

Cover story

Ethnic eateries stay authentic with a twist

USA TODAY

By Jerry Shriver

Multilateral menus

In trendy U.S. restaurants, cultures mingle on the plate

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Entrees to the world

If it seems as though the USA is at odds with most of the world, you just haven't sampled an upscale restaurant menu lately. In the kitchen, at least, we're in the throes of an unprecedented multinational love affair.

For those keeping tabs, India with a Latin twist is the most chic coupling in Chicago at a new place called Vermilion. In Denver, Asia and Mexico cohabitate in the same stylish room at recently opened Zengo.

Elsewhere, Japan commands unheard-of dollars in New York and Los Angeles, Vietnam just won a James Beard award for San Francisco, and Spain, with its tiny, tasty tapas, is teaching diners in every major city the art of sharing.

Say howdy to the age of gustatory glasnost. For the first time on a nationwide scale, first-class ambience, smart service, well-traveled customers and adventurous and authentic cooking are intersecting in foreign-themed restaurants whose names don't begin with "Chez." Whether the fare is advertised as "fusion," "global," "regional" or simply "ethnic," diners are welcoming it with open arms, minds and wallets.

"America is no longer the melting pot, but it might be the world's cooking class," says Clark Wolf, a New York-based restaurant consultant. "This is where people come today to explore, to promote, to spend, to establish. We offer a laboratory and a broad, interested audience. Soccer moms do try new things."

And so do sushi-savvy heartland youngsters and not-yet-jaded urbanites. Or as chef Guillermo Perrot of the posh 5-year-old, contemporary Latino restaurant Passion! in Philadelphia puts it: "It still amazes me that I'm feeding blood sausages to theatergoers."

Today's ethnic restaurant differs from the traditional neighborhood model in several ways: It may have a formally trained chef, the menu will balance authenticity with modern approaches, the decor may be created by an A-list designer, and the total ambience will feel more 21st century than Old World, though tradition will be respected.

"There is this drive toward an exotic experience where people want variety and a mini-vacation or a way to be transported through food and design," says New York-based architect David Rockwell, whose Rockwell Group will do about two dozen restaurant projects this year, most of them ethnic, including the new multi-million-dollar, Thai-themed Kitrichai in New York.

Old hunger habits die hard, however. French and American restaurants still rule the very top of critics' lists, and Italian is still the most popular foreign cuisine in the Zagat restaurant guide surveys. But in the past decade, far-flung fare has moved swiftly into the upscale mainstream and is generating the most dining excitement.

"I travel each month to a different city, and the restaurants I'm most eager to return to are not the fancy Italian or French models, but Mediterranean and Asian places," says Tom Sietsema, food critic for *The Washington Post*. "Those restaurants are less expensive, more comfortable, they promote themselves better, and they make for more interesting eating."

More important, he says, is that these places tend to "fit the way Americans prefer to dine these days—casually, with a lot of flavors but small portions. You don't go away stuffed or bloated."

Some dining industry observers go even further. Tim Zagat, co-founder of the namesake restaurant guides, believes ethnic restaurants led the way out of the post-9/11 and post-dot-com-bubble economic slump. "We saw growth in that segment even through the worst times, and now that growth is accelerating."

Never before have American diners had so many ethnic options, particularly at the high end. The *Zagat Survey* lists more than 80 foreign cuisines other than French and Italian in its 48 city guides, up from 61 a decade ago.

And among the top 20 "best food" rankings in those guides, nearly 30 different ethnic cuisines are represented.

Even the heartland is embracing this movement, Wolf says. "It's shocking when you go to Dallas and see a sushi bar every 3 feet. They giggle about it themselves. But if Dallas has sushi bars and Atlanta has groovy Mediterranean hybrids and Denver has Zengo, we're really getting there."

Richard Sandoval, a leader of the modern Mexican cooking movement at Maya in New York, paved the way for his Zengo in Denver by first opening Tamayo there. At first, "people didn't understand how you could go into a Mexican restaurant and spend \$30 or \$40 a person when normally you would spend \$15," he says. "We used traditional dishes but with a more creative approach, and people embraced that, so we figured they would embrace fusing Asian with Mexican."

Spanish-born chef Jose Andres, a leader of the small-plates movement in Washington, D.C., with Jaleo (Spanish tapas), Cafe Atlantico (nuevo Latino) and Zaytinya (Greek/Lebanese/Turkish), isn't surprised by diners' responses.

"Americans as a whole are one of the easiest people to feed, because they are more open to new things than any society I know. Do something well, and people will like it."

That sounds simple, but it has taken the dining public several generations to get to this point. For most of the past century, fine-dining restaurants were based on European models, primarily French, which set the standard for ambience, service and cuisine.

In recent decades, Americans rediscovered their own heritages, and places offering fresh, local ingredients cooked in distinct regional styles flourished. Ethnic eateries were an essential part of the mix, but mostly at the mama-and-papa level.

But then came a confluence of megatrends: the flowering of the yuppie culture, which subsequently spawned the "foodie" culture; the dramatic rise in America's Latino, Asian and Indian populations; increased desire for international travel; the concept of overnight delivery of goods; fortuitous economic climates; and the blurring of the distinction between "formal" and "casual" in social settings.



taking advantage of this was "a new stream of immigrants who are more open about their food and who are not as inclined to smother it to fit in," says folklore scholar Joel Denker, author of *The World on a Plate* (Westview Press, \$24).

All about the buzz

Those immigrant groups have produced chefs and restaurateurs who shun the old-style Americanization of their native cuisines. Today, the emphasis is on authenticity, rediscovering and delineating regional cooking styles, updating traditional methods with modern techniques — and getting smart about the business end.

"People are getting it now," Vermilion managing partner Rohini Dey says. "The moment you marry excellent food with service and ambience, you've got it. You have to make it alive and vibrant and contemporary. It's all about the buzz."

That promise is being fulfilled in a variety of ways and places:

► New York is enjoying a boom of upscale Japanese restaurants at a time when four top-tier French restaurants recently have closed. Leading the pack is Masa, in the new Time Warner Center, where fixed-price *omakase* (chef's choice) meals start at \$300.

► Indian cuisine, once represented by dreary buffet-style curry houses, is getting contemporary treatment at trendy places in Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Chicago and elsewhere. Just as significant, chefs cooking in a variety of styles all over the country are plumbing the subcontinent's legendary spice boxes for accents.

► Progressive Vietnamese cuisine, led by recent James Beard Award winner Charles Phan of *The Slanted Door* in San Francisco, is still in its infancy. But many foodies predict its growth could outstrip

that of Thai or even Chinese cuisine because of its emphasis on fresh, healthful ingredients.

And even as these cuisines move forward, another wave is bubbling just below the surface.

An informal survey of food writ-

ers and restaurant industry professionals shows great potential for foods from Greece, Austria, Brazil and lesser-known regions of Italy, including Apulia and Liguria. Opinions are split on whether China and Africa will ever unleash their full

potential here.

"There is a whole world of spices out there we have yet to embrace," says Wolf. "There are 20,000 edibles on Earth, and we eat only about 150 varieties. So we have plenty of greens yet to chop."