

## 5 - Crazy for Coconut

In a myriad of forms, coconut imparts its tropical richness in new and wonderful ways

By Katie Ayoub

“If you could count the stars, then you could count all the ways the coconut tree serves us.” That Filipino proverb rings true for today’s American menus. We’re finally looking beyond the piña colada and cracking the flavor code to this intriguing and versatile fruit. Rich, fresh, luscious, fragrant, musky, tropical and exotic—all evocative flavors unlocked by coconut. So let’s crack it, layer by gorgeous layer: Coconut milk (and cream) is extending its reach beyond Thai curries and tropical drinks. Ditto for dried coconut, which is making moves beyond desserts. And even within desserts, it’s upping its game. As evidence, look to Driftwood in Dallas and its Sticky Spice Cake, finished with sweetened coconut flakes that are dehydrated and ground into a fine powder.

Coconut oil brings the largest health halo to the table, thanks to buzz around its ability to improve immunity, fight diseases and promote well-being. Coconut water is the newest discovery, mostly explored at the retail level, but it holds opportunity for innovation (coconut water ice cubes, anyone?). And then there are the byproducts, which continue the intriguing flavor narrative. Coconut sugar, coconut vinegar - even coconut sap is being tapped for potential.

Coconut, in a word, is versatile. “It has a multi-faceted personality and plays well with others,” says Suzy Badaracco of Culinary Tides. “It easily fits in all dayparts and can be showcased as sweet or savory. It has a long history in this country, so it’s not intimidating.” Yet again, we’re seeing that exotic or bold flavors tethered to familiarity can reach great heights with consumers.



The time has come for serious consideration of coconut as a menu builder. In this Beef and Coconut Noodle Salad, a coconut-milk dressing is a perfect complement to the steak’s marinade of lime, fish sauce, lemon grass and chiles.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BEEF CHECKOFF.

## PATHWAY TO GLOBAL

Coconut flavors beat a direct path to global and exotic, but without the need for a translator. “Coconut is associated with many global cuisines, including Asian, Caribbean and South American,” notes Darren Tristano of Technomic. “Consumers want to try global flavors when dining out. Adding coconut to a dish or drink adds an ethnic taste without making it too intimidating for guests.”

It can also help move a dish further into its sense of place. For instance, a tres leches cake scented with coconut extract and dusted with toasted coconut offers adventure and paints a premium picture. So does a delectable bar bite of a mini coconut crab cake—familiar, exotic, enticing.

At Fish restaurant in Charleston, S.C., Executive Chef Nico Romo brings an Asian touch to classical French food. His Lobster with Coconut-Ginger Beurre Blanc relies on coconut cream to bridge the flavor into Asia. “Ginger brings the heat and spice, but coconut cream adds depth and silkiness to the beurre blanc,” he says. And he moves his bouillabaisse out of France with a coconut-lemongrass broth. “Traditionally, bouillabaisse features a heartier tomato-seafood broth flavored with Provençal herbs like fennel, saffron, thyme and bay leaves,” he says. “Our signature recipe begins with good fish stock, but is lightened with delicate Asian flavors like coconut milk, lemongrass, ginger and aromatic kaffir lime leaf for a buttery, citrusy seafood broth.”

At the Malaysian-themed Azalina’s in San Francisco, coconut is a formidable presence on the menu. A vegetarian curry laced with coriander and mint is spiked with a coconut sambal. Basmati coconut rice features fresh coconut and coconut cream, while pesto is made out of Penang greens and coconut.

Moving to Indian flavors, at Thali in New Canaan, Conn., Coconut Saag Lamb stars roasted coconut, Kashmir dried red chiles and roasted garlic spinach, instantly calling up a rich, fragrant flavor profile. Latin dishes love coconut, too, bringing the tropical vibe front and center. Rosa Mexicano, with 19 units worldwide, serves a cocktail called the Mojito Coquito that builds off of a coconut-infused tequila. At Rayuela in New York, citrus-marinated chicken is finished with a coconut-citrus glaze.



Coconut cream adds depth and silkiness to the beurre blanc in chef Nico Romo’s lobster dish at Fish restaurant in Charleston, S.C.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF FISH.

## EXPLORING THE COCONUT PANTRY

Much in the way that the humble chickpea gains street cred through chickpea flour and hummus, coconut earns premium value and menu interest through many of its byproducts. Coconut sugar, for instance, which comes from the sap of the palm tree, offers an alternative natural sweetener, much like agave. Seen in Filipino and other Asian cookery, it's often used in marinades but holds potential for beverage and dessert applications. Coconut flour, made from dried coconut meat, may offer a gluten-free solution—think battered and fried chicken tenders with a mango-pineapple salsa, for instance.

“Coconut flour and sugar can be easily incorporated into baked goods,” offers Benjamin Stanley of Food Genius. “Coconut milks and waters can be added into smoothies as non-dairy substitutes, and coconut milk can be used to bring creaminess to sauces and dressings.”

For a vegan dessert option, chef/mixologist Kathy Casey suggests replacing dairy in panna cotta with coconut milk. “It's also beautiful as a foam for cocktails that's egg-white free,” she says. “It adds a lush mouthfeel to tropical drinks.”

At Boston-based Not Your Average Joe's, a Thai Curry Shrimp Rice Bowl offers a niche alternative for those looking for dairy-free menu choices. “We're trying to offer our guests more non-dairy options, and coconut milk gives you a great velvety texture,” says Jeffrey Tenner, vice president and executive chef.

Coconut vinegar, from fermented coconut water, offers perhaps the greatest room for exploration on more traditional menus. With its acidic but mellow character and its slightly musky flavor, it brings both attention to detail and exotic intrigue. Allen Susser, famous for Chef Allen's in Florida and now a restaurant consultant and chef-owner of Burger Bar, describes it as a mild vinegar that's richer than rice wine vinegar but not as harsh as apple cider vinegar.

And rich, unctuous and sensual coconut oil! “It's a great fat for cooking shrimp and crab,” says Susser. “Good quality coconut oil is soft on the palate with sweet aromatics.” He describes a salad dressing of organic coconut oil, passionfruit and orange juices, toasted fennel seed, sea salt and black pepper. “The richness of the oil makes it a perfect dressing.”

In all its forms, coconut as an ingredient carries with it all the cues that resonate with consumers today: better-for-you, natural, indulgent, sweet yet savory, and just a hint of exotic.



Coconut milk makes a good base for dairy-free and vegan menu offerings, accompanied by indulgent cues for added appeal.