

Small Bites,

These lamb-stuffed mushroom caps move the flavor profile toward Asian with plum sauce, green onion and peanuts.

Courtesy of the American Lamb Board

Big Asian Flavor

With the trend in Asian cuisine firmly planted, a look at appetizers in this category is a telling way to see what lies on the horizon.

By Katie Ayoub

American diners are exhibiting a deepening sophistication and worldliness when it comes to food, and according to U.S. Census figures, Asian Americans are the second fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States. Melded together, these two factors have influenced menus nationwide.

Indeed, the trend in Asian foods is so rooted in our culinary landscape that it actually has sprouted three distinctive shoots: an exploration of authentic dishes from Asia; a bringing together of all Asian cooking techniques and ingredients under the umbrella of Pan-Asian cuisine; and a blending of Asian cuisine with other cuisines, including French and regional American, forming Asian fusion.

We're focusing on Asian-inspired appetizers, which have the greatest crossover potential into the broadest spectrum of menus. Mastering the various techniques and flavor profiles within this category will serve you well in the future. Asian cuisine, and all its interpretations, seems like a natural fit for this menu part. It brings its own vibe of small bites meets street food meets family-style. And Asian cookery continues to embody the mega food trends of today: comfort food, big flavors and healthful preparations.

Understanding the principles

Asian cuisine is anchored in the harmony of sweet, sour, salty, bitter and umami (that savory fifth taste). "What is unique about Asia, especially Southeast Asia, is the layering of flavors and textures," says Robert Danhi, chef-consultant and author of *Southeast Asian Flavors* (Mortar & Press,

2008). "It's a really dynamic cuisine with lots of nuances. When creating curry pastes and powders, you need to know how to balance the spice mixtures—the chalkiness of turmeric, the pungency of cumin and the piney-ness of coriander, for example."

Rice and noodles are integral to Asian cookery,

but the combination of spices, complex pastes and sauces (at varying levels of heat) is where intense, clean, vibrant flavors unique to this region are born.

Wok cooking is a technique that needs mastering to truly capture the heart of this cuisine. With its sloped sides and rounded shape, a wok cooks food very quickly at extremely high heat. Although stir-frying is its most well-known application, the wok is also used for steaming, simmering, braising and smoking. Oils with high-smoke points are required, so consider peanut oil, corn oil or soybean oil. *Mise en place* is crucial for cooking with a wok. Everything must be prepared ahead of time because ingredients are cooked quickly. "There's a rhythm to wok cookery," says Doug Turbush, executive chef of Bluepointe in Atlanta, a contemporary American restaurant with Asian flair in the Buckhead Life Restaurant Group. "You're cooking at 200 to 300 degrees higher temperature than a cast-iron skillet. Timing is everything.

Dishes can be executed so quickly, but you can ruin a dish in a matter of seconds."

Case study: Big Bowl

"We want to be one step ahead of the guest, so we can pull them along gently, but we don't want to get three steps ahead of them because we'll lose them," says Dan McGowan, president of Big Bowl, an eight-unit Asian concept offering authentic Chinese and Thai dishes.

Since the chain, owned by Chicago-based Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, opened in 1992, it has thoughtfully repositioned its food. "We made a commitment to sustainability, quality and authenticity," McGowan says.

Another strategy change was reducing portion sizes and prices. This is key in understanding where the trend in Asian cuisine is headed. "There's a looseness in the culture of our restaurant, and it's tied to the idea of sharing and trying different flavors," he says. "Asian food is about family and interaction. It

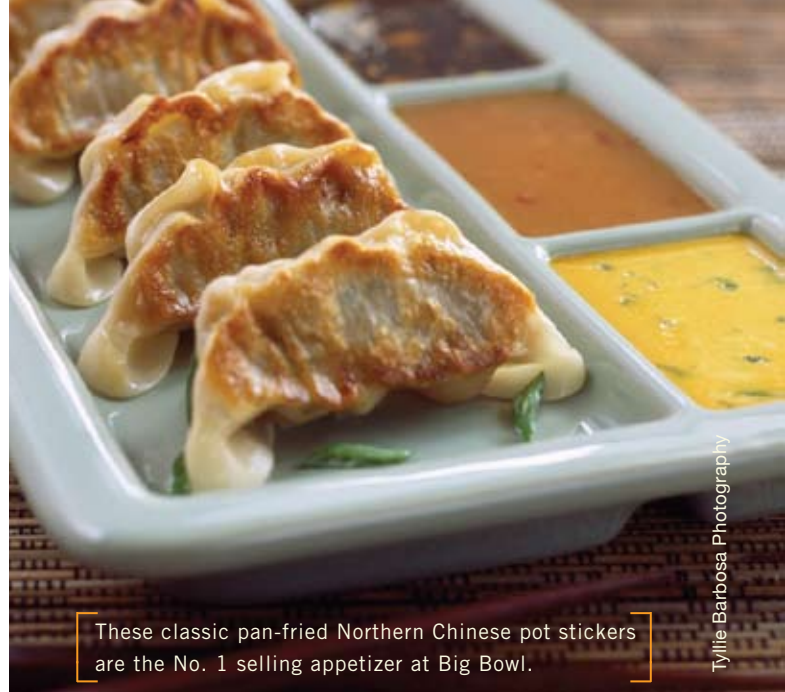
made sense for us to have smaller dishes.” Appetizer sales make up 65 percent of overall menu sales at Big Bowl, and although dishes like the BBQ pork bao (steamed dough packets stuffed with seasoned pork and vegetables) are gaining traction, the more familiar pot stickers (pan-fried Asian dumplings), still rule.

Big Bowl offers further insight into trend forecasting if treated as a barometer on how Asian dishes play to city versus suburban diners. Sales of its self-service stir-fry bar in its downtown Chicago locations holds steady at 13 percent. Tracking sales at its suburban units shows almost a doubling of volume at 25 percent. “There could be a lot of different factors there, but familiarity with stir-fry is probably one of them,” McGowan says. “People in the city are more likely to trust the chef and order off the menu.”

Case study: California Pizza Kitchen

It’s worth noting how mainstream restaurants with broad-based menu concepts have distilled trends in Asian cuisine. California Pizza Kitchen (CPK), with more than 240 units in 33 states and eight foreign countries, has had great success with its Asian-infused dishes. Yet Brian Sullivan, vice president of culinary development for the Los Angeles-based company, knows how important it is to appeal to the concept’s average diner.

“We truly are a global menu,” says Sullivan. “We can go anywhere in the world and incorporate the flavors that we like.” A lot can be learned from CPK’s Singapore Shrimp Rolls, an appetizer of shrimp, baby broccoli, soy-glazed shiitakes, spinach, carrots, rice noodles, bean sprouts, green onion and cilantro wrapped



These classic pan-fried Northern Chinese pot stickers are the No. 1 selling appetizer at Big Bowl.

Tyllie Barbosa Photography

in rice paper. Served chilled with a sesame-ginger dipping sauce and Szechuan slaw, they’ve been on what Sullivan describes as “a roller coaster ride” since their introduction onto the main menu in 2001. “They picked up steam after two or three years, but are now declining again with the introduction of our fried appetizers,” he says.

Two dishes have stolen the limelight: Sonora Egg Rolls (grilled lime chicken, roasted corn, black-bean salsa, cheese, mild chilies, green onion and cilantro wrapped in a crispy wonton roll) and Avocado Club Egg Rolls (avocado, chicken, tomato, cheese and applewood smoked bacon, wrapped in a crispy wonton).

The freshness and wholesomeness of the Singapore Spring Rolls does have a following, Sullivan says, but he still needed the dish to appeal to a broader palate. “I tried to put fresh mint in the rolls, but people just didn’t get it. I also tried a more authentic dipping sauce — thinner and

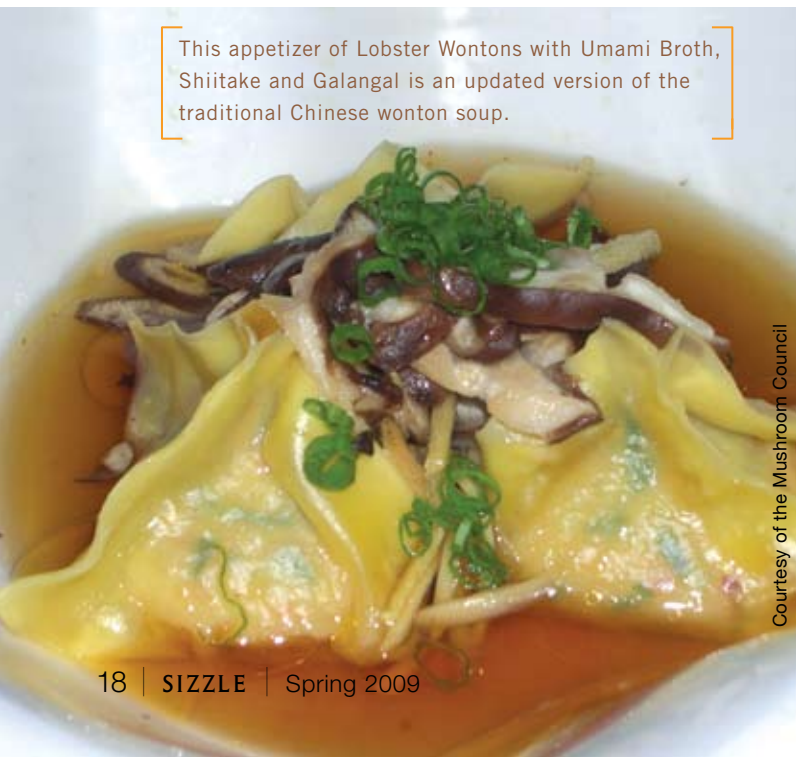
with fish sauce. But our diners want goopy sauce — good sauce, but thicker than what you find in Thailand.”

In evidence at CPK is Asian fusion. Its most popular Asian appetizer? The Tortilla Spring Rolls that favor Latin flour tortillas instead of the Vietnamese rice paper. Diners can choose Mediterranean, Baja Chicken or Thai — truly a global experience born in Asian tradition.

A tale of two dishes

Susan Feniger, famous for her partnership with Mary Sue Milliken on the Food Network’s “Too Hot Tamales” and their restaurants Border Grill (Santa Monica, Calif., and Las Vegas) and Ciudad (LA), recently launched her own concept, Susan Feniger’s Street in LA. She pulls inspiration from the carts of street vendors from across the world. Although known for her take on Latin food, she’s also venturing into Asian street food with this menu. “The same thing that attracted me to the Latin

This appetizer of Lobster Wontons with Umami Broth, Shiitake and Galangal is an updated version of the traditional Chinese wonton soup.



Courtesy of the Mushroom Council

kitchen attracts me to Asia—strong flavors,” Feniger says.

A dish she’s calling Thai Bites is inspired by Thailand’s *miang khum*. She spreads greens (collard, mustard or spinach) with a tamarind caramel (fish sauce, palm sugar, tamarind paste) then adds toasted peanuts, dried shrimp, toasted coconut, diced lime (with peel in tact), ginger and red chilies, and then closes the greens into little packets. “The complexity of flavor and texture in these little bites is unbelievable,” she says.

As she developed her menu, she sought out various experts in Asian cookery (including the aforementioned Robert Danhi) and tried as many different foods as she could. “My advice for those who want to learn about Asian ingredients and techniques is to eat and eat and eat,” she says. “If you get the

opportunity, travel there. If not, go to ethnic areas where you live and dig in, asking as many questions as you can. With Street, I’m doing things I’ve never done before. It’s my first solo venture in 27 years. It’s scary, but inspiring to learn about these cuisines.”

Turbush with Bluepointe learns more about Asian cookery each time he travels to the region—and from his Thai mother-in-law. “The flavors that most excite me are from Thailand, Vietnam and Japan,” he says. “They’re fresh, spicy, flavorful and clean.”

For his appetizer of Lobster Wontons with Umami Broth, Shiitake and Galangal, his approach brings new dimensions to the traditional wonton soup. He stuffs wonton wrappers with ground lobster meat mixed with a blend of cooked and cooled garlic, galangal, Thai chilies and scallion. He adds fish sauce, cream, kaffir-lime leaves and cilantro, then boils the wontons. The broth is made with dashi, soy sauce, mirin, sushi

Bok choy and ginger are common Asian ingredients



seasoning and bonito flakes. Julienned shiitake, ginger and scallion are heated in the broth, which is then poured over the wontons. “You get that wonderful savory flavor from the shiitake. The dish exemplifies the nuances of Asian cooking,” Turbush says.

What’s next?

Danhi sees the customizable elements of Asian dishes continuing to influence menus in the United States. “As an example, the Vietnamese have this wonderful crispy pancake called *bánh xèo*,” he says. “The salad roll is already familiar here, so I think this could be next. It’s a Saigon crêpe.” The crêpe is made from a batter of coconut milk, rice flour, salt and water. It’s fried, then stuffed with bean sprouts, pork and shrimp, and served wrapped in a lettuce leaf. Diners customize the add-ons at the table, which include cucumber and fresh herbs. A dipping sauce of fish sauce is thinned with water and served with lemon.

“The diversity of Asian cuisine cannot be matched,” Danhi says. [As another trend], I think the local Malay foundation, piled high with Chinese cooking techniques and flavors and Indian accents will feed the culinary hunger of Americans for years to come.” ■

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Ingredients for an Asian pantry

Chinese

char siu (thick barbeque sauce made from fermented soybeans, vinegar, tomato paste, chilies, garlic, honey and spices)
chili sauce
fish paste
garlic
ginger
nuoc mam (fish sauce)
sesame oil
soy sauce

Korean

chili-bean paste
doenjang (fermented bean paste)
dried kelp
garlic
ginger
gochu chang (a condiment that has fermented barley-malt powder, rice flour and chili powder)
kimchi
sesame oil
soy sauce
soybean paste

Thai

coconut and palm sugars
coconut milk
galangal
garlic
ginger
kaffir-lime leaves
nam pla (fish sauce)
scallion
soy sauce
tamarind
Thai basil
Thai chilies

Vietnamese

basil
bok choy
coconut milk
coriander
garlic
lemongrass
nuoc mam (fish sauce)
scallion