

# seasoned greetings

An introduction to international condiments for your next event

Not long ago the term ponzu on a proposal baffled clients of Cuisine Unlimited Catering & Special Events, Salt Lake City, says Maxine Turner, president. Many trained chefs also were unfamiliar with katsuobushi.

Thanks to TV cooking shows, Olympic coverage and travel, now everyone speaks the language of ethnic seasonings, and katsuobushi – commonly known as bonito flakes – is recruited regularly by Cuisine Unlimited's kitchen as a fish base for soups or sauces.

BY DEANNE MOSKOWITZ

Elaine Bell, chef/owner, Elaine Bell Catering, Napa and San Francisco, serves such condiment-enriched dishes as fried pupusas with curtido (an El Salvadorian cabbage condiment) and corn tamales with pasilla chiles and watermelon rind salsa. She finds clients are more adventurous about setting out spicy condiments for guests to try such as: Sriracha, chile powders, or salsas.

Tom Mueller and Nancy Goodier, chef/owners, Pineapple Alley Catering, Washington, D.C., were traveling in India, when I called. Condiments (blackening spices, preserved lemon, pestos, pepper sauces, etc.) always were important in their business, but increasing interest, especially by corporate clients, was one reason for the trip, Mueller explained.

Brooke Vosika, executive chef, Four Seasons Hotel Boston, is enthusiastic about the polyglot of condiments expanding culinary possibilities. For instance, switching from a Madras curry in a dish to a Thai curry paste might suggest a complementary change from chicken stock to coconut milk, producing a new flavor profile from the same recipe.

David Turk, president, Indiana Market & Catering, New York City, has seized on seasonings and condiments to help clients create inexpensive but exotic experiences for guests during these irksome economic times. A perfect example was an East Meets West event, which featured a décor of bazaar-inspired vessels brimming with exotic oils, sauces and seasonings. Guests enjoyed seasoning dishes themselves and coloring gigantic outlines of leaf designs on canvas using

"paints" concocted from spices mixed with glue.

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#### Enlarged Lexicon

Though some caterers insist on only house-made condiments, many express enthusiasm for pre-prepared products, available now in a dazzling array of choices.

Turk and Turner shop trade shows for inspiration, and Turk has an employee peruse local specialty stores monthly for promising introductions.

Whereas Indiana once made chimichurri and harissa in-house, Turk now saves time and money by substituting pre-prepared Chimichurri Wine Jelly and organic Bart Delicatessen Harissa Paste, respectively, the latter's chili bite cut by mustard, crème fraîche and sour cream.



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Among Turk's finds is Hawkshead Relish Company's Fig & Cinnamon Chutney, with its hint of garlic, which he pronounces excellent on everything from duck to waffles; and Mustapha's Moroccan Green Aniseed Spread, a minty base for dips and spreads served with items from crudités to grilled chicken or lamb skewers.

While Cuisine Unlimited's kitchen produces fresh condiments including flavored butters, the chef has pre-prepared favorites, often tweaked to improve or personalize them. LifeForce Naturals' Palouse Red Sauce, currently topping tortellini salad, is a staple in his kitchen, and he's perking up various plates now with enhanced chipotles, pomegranate reductions, and ponzu.

Getting the nod from both Turner and Bell, Mae Ploy Sweet Chili Sauce, served straight, is a spring roll dipping sauce at Cuisine Unlimited; and heated with lime juice and Kaffir lime leaves dresses grilled shrimp at Elaine Bell.

Other store-bought sensations beloved by Bell are: Kecap Manis Sweet Soy Sauce, drizzled on wasabi mashed potatoes served with citrus glazed

sesame salmon; Huy Fong Sambal Oelek, for Asian-style sauces and soups or to top Asian fish tacos; Edmond Fallot Dijon Mustard, mixed with mayonnaise, on broccolini, and Huy Fong Sriracha Sauce on "anything."

While pre-prepared condiments have their place, nothing beats home-made for creating a signature stamp.

Although Worcestershire and Tabasco are mainstays of Mueller and Vosika, they mainly use fresh. Homemade mayonnaise makes the difference in Pineapple Alley's shrimp salad, Belgian Fries and Banh Mi, a Vietnamese sandwich.

Vosika does "a huge amount of pickling," sometimes serving his version of kimchi with Korean barbecue sates. Recently he was planning a bloody Mary bar piquant with pickled garnishes such as asparagus spears and cauliflower.

Bell loves creating one-of-a-kind condiments for clients: Among them blackberry Cabernet jam and fresh almond butter, wonderful on panettone panini; and yellow Brandywine tomato and golden raisin chutney, perfect on poached fish.

Cuisine Unlimited's apricot/mustard sauce has three applications, as do all condiments made there. The nectar and whole grain French mustard mixture is the dip for rumaki; the plating sauce for glazed, coconut-encrusted chicken breast, and the accompaniment to grilled ancho-chile rubbed shrimp.

Vosika notes an artisanal trend in condiments. For example, salt is available in a dozen varieties, from pink Himalayan to black Hawaiian to two types of Sel Gris, one made by reducing sea water, the other from just its foam.

#### Salt Content

Additional local restrictions on sodium are threatened and it's likely that this year's updated government Dietary Guidelines for Americans will recommend further reductions in sodium consumption. But caterers interviewed aren't shaking the salt habit, although many limit sodium in the cooking and opt for finishing salts instead. Avoiding iodized salts and going beyond kosher ones, they are experimenting with dozens of mineral and sea salts, many infused with herbs and spices.

Instead of disguising great ingredients with heavy sauces, Vosika accentuates them with finishing salts, selecting them for each dish based on taste, color and flake. Maldon is his favorite because of its lighter texture, subtler saltiness, and satisfying crunch. He likes the color pop of black Hawaiian sprinkled just before serving on a medium-rare veal chop or strip steak; the smokiness of Cypress Sea Salt on strong flavors such as game; and pink Himalayan slab salt grated as a garnish at table.

Elaine Bell chooses Sel Gris de L'Ile de Noirmoutier as an all-purpose and finishing salt; Maldon's on grilled vegetables, fish, salads and such, and Halen Mon with desserts. She showcases these salts at a French fry bar, letting guests select from three types of potato and four aioli.

Turk enjoys the "fun" of flavored salts: A sprinkle of smoked sea salt on fish or poultry. Truffle sea salt, while expensive, goes a long way, he says.

Cuisine Unlimited's chef is playing with such flavored salts as black sesame seed, lemongrass, lemon ginger, and thyme. They kick up salad dressings, grilled chicken, and kabobs.





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#### Healthy Interpretations

Since condiments can be made without allergenic ingredients and used at the diner's discretion, they help chefs cater to an increasing diversity of dietary demands.

Serving condiments alongside a dish is one way that Mueller addresses allergy anxiety in menu planning, which is on the rise among brides, he observes.

Bell calls condiments an easy way to up the flavor intensity of a dish without excessive salt.

Receiving more requests lately for health-conscious menus, Turner is taking help from irritant-free, pre-prepared formulas. She's ecstatic at the virtual elimination of msg from pre-prepared ingredients and has been tapping into some health-conscious distributors. One is More Than Gourmet, which makes preservative-free, low-sodium sauces and a gluten-free line.

Though clients rarely request "no salt," Turk says they like to give guests "high-concept" dishes that happen to be low sodium. Several from an upcoming menu include: chili fire-roasted shrimp with low-salt, paprika-based, garlicky aioli; Moroccan lamb skewers with cumin-infused yogurt sauce, and pida (a Syrian flatbread), piled with robust red and yellow tomatoes that were slow-roasted in season.

Salt-free spice mixtures and marinades are quick, healthy ways to boost protein flavors. The rub specialist in Cuisine Unlimited's kitchen created an ancho chile vinegar wet rub that revs up brisket or Spanish rice. Liquid smoke is one element in his secret "cowboy" marinade.

Lighter than typical barbecue rubs, Vosika's so-called seasoning salts can be sodium free. One designed for duck combines coriander, white and black peppers, cumin, cardamom, and sumac.

Infused oils and vinegars also add salt-free flavor punch. Cuisine Unlimited sauces tiny lamb chops with reduced pomegranate balsamic.

Vosika selects different vinegars and oils for different dishes. Instead of brown balsamic, he uses white in vinaigrette destined for a spring-time salad: Bibb lettuce with crumbled blue cheese and crisped shallots. Yellingbo Gold extra virgin from Australia lends young fruitiness to ceviche or crudo; the heavier, nuttiness of Italian extra virgin matches the acidic pungency of a caprese salad.

#### Vast Vocabulary

Condiments let chefs multiply menu possibilities of even otherwise limited items, such as chicken breasts and salmon.

Cuisine Unlimited's chef glamorizes grilled chicken by topping it with mango chutney and serving it with coconut/mint rice.

Vosika applies condiments to complete a dish, like the final brushstrokes on a painting. Copper River salmon and Vidalia onion are the makings of a masterpiece, when he sears the fish and prepares the onion three ways: As a side salad, a plating sauce, and a crispy garnish.

Ethnic nuances keep expanding, as uncharted global territories are explored.

Turner and Turk have produced Persian parties recently. Among cuisines new to Mueller's repertoire is Peruvian, marked by huancaina (spicy red and yellow pepper sauces) and huacatay-spiced ceviche bars. From his Indian trip he intends to add various pickles; and curries spiced with curry leaves, green cardamom, and a desert bean called Ker.

The condiment-rich cuisine of India is second-nature to Bell, and last year she opened an Indian catering division with Indian chef Anila Chaudhary. Servicing the weddings of Indian and mixed race couples, as well as Americans in the corporate sector, she gives them such exotic fare as: Tamarind date and fresh mint chutney with samosas and pakoras; and coconut chutney and papaya mustard pickle with curries and roast lamb raan.

Comfortable with foreign flavors, chefs are personalizing them or applying them to American classics. A Serrano pepper might be substituted for a traditional Scotch Bonnet in classic Caribbean jerk, Vosika observes.

Showcasing such reinterpreted American classics as Thai pumpkin shooters, salmon mini-burgers with curry aioli, and five-spice popcorn, Indiana's East Meet West event illustrated how ethnic condiments and seasonings are coming full circle. ●



## Nirmala Narine: The Next Word

Catching up with Nirmala Narine isn't easy. Owner of Nirmala's Kitchen ([www.nirmalaskitchen.com](http://www.nirmalaskitchen.com)), seasoning supplier to caterers and consumers and flavor and fragrance consultant to corporations, the determined dynamo is always off somewhere sniffing out exotic ingredients or educating Americans about them.

Since founding the company 10 years ago, with the mission of "fusing cultures through food," she has traveled to more than 130 countries, usually far-flung locations without phone service and where little English is spoken.

"I fit right in," notes Narine, who was born into poverty on a farm in Guyana, South America, and often accompanied her Indian grandfather, an Aruvedic scholar and Hindu priest, as he roamed the region prescribing herbal remedies.

At age 10, she moved to Queens, N.Y., a crossroad of cultures and cuisines.

"You never find me in a restaurant when I travel," Narine says. "It's all about going into someone's home, where they're cooking with pinches and dashes."

Eager to eke out an authentic tajine spice blend, this year she found herself in the Saharan Desert with Berber tribesmen.

Among her discoveries is Australian waffle seed, used for centuries by Australian aborigines, which lends wonderful mocha notes but no caffeine to desserts.

Narine sees South America as the next culinary frontier and her second book *Nirmala's Edible Diary*, (Chronicle Books, 2009), exposing 14 countries and their surprisingly diverse cuisines, would make anyone a believer.

It's a riveting read filled with compelling portraits of local cooks and cooking techniques, fascinating personal recollections of Narine's childhood, more than 70 recipes and 100 stunning photographs.

The book's glossary defines unfamiliar seasonings, among them huacatay, or Peruvian black mint, a cross between cilantro and parsley. Grind it into a green paste, add cumin, garlic, and extra virgin olive oil, and spread it on fish wrapped in a banana leaf, says Narine, "And you've got yourself a winner!"

None of Narine's products contains salt or sugar. Foods contain enough salt naturally, she observes, and their flavors can better be enhanced by herbs, spices, juices and citrus zests. She values finishing salts, however, and manufactures a line of them.

She says she hopes to convince Americans who associate South America with Hispanic cuisine, that it is actually a microcosm of global influences (among them, British in Falkland Islands, Japanese in Peru and French in Surinam), and a less costly and more convenient source of ingredients than, let's say, distant Thailand.

Where will Narine go next? Well, she anticipates a resurging interest in Southeast Asia, this time probably Indonesia, Korea and Malaysia.