

East Meets West in Next-Generation Asian Food

Consumers are on a flavor expedition in which they are seeking out more specialty Asian fare. In 2014, 73 million Americans bought Asian food in specialty food stores and/or the gourmet sections of mainstream supermarkets, according to the 2014 *Specialty Food Consumer Survey* from the Specialty Food Assoc.

Although Millennials are slightly less likely than shoppers overall to buy Chinese foods, they are more likely to buy sushi.

Thai/Vietnamese/Malaysian came in fifth on the list of hot ethnic cuisines and flavors for 2015, and Korean was sixth, according to American Culinary Federation (ACF) chefs surveyed in fall 2014 by the National Restaurant Association (NRA). Ethnic fusion, authentic ethnic, and regional ethnic cuisines also made the list. Rice and Chinese food are the top two food categories that U.S. consumers would like to see become more upscale, according to the Hartman Group's 2013 *Eating by the Numbers* report.

Two-thirds (67%) of mainstream food shoppers buy Chinese foods; 25%, sushi; 24%, Thai; and 18%, Japanese. Although Millennials are slightly less likely than shoppers overall to buy Chinese foods, they are more likely to buy sushi, with 36% purchasing it, and 30% buying Thai food, according to the Food Marketing Institute's (FMI) 2014 *U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends* report.

It appears that the younger generation is buying into Asian food. Technomic's 2014 *Generational Consumer Trend Report* found that among Millennials and Gen Z consumers (kids and teens), Asian fare ranks third on the list of food they would be most likely to order if it is offered in a restaurant.

Consumers are also thinking Asian in their own kitchens. One-third of consumers regularly stir-fry foods, according to Mintel's 2012 *Cooking Enthusiasts—U.S.* report. Over the past five years, stir-fry cooking has increased 16%, per FMI's 2014 *Power of Meat* report. It's no wonder that stir-fry strips were among the best-sellers in the fresh meat case in 2013, with volume up 10.4%, according to IRI. One-third of Millennials and Gen Xers use packaged Chinese products/meal kits; 19%, Japanese; 15%, Thai; and 10%, Korean, according to Mintel's 2014 *Ethnic Foods—U.S.* report.

Surprisingly perhaps, egg rolls are much more likely to be ordered as a restaurant appetizer than nachos. According to Technomic's 2013 *Starters, Small Plates and Sides* report, half of women would be likely to order spring rolls; 42%, a smaller portion of an Asian entrée; and 41%, fried wontons. Ethnic street food (e.g., tempura or satay), seafood

charcuterie, ethnic dips, and raw fish appetizers (e.g., sashimi) are among the hot appetizer trends for 2015 that are likely to move Asian items into the spotlight. And six in 10 ACF chefs named street food—inspired main courses as a hot center-of-the-plate trend for 2015.

Black/forbidden rice, Asian noodles (e.g., soba, udon, etc.),

and ramen noodles are hot side dish trends for 2015, per NRA. Sriracha, hoisin, and sweet chili were among the fastest-growing appetizer sauces in restaurants in 2013, according to the 2014 Datassential *Menu Trends Direct* report.

Oyster mushrooms/exotic Asian mushrooms, pickled vegetables, and bok choy were among the fastest-growing vegetables in restaurants in 2013, per Datassential. Dragon fruit, mangosteen, lychee, Buddha's hand, and Asian pears are among the Asian fruits gaining in popularity, according to Frieda's Inc., a specialty produce wholesaler.

When it comes to Asian food, 57% of consumers are very interested in spicy flavors; 50%, meaty; and 46%, sweet and sour, according to Mintel's *Ethnic Foods—U.S.* report. Vegetable, herb, barbecue, tangy, smoked, and sweet also made the list.

The NPD Groups reports that 16% of U.S. households with a

meal preparer under the age of 35 have sriracha in their kitchen, and 9% of total households are stocking it. Sriracha, wasabi, yuzu, Thai chili, edamame, and churrasco were among the fastest-growing ethnic flavors on nonethnic menus in 2013; new ingredients from Korea were the top cuisine, per Datassential.

Chinese bao buns are among the trendy new protein carriers. Ethnic-inspired breakfast items (e.g., Asian-flavored syrups and coconut milk pancakes) and traditional ethnic breakfast items top the list of hot culinary breakfast trends for 2015, per NRA.

Interest in ordering Asian soups (e.g., pho, miso, or wonton) in restaurants continues to grow while interest in Mexican soups dropped 10% between 2011 and 2014, according to Technomic's 2014 *The Left Side of the Menu Soup & Salad* report. In addition, according to the report, one in 10 consumers say Asian is their favorite salad.

Thai-style iced tea, which usually contains milk, and matcha are among the hot culinary nonalcoholic drinks expected to be trendy. Ginger, coconut, pomegranate, green tea, and passion fruit were among the top 20 beverage flavors in 2014, per *Beverage Industry* magazine's 2015 product development survey. **FT**



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