

TOP 10 TRENDS FOR 2016

Italian Renaissance

The most beloved cuisine is ready for American innovation

By Katie Ayoub

As other cuisines have opened themselves up for interpretation, it could be said that Italian food has kept its borders firmly closed. Guarded by tradition and authenticity, it's been hard for chefs to tinker with Old World recipes and traditions. With any attempt, they're collectively whacked on the hand by Nonna's wooden spoon, getting shooed away from the idea of tweaking, upgrading or transforming this classic cuisine.

And, really, why mess with a good thing? Not only is Italian far and away the No. 1 "ethnic" cuisine here, it beats out the five runners-up by a wide margin, according to Mintel's 2014 research. Some chefs are viewing that nod of recognition and well-worn love as an enormous opportunity. After all, the foundation of today's most successful menu innovation is adventure wrapped in familiarity. Today's consumers yearn for what's next in dining out, with expectations for creative, delicious food at an all-time high.

"The sophistication of American palates has pushed the sophistication of cuisines—Italian included. Even the fast-casual pizza boom has influenced the way we think about Italian cuisine. These menu offerings speak to bold, fresh flavor combinations—placing modern twists on old Italian standbys." - Rob Corliss

Forward-thinking chefs are taking up the gauntlet and throwing it down with exciting, new interpretations of what makes up Italian-American fare. "Although many traditionalists would scoff at experimenting with Italian cuisine, chefs are beginning to say, 'What can we do next?' American chefs are finally feeling bold enough to experiment with Italian cuisine," says Emily Dryden, insights manager with Food IQ. Driven by attention to detail, regional seasonality, updated builds on the classics, global mash-ups and—believe it or not—modern brunch, they're showcasing the potential of this superstar cuisine.



In a modern twist, bone marrow is scraped into the cavatappi tableside at Love & Salt in Manhattan Beach, Calif. The dish is then finished with parsley, black pepper and Parmesan.

Bruschetta seems to be the earliest pioneer in this Brave New World, even morphing into artisanal toast or crostini. Alimento in Los Angeles serves a Braised Lettuce Bruschetta with English peas, spring garlic and burrata. Formento's in Chicago, which describes its concept as "New World culinary creativity marries with generations past," offers a persimmon bruschetta with whipped ricotta and spicy soppressata. Love & Salt in Manhattan Beach, Calif., calling itself "Italian inspired with a California soul," menus a Melted Leek Toast with burrata and pickled Fresno chiles. And All'Onda in New York, a farm-to-table modern Italian eatery, serves an avocado crostini on its brunch menu, topping grilled country bread with avocado, pickled pearl onions and basil.

Opportunity isn't limited to bruschetta, of course. Chefs are looking at all elements of Italian cookery, then bending it toward a modern culinary sensibility with chef-driven creativity or twisting it into something entirely new, melding it with the global mash-up trend. With a New World sense of adventure, this trend sees the modernization of Italian-American food driven by possibility, but firmly tied to its native roots.

American Accents



Vegetables hold new prominence in today's Italian venues. Love & Salt's Shaved Black Kale Salad features soppressata, olives, pickled peppers, breadcrumbs and ricotta.

Chefs who are in love with Italy's cuisine are expanding its pantry, still including high-impact Italian imports, like truffles and salumi, but looking closer to home, too. They say that Italian cuisine's authenticity lies in emphasis on local product, so chefs are finding inspiration here. Through switch-ups such as using a local heirloom tomato instead of a San Marzano, they're creating a new modern Italian, giving it an eclectic spin. They're not only injecting American ingredients, but American inventiveness, too. Rocky Slims, a modern Italian restaurant in New York, serves seasonally inspired fare, like the squid on a plancha with Hatch chiles, herbs and persimmons, or the side dish of mushrooms with avocado and culatello ham.

"Italian cuisine is and always will be a celebration of fresh, in-season, high-quality and great-tasting ingredients." -

T.J. Delle Donne

Love & Salt's Executive Chef/Partner Michael Fiorelli wanted to bring an American culinary sensibility to Italian fare, inspired by California's abundant year-round harvests. Menu items include the Mortadella "Hot Dog,"

featuring housemade mortadella in a brioche bun with a house-pickled vegetable relish (cauliflower, Fresno chile, cucumber), grown locally. "It's a whimsical take on a charcuterie plate," Fiorelli says. "But in order to do that kind of thing on our menu, I knew I had to hit a home run with the pizza and pasta, because that's what guests look for on an Italian menu." Offerings include the Caramelized Onion & Black Grape wood-oven pizza, sporting California blue cheese and wild arugula, and the Cavatappi with bone marrow, roasted garlic, parsley, Parmesan and cracked black pepper. Small plates include California endive with fried chickpeas, anchovy,

crispy sage and roasted garlic-Parmesan dressing, and homemade English muffins with rosemary, sea salt and cultured butter. “This may not be what people think of as authentic Italian, but it’s how people cook in Italy—cooking from scratch and using local ingredients,” he says.

At Coltivare in Houston, Chef/Owner Ryan Pera calls his place a neighborhood Italian-American joint. He menus the traditional whole-roasted fish, but swaps out Mediterranean branzino with Gulf Coast bycatch. “Any Italian would relate to this dish,” he says. He bastes the fish with local herbs, including Texas marigold, and sautés with local greens. “We try to source the freshest, closest ingredients, then frame it in an Italian background.” Snacks include Backyard Radishes with cultured butter and salt, and housemade ‘nduja, made with local pork and Texas chile peppers, spread on bruschetta and drizzled with Texas wildflower honey, then finished with arugula simply dressed with lemon juice.

Brunch, Italian-style



Centrolina in Washington, D.C., adds interest to spaghetti alla chitarra with eye-catching shaved carrots and saffron.

The modern brunch boom is influencing so much of the innovation in foodservice today, standing at the frontline of hip, edgy, anything-goes, breakfast-inspired fare. An interesting, opportunity-rich part of the modern Italian-American trend is exploring this kind of menu development. With a comfort carrier as its base, any brunch dish starring polenta works here. At All’Onda, the brunch menu includes a polenta flavored with wild mushrooms, poached egg and soy. Chicago’s Osteria Langhe serves Rock Shrimp Creamed Polenta on its brunch menu, with bacon lardons, peas and poached egg. It also offers Biscuits & Gravy, starring carbonara gravy, “Bang, Bang” biscuits, sunny eggs and fresh jalapeños.

“Bowls work really well in the context of Italian. Try them with a variety of bases, sauces and garnishes—quinoa, polenta, pasta varieties, roasted vegetables, broths, savory sauces, Italian cheeses and fresh herbs. They provide customizability and flavor options in an updated format.” - Charlie Baggs

Egg-centric frittatas have always made sense at breakfast and brunch. Now, they’re getting culinary upgrades with intriguing modern touches. At Wildcraft in Culver City, Calif., the brunch frittata sees spinach, tomato, peppers, caramelized onion, fontina and arugula pesto. In addition to a classic frittata prep, Monello in San Diego features a Spaghetti Frittata, with eggs, spaghetti, arrabbiata sauce and ricotta. Pastaria in Clayton, Mo., serves a seasonal frittata, as well as a more adventurous Italian Ramen with a soft-cooked egg, chicken, Grana Padano and basil.

The aforementioned bruschetta/toast hybrids find a natural home at brunch. Pastaria menus a Ricotta Bruschetta with local honey and berries. Jon & Vinny’s in Los Angeles, a concept by the same team behind Trois Mec, offers Italian-inspired breakfast. Examples include the Nectarine and Raspberry Crostada as well as the Nutella Toast on pan de mie with Nutella, olive oil and sea salt. Little Dom’s, also in Los Angeles, serves

breakfast offerings, including Nutella Panino and Scrambled Eggs Bruschetta on grilled ciabatta with roasted tomatoes and pesto.

Less is More

by Mike Buononato

Want to modify Italian for earlier dayparts? Reduce the quantity, simplify the ingredient total, and perform the least intensive cooking method.

We're seeing chefs using the lexicon of Italian ingredients and presenting them in smaller portions, which allows for greater concentration on the quality of the cooking or the actual ingredients themselves.

Modern Italian cuisine is taking this to the next level by using the less-is-more strategy. For instance, cut back on the cream and add imported Parmigiano-Reggiano to make up for the texture and flavor loss.

Italian Mash-Up



Not your usual fare, Octopus Saltimbocca comes with ceci beans and prosciutto at Charlie Bird, a modern Italian restaurant in New York.

Chefs leading the charge here are demonstrating the ease of innovation with Italian, hooking all of the great, well loved flavors of Italy to more adventurous pairings. Old World authenticity has held back innovation for so long, but it's now breaking through, showcasing an almost giddy sense of flavor discovery. Chefs Paul Minnillo and Matt Mytro at Flour Restaurant in Cleveland are pushing the envelope with dishes like sweet Italian grits with bacon-Sriracha sauce. Their Pork Banh Mi combines Italian porchetta with a pickled vegetable salad, roasted garlic aioli and local green salad. Grassa in Portland, Ore., features mash-ups like the Grassa Ramen, with char siu pork, angel-hair pasta, soft-boiled egg and spinach. Its Papardelle dish is made with lamb sausage, sunchokes, olives and mint-tomato butter.

“One common theme throughout modern Italian has been the use of more vegetables, creatively prepared to complement traditional favorites. A good example of this is at Martini Modern Italian restaurant in Columbus, Ohio—its escarole-kale salad comes with candied hazelnuts, amaretto cherries and a creamy Gorgonzola cheese.” - Rick Perez

“As with everything, Millennials have had their influence on the long-standing cuisine,” says Annie Culver, strategist with The Culinary Edge. “Restaurants are vying to become known for their ‘next best’ revamp of an Italian classic.” As evidence, look to All’Onda’s Eggplant Parmigiana with miso and tomato, or its ramen with Parmesan dashi, scallion, and hen-of-the-woods mushrooms.

No matter how creative or far out the innovation goes, today's Italian-American trend is anchored to the mothership of Italian cuisine, ensuring a safe starting point from which to launch successful menu innovation.

Why Modern Italian?

by Logan McCoy, KOR Food Innovation

There are various reasons for the increased interest in modernized Italian. First, its versatility: The possibilities are limitless. From diversifying pasta fillings and add-ins in a multitude of applications to the straightforwardness of scaloppini, the modernization of Italian fare is adaptable to contemporary cooking.

Secondly, the modernist movement within the culinary and beverage field has aided in the refinement across the industry. Chefs are able to manipulate textures and flavors of food in order to give their guests that element of surprise.

Next, with the array and availability of books and social media in today's world, these elements have become not only evident, but a necessity to ideas in food. Books such as SPQR by Shelley Lindgren are revolutionizing the way that many of us appreciate Italian food.

Chef Thomas McNaughton, of Flour + Water in San Francisco is leading the charge in modernizing Italian cuisine. After a brief stint in a small Bologna pasta production kitchen, he has returned to the West Coast in hopes of spreading his wealth of knowledge.

With dishes like Toasted Farro Garganelli with braised short rib, hazelnuts and radicchio, McNaughton isn't reinventing the wheel, he is simply refining a classic cuisine in a contemporary setting.

Similarly, restaurants like Love & Salt in Manhattan Beach, Calif., are also redefining what modern Italian represents while highlighting local ingredients and hand-crafted items.