

Forward Fruit

Why purée a sauce when you can leave the fruit exposed and beautiful?

By Katie Ayoub

Smooth sauces are refined. Classical. And they have their place. But some dishes claim boasting rights from chunky sauces. Besides adding eye candy, they offer moments of pure flavor and texture—when the mouth discerns a piece of fruit, bites down, and revels in its utter fruitiness.

But the fruit chunks, although the star of this particular show, still need a supporting cast, along with a character foil, to really knock socks off. That foil, we found, is successfully played by heat—red chile, jalapeño, garlic. The performance, then, isn't left entirely to the fruit. Depth is delivered by a counterpoint of spice to a larger-than-life presence of fruit. The result? A sold-out show.

This Texas skirt steak and California raisin-coffee salsa highlights the earthy flavor and meaty texture of raisins.



Is that a dried fruit in my sauce?

At Café Annie in Houston, executive chef/owner Robert Del Grande pairs a Texas skirt steak with a raisin-coffee salsa. "Dried fruit in a sauce is not unusual for how we think down here in the Southwest," says Del Grande.

He rubs the outside skirt steak with a blend of raisin paste, ground smoked almonds, chocolate and chiles. After grilling, he complements the steak with a chunky salsa of raisin paste, chiles, coffee, cocoa powder, balsamic vinegar, butter and salt.

"Take a raisin and a coffee bean and eat them together. In your forehead, you get an enormous hit of coffee," Del Grande says. "Way low in your palate, you get the earthy fullness of the raisin. Somewhere in between is the acidity."

Del Grande says his raisin-coffee salsa is a riff on a mole, with its rich, deep flavors. "You've obviously got the sweet and the salt in the salsa. The question, as with all things, is how to balance the flavors."

And with the chunky sauce, there's a salute to texture. "We try to keep it on the rustic side, because that's the style of food we serve here," says Del Grande. "We like debris in the sauce. Don't strain it and take the life out of it."

Dried fruit takes center stage on the east coast, too. At The Laundry in East Hampton, N.Y., chef/partner Andrew Engle



enhances a braised lamb shank with a dried-fruit salsa.

"It's a play on gremolata on osso buco," says Engle. "The dried fruit gives such great texture and flavor. It would be wonderful on any hearty meat dish, like beef short ribs, pork shanks or smoked turkey legs."

For his Mediterranean salsa, he combines dried apricots, figs, dates and currants with raw garlic, lemon peel,

Michelle Bernstein's snapper with braised Chilean grapes highlights how well fish and acidity go together.

FLAVOR

parsley, scallion and olive oil. The counterpoint to the sweet fruit is the acidic raw garlic. "It really pops, and its sharpness is a nice contrast to the fruit," says Engle.

Fruit without borders

Fruit sauces can be easily coaxed toward one cuisine or the other. At The Laundry, the Asian fruit salsa paired with butter-poached lobster combines Asian pear, persimmon and pineapple with celery root, ginger, red chile and cilantro in grapeseed oil and rice-wine vinegar.

"It's a twist on the classic pairing of mango and papaya," says Engle. "I'm a big fan of persimmon and its plum-like texture and tangy flavor. The celery leaves add a hint of bitterness."

He deseeded the red chile, so it adds flavor balance more than outright heat. "The salsa has a lot of acidity, which cuts the richness of the dish really well," Engle says. "By keeping the fruit somewhat intact, I'm getting individual flavors across, instead of a monotone or one-note flavor of a puréed sauce."

At Azzarelli's in Houston, chef/owner Frank Triola's jalapeño/blueberry/raspberry/mint demi-glace is decidedly an interpretation of modern American cuisine.

He cooks blueberries, raspberries, seeded jalapeño, garlic, shallot and fresh mint until the mixture is reduced by half. He then adds housemade veal or boar

Texas Skirt Steak and California Raisin-Coffee Salsa

Robert Del Grande,
Executive Chef/Owner
Café Annie
Houston

Yield: 8 servings

½ oz. Oaxaca pasilla chiles
6 oz. ancho chiles
1 qt. warm water
3 cups smoked almonds
12 oz. butter, melted
3 oz. California raisin paste
2½ oz. semisweet chocolate,
melted
¼ cup salt
3 lbs. Texas outside skirt steak
4 oz. butter
2 garlic cloves, minced
Raisin-Coffee Salsa (recipe follows)

1) Stem and seed chiles; toast lightly. Steep in water until soft, about 30 minutes. Transfer to blender; purée until smooth. 2) In food processor, process almonds with melted butter to a coarse paste. 3) In mixing bowl, combine puréed chiles, ground almonds, raisin paste, chocolate and salt; mix well. Rub marinade all over beef; allow to stand for about 30 minutes. 4) Grill or broil beef until desired temperature. 5) Heat butter and garlic until butter foams. Keep warm. 6) To serve, thinly slice meat; drizzle garlic-butter atop. Spoon salsa



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over meat.

Raisin-Coffee Salsa

1 oz. ancho chiles
½ cup water
4 oz. California-raisin paste
1 t. finely ground coffee
1 t. cocoa powder
1 T. adobo paste (optional)
3½ oz. butter, melted
1 T. balsamic vinegar
1½ t. salt
1 T. finely crushed coffee beans

Method: Stem and seed ancho chiles; toast lightly. Soak in water until soft. Transfer chiles with liquid to blender; purée until smooth. Combine puréed ancho chiles with raisin paste, ground coffee, cocoa powder, adobo paste, butter, vinegar and salt; mix well. Set aside. Right before service, stir crushed coffee beans into salsa.

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—Robert Del Grande

demi-glace. (Sugar is only added if the berries are a bit tart.)

“Even in Texas, people worry about too much spice,” he says. “But the heat is subtle. You get a great fresh-fruit taste with a background of mint.”

The sauce isn't strained. “I like that you get a bit of berry in your mouth. And the presentation is better this way,” says Triola.

Michelle Bernstein finds her foil not with heat, but with the assertive flavor of tarragon. Chef/owner of Michy's in Miami, and chef/partner at Social Sagamore in South Beach, Fla., and Social Hollywood in Los Angeles, she serves a snapper with braised Chilean grapes on a leek/fennel fondue.

“The grape sauce really shows off the fish. It's light, so it doesn't mask the taste—it just brings out the natural flavors,” says Bernstein, a recent challenger on Iron Chef America, reigning supreme over Bobby Flay. “And the tarragon brings back the anise flavor in the leek/fennel fondue,” she adds.

She cooks the fish, skin side down, in grapeseed oil, and flips it when it's golden brown. She adds shallot, then

red wine, red-wine vinegar and honey. Once reduced, she pours in blond fish stock, and reduces by half again. Bernstein then adds halved red and white grapes, tarragon, basil and butter.

“If you purée the sauce, you lose that wonderful burst of flavor that happens when you bite into a grape,” says Bernstein. “You can see your product, and it's beautiful.”

Katie Ayoub is based in Keswick, Ontario, Canada. She is editor in chief of our sister publication, Sizzle.



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