

4 - The Spice Blends of Life

Global spice blends stand ready to make a big move onto American menus

By Katie Ayoub

For an on-trend, low-risk entry point into global flavors with a customer-friendly façade, look to flavor-packed spice blends. Za'atar, berbere, dukkah, togarashi, ras el hanout—none of them trips off the tongue, but each instills a sense of adventure to all that they touch. Flatbreads finished with Bengali Five Spice add an exotic point of distinction. Moroccan-spiced carrots up the side-dish ante, and a blended spice-sea salt rim on a cocktail adds appreciated nuance.

“Spice blends offer low commitment, high reward,” says Eric Stangarone of The Culinary Edge. “It’s easy to experiment with different spice blends, requiring little, if any, change in technique of your existing recipes.” There may not be room on your menu for a Baharat-Spiced Turkish Lamb Stew, but baharat (black pepper, paprika, cloves, cumin, nutmeg, cardamom and red pepper) can bring an intriguing dimension to the familiar meatball sandwich.

“The versatility of these spice blends is that they become real back-of-house workhorses for operators,” says Datassential’s Maeve Webster. “Even if you bring in pre-made/value-added dips, sauces or dressings, a spice blend can be used to create something unique without the labor required to start from scratch every time.”

Clearly, bar bites and snacking menus are a good fit for flavor exploration here. Think of it as speed dating with spice blends—if your customers don’t like it, they can quickly move on, no strings attached. But the chance to flash them an exquisite flavor profile is worth it. Dukkah-studded flatbreads. Za’atar chicken wings. Togarashi popcorn. Quatres épices sausage. And don’t stop at your starters menu. Roasted chicken at Gather in Berkeley, Calif., reels them in with hominess, then delights with berbere (an Ethiopian blend of chiles, ginger and cloves). “Keep protein, grain and vegetable preps familiar, but boost flavor and quality by incorporating freshly ground spices,” says The Hartman Group’s Melissa Abbott. Doughs, dips, salads, crusts, finishes—all can shine with a unique signature of flavor-forward spice blends.



“Health is a driver of this trend. Consumers desire elevated taste without the calories, fat and fillers,” says chef Rob Corliss. “Spice and herb blends deliver big flavor without the unwanted extras.” Here, portobellos stuffed with a multigrain medley get a flavor boost from za’atar.

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SOARING FLAVOR, SUBTLE DELIVERY

“Palate entertainment” is what Cliff Pleau, senior director of culinary and beverage, calls his flavor strategy at Darden’s upscale Seasons 52 concept. “I play in an arena of seasonal and lower calorie cooking,” he says. “When you’re cooking with lower amounts of fat, there’s no masking of the tongue, so I can entertain it with spices.” Just look for the natural matches, then push them out a bit, he advises. Roasted cauliflower scented with curry powder is a great flavor combination. “But rather than use a generic curry powder, I’ll use a Madras blend, or maybe garam masala,” he says. Indeed, such a simple elevation makes the dish unique, dialing up the flavor while delivering a premium, singular experience. “Custom blends also give us distinction,” says Pleau, who works with several boutique spice houses for proprietary blends. He grinds them in small batches, heightening their flavor impact. “Take advantage of the freshness cue with spices,” says Pleau. “Grind them in house and toast them to bring out the oils. The aromas are intoxicating.” He runs grilled fish on the spring menu, seasoning it with shichimi togarashi, a hot and fruity blend of spices that includes red pepper flakes, seaweed, sesame and orange peel. “Togarashi is interesting and not well-known, so it gets the servers excited about the dish, and that helps sell it,” he says. “We don’t want to alienate our customers though, so we tread lightly with exotics. We speckle the menu for that buzz and that surprise and delight.”

At 19-unit Not Your Average Joe’s, Jeffrey Tenner, VP and executive chef, looks to unique spice blends for added dimension and as a replacement for salt. “We let the spice blends do the work,” he says. Brand new on the menu, the Catalan-style chicken gets a huge hit of flavor and texture from the dredge, made with chickpea flour seasoned with smoked paprika, garlic and onion powder, cayenne and ancho chile powder. And on a new pork tenderloin dish, the spice rub consists of black pepper, cumin, fennel seed, coriander and mustard seed. “It’s a great background flavor, and that’s what we’re looking for—layers of flavor that elevate the food,” says Tenner. “A huge part of the work that we do is to streamline steps, but we don’t want to dumb things down. Spice blends help us keep things simple while maximizing bold and exciting flavors.”

At Salt House in San Francisco, executive chef Vernon Morales makes his own vadouvan, a haunting spice blend that ties India to France. “It tastes like a roller coaster,” he says. “It’s earthy with a little chocolate undertone. It’s bright and spicy and brings balance to a number of dishes.” He features it on his Vadouvan-Spiced Lamb Riblets, in his Arctic Char Tartar and as a finishing spice on his Lobster Roll. His house blend combines a grind of roasted cumin,



At Ofrenda in New York City, Jorge Guzman’s Camote Margarita is rimmed with a chile ancho salt, highlighting a big flavor opportunity for cocktails.

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cardamom, coriander, fenugreek, black and white pepper, allspice, cinnamon and California pasilla. He adds fried-then-dried shallots and onions to the mix. “With the lamb dish, the meat is inherently sweet, so this plays off of that nicely,” he says.

Chef Keith Brunell appreciates spice blends for an even distribution of flavor in every bite. As senior director of culinary at Italian-American multi-unit Maggiano’s, he’ll use blends as a protein crust or a finishing touch. “We create our own char crust using 14 different ingredients including coffee, smoked salt, coriander and three different peppercorns,” he explains. “It creates a beautiful color and a mild-tempered flavor for a filet or pork.”

But in addition to protein crusts and rubs—where spice blends are most commonly used in American kitchens—modern global influences are introducing chefs to the much-broadened versatility of blends that go far beyond proteins. Many of these applications put the flavor front and center, as a topping or finishing sprinkle atop a salad or even a pasta dish. “Without a doubt, I’d top a pasta dish with a spice blend,” notes Brunell, highlighting the bottom line of this flavor delivery method: “A finishing sprinkle gives even distribution of flavor over a myriad of menu items.” This observation makes spice blends especially appealing in an age of flavor exploration.



A blend of spices, herbs, nuts and seeds used in finishing applications offers textural contrasts and an even flavor distribution atop menu items across all dayparts.

In Boston, Oleana chef Ana Sortun dusts a poached egg-topped bruschetta dish with dukkah, an Egyptian spice blend with nuts and seeds, to which she adds coconut. Fresh from a culinary visit to Turkey, chef Gerry Ludwig introduced attendees at last summer’s Flavor Experience event to a traditional bread dip of olive oil followed by a coating of an aromatic Turkish spice blend. And globally inspired bartenders are experimenting with blended rims, as in pisco sours rimmed with smoky-spicy Chilean merkén.

CUE AUTHENTICITY

Spice blends form a direct line to authenticity. They are audacious ambassadors, stamping flavor postcards from distant lands. Take ras el hanout—with its dizzying number of heady spices, which usually includes cloves, cumin, dried rose petals, ginger and galangal. Cross the seas to Latin America and a rub starring spices like aji amarillo, cumin, annatto, Mexican oregano and kaffir lime leaves takes dishes deep into Peruvian culture—without alienating diners. “Spice mixes give you a new way to express regional and ethnic cuisines via signature flavor profiles,” says Stangarone. “Baharat for Turkey, togarashi for Japan, jerk for Caribbean.”

Chef Rick Perez of R&D Culinary agrees. “These blends offer new and inventive flavors to menu standards that can help operators differentiate themselves. Berbere-spiced nuts in a

kale salad, harissa and honey chicken wings, or za'atar tzatziki for lamb kabobs—these are all ways operators can spice up traditional menu items very cost-effectively.”

With spice blends, it's all about the transformative quality—they move us both with flavor discovery and leave us with an exotic, sensual sense of place.