

by A. Elizabeth Sloan

## Eating East in the West

Asian foods have gone mainstream in the U.S. marketplace. Six in 10 meal preparers (61%) regularly eat Asian/Oriental foods/flavors at home or in restaurants, according to the 2010 *Gallup Study of Dinner*. National Association for the Specialty Food Trade data show that just over half (55%) of all specialty store/gourmet aisle shoppers bought Asian food products last year, and 63% of those ages 25–34 did so.

Half (52%) of consumers say they would definitely order a new menu item made with the typical flavor/ingredients of Chinese cuisine, 34% Japanese, 30% Thai, 21% Szechuan, 19% Indian, 15% Vietnamese, 13% Korean, and 12% Indonesian, according to data from foodservice research and consulting company Technomic.

America's 78 million Baby Boomers are the biggest fans of Chinese (e.g., Szechuan, Hunan) cuisine. Gallup reports that 61% of meal preparers ages 50–64 regularly eat Chinese vs 56% of those 18–49 and 48% of those 65+.

In supermarkets, when it comes to ethnic foods, shoppers are choosing Asian second only to Italian. Nielsen reports that canned Oriental food sales increased by 6.8% for the year ended Feb. 19, 2011, after 4.2% growth the previous year; frozen Asian entrees jumped 12.1% on the heels of a 7.5% increase.

Upscale, unique recipe, and restaurant crossover products such as *P.F. Chang's Home Menu*

are leading the way. Asian meal kits (e.g., *Wanchai Ferry* and *Simply Asia*) are posting strong growth with Gen Y and Gen X consumers short on time and cooking skills. Gallup reports that two-thirds (65%) of households with children regularly eat Asian foods at home.

In 2010, regional Italian and Chinese recipes (Szechuan and Hunan) were the ethnic recipes searched for most frequently on Allrecipes.com, followed by Southeast Asian (e.g., Thai). Wok cooking has regained its popularity; Gallup data shows that 5% of meal preparers make

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a stir-fry for dinner on any given weekday night. The Hartman Group's *Reimagining Convenience Foods* report states that 59% of Gen Yers and 35% of those 65+ want more stir-fry sauces. Younger Gen Y cooks are looking to cooking sauces, especially Asian, to easily make restaurant-style food/flavors at home; 76% want more marinating sauces and 71% want more rubs/spices, according to Hartman data. Garlic and ginger were among the spices consumers used more frequently in 2010, according to Nielsen. Mintel data show that 44% of households use soy sauce and 24% use teriyaki.

Asian specialties and flavors are mainstreaming into all menu

sectors and dayparts.

Technomic put the size of the U.S. Asian restaurant segment at \$18 billion in 2009. Asian was the fastest-growing menu category in both full-service and limited-service restaurants.

The National Restaurant Association's annual "What's Hot?" survey of American Culinary Federation (ACF) chefs named ethnic-inspired breakfast items (e.g., Asian syrups and coconut milk pancakes) as the No. 1 breakfast trend for 2011. Teriyaki tops the list of the most desired new sandwich toppings, according to a Technomic report.

Wonton, miso, and egg drop are among the most popular soups sold in U.S. restaurants, NPD/CREST data shows.

Appetizers inspired by ethnic street food (e.g., tempura and skewers) top the ACF chefs' list of trendy appetizers; dumplings/dim sum ranked fifth. And it's not a big surprise perhaps that, according to Technomic data, eight in 10 diners (80%) almost always/sometimes order egg rolls when they are available.

Asian-inspired entrée salads were cited as a hot trend for 2011 by 43% of ACF chefs. Sesame, Asian Vinaigrette, Thai Peanut, Wasabi Soy, and Sweet and Sour are among Asian salad dressings that appear most often on chain restaurants menus, reports the

Foodservice Research Institute's MenuMine Database; miso, ginger, and wasabi vinaigrette can be found frequently on high-end Asian menus. Look for more spicy, red curry, Ponzu, and Hoisin sauces on the menu in cutting-edge independent Asian restaurants, says the Foodservice Research Institute. Vegetarian and natural are by far the most prominent claims that relate to health and wellness on Asian menus, followed by low-fat, organic, and gluten-free, according to Technomic. Stir-fry, sushi, and egg rolls are common dishes for two-thirds (66%) of kids' cafeteria lunches, according to the NPD Group.

Traditional ethnic desserts such as the South Korean pastry *delimanjoo* rank among the top 10 trendy restaurant desserts, per ACF. Ethnic-inspired children's dishes came in sixth on the list of the chefs' trendy new children's menu items for 2011. Asian tea cookies are new bestsellers in in-store bakeries, according to the International Dairy Deli Bakery Association. Specialty iced tea, including Thai-style, tops the list of trendy nonalcoholic beverages for 2011. Flavored cocktails with an Asian influence (e.g., lemongrass, lychee) are popular as are nontraditional liquors like *soju* (Korean) and plum wine. **FT**



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