinaigrettes but are also ideal for making gastriques, adobos, finishing soups, “same day” pickling of vegetables and fruit, and creating uniquely flavored ceviches and tiraditos.



FERMENT IMPLEMENTS

Chefs who use fermented ingredients strategically consider them a heavyweight flavor builder. “Fermented flavors add so much depth — that fifth element of savoriness,” says Bill Kim of Chicago’s Belly concepts. Indeed, perhaps “umami” is the buzzword that’s helping break down barriers for fermented flavors. “People misinterpret kimchi as spicy, hot and only made with napa cabbage,” says Kim. He uses it as a salsa, on a taco or hot dog, for instance, or blends it and uses it as a flavoring agent for soups or as a finishing sauce for fish, poultry and meat, much like a chimichurri. Kim moves beyond cabbage for his kimchi, looking to green papaya, cucumber or even garbanzo beans. He also ferments sun-dried tomatoes, then dehydrates and grinds them. “I use it as a dusting for potato chips, french fries or fried chickpeas, or as a seasoning on chicken and pork,” he explains. At the new BellyQ, Kim’s Asian barbecue concept, kimchi teams up with beloved fermented condiments like soy sauce and black vinegar for one of his most popular dishes: Double Smoked Bacon and Kimchi Pancake, a modern take on the mung-bean pancakes he grew up on.

Dave Woolley, executive chef of Red Robin Gourmet Burgers, says keeping approachability is key for success. “Slaws with fermented flavors are worth exploring,” he says. “Cost of goods has a role, and cabbage is inexpensive.” His team has experimented with kimchi-flavored slaw, using a kimchi-flavor-infused vinegar and

“ So many cultures use fermentation as a way to develop craveable flavor profiles. When we honor the true fermentation process, we allow real flavor to properly bloom that would not otherwise be available to us. It takes time, commitment and reverence for authentic tradition to create these authentic flavors. A good place for operators to start is to use miso for marinades and other fermented bean pastes for flavor infusion. Try using yogurt for marinades, and explore the world of housemade brines and pickles. ”

ROSS KAMENS

ON THE MENU

Fermented Flavors

PORK BELLY PORCHETTA ~ Lang Family Farm pork, fermented black-bean crêpe, Brussels sprouts, black garlic jus
HARVEST RESTAURANT, MADISON, WISC..

CLAMS CASINO ~ Virginia clams casino, potato and sauerkraut ravioli
THE RED HEN, WASHINGTON, D.C.

CHIEF LAPU-LAPU SHANDY ~ Apple brandy, housemade pineapple shrub, lemon juice, Sixpoint Bengali Tiger beer, bitters
JACQUES 1534 BAR, NEW YORK CITY

CHICKEN TACOS ~ With house-cultured tomato salsa, lime-infused quinoa, sour cream and black beans
SHINE, BOULDER, COLO.



KIKKOMAN

Versatile, simple and beautiful, slaw is made savory with soy sauce in this jicama-grapefruit version by chef Charles Phan at San Francisco's Slanted Door.

fish sauce for the fermented flavor aspect. "You can flavor the slaw à la minute, or you can let it sit to pick up more of the fermented notes," he says, adding that such flavor profiles are bubbling up from gastro-pubs and food trucks. "You definitely should be experimenting with fermented flavors as these not only fall under sour but also umami."

The fermentation process is a natural umami-builder, and the umami element is an important one in the understanding, use and appreciation of these ingredients and flavors.

"Many fermented products also bring with them a big umami hit which, when harnessed by the chef, makes the flavor of the final dish more irresistible," says chef Christopher Koetke, VP of culinary arts of Kendall College and Laureate International Universities.

Like all new and bold culinary adventures, application of these flavors should be approached thoughtfully. "To implement fermented foods, first know your customers and how open they are to exploring new flavors, and if they're already familiar with a particular fermented food," adds Koetke. The opportunity here is to harness these ingredients in such a way so that they add "bursts of flavor without overwhelming the palate," he points out — especially of those who may be less familiar with such profiles. "In small doses, it adds zing and a perhaps unusual flavor experience. It also brings the ability to take a common ingredient and add a point of differentiation." As an example, he suggests seasoning stews with miso instead of salt for a dramatic flavor increase.

“ Fermenting or pickling offers operators a high profit margin, but for different reasons. Once the item has gone through the fermentation process, the shelf life is extended, and since it's ready to go, plating is much quicker than for an item that needs to be prepared to order. ”

CHRIS CASSON

How to Work It Chefs are doing all different kinds of kimchi. Try keeping complementary ingredients together: butternut squash and apples; red onions and purple plums; leeks and carrots. I have also seen more housemade krauts on menus, which opens many doors. One of my favorites is a root-vegetable kraut: celery root, carrots, leeks and rutabaga marinated with Riesling, juniper, caraway, fresh thyme and braised with duck fat. Serve this over a pork chop, and all you need is a good beer!

– TODD DOWNS

The beauty of such high-impact ingredients is their readily available flavor, and the ability to use them in small quantities and versatile applications.

“Kimchi represents the ease of higher quality foods that are ready for assembly,” notes The Hartman Group’s Abbott. “Having it on hand makes meal prep or quick snacks easy — tossing kimchi into a brown-rice stir fry or topping a soft taco with it celebrates fresh and seasonal with a nod toward convenience.”

HEALTH HALO

One of the factors bringing more light to these ingredients is the growing awareness of the healthfulness of cultured, aged and fermented foods.

“Chefs are becoming more interested in these foods from a flavor distinction, along with the rise in artisanal products,” says Sandor Katz. “But in other segments, such as retail and home fermenting, this increased interest can be viewed from a health context.” He notes that consumers are becoming more aware of the various forms of fermentation (alcoholic, breads/grains, lactic- and acetic-acid ferments) and the beneficial impact these cultures can have on our health. “The emphasis is really on the live culture,” he notes. “There is more and more evidence to support the idea that bacteria are centrally important to our health and well-being.”

Indeed, the health halo around fermented foods glows brightly, and can be viewed as an added hook for increased menu usage. “In one of our recent panel studies, we tested concepts for a wide range of slaws with deli consumers,” says Culinary Visions’ Olson. “Interestingly, we found pretty strong interest in slaws that were perceived as healthy.” The Culinary Edge’s Goldstein agrees. “Kimchi carries a health halo for being a light, oil-free condiment with a hefty flavor punch,” he says. While this halo is nudging interest along, at its core, fermented foods will continue to find their way onto more menus because of their promise for a bold flavor adventure. ☺

“It’s okay to use a pre-made product. Make it your own with smart ‘plus-one’ touches. Given kimchi’s strong flavor, use it as you would any other seasoning — pairing, tasting and adjusting to make sure you don’t kill your patrons’ palates. Simple yet creative slaws can be an easy way to differentiate your menu. Consider the different variations you can achieve through the creative use of seasonings, fats (mayo vs. oil), and different vegetables (cabbage, Brussels sprouts, etc.) depending on the season.”

STEVEN GOLDSTEIN