

# Word on the Street

Chefs hit the pavement, finding inspiration in street food across the globe.

By Katie Ayoub

Iconic buildings define cityscapes, but street food defines cities. Hot pretzels in Manhattan, currywurst in Berlin, funnel cake in Boston. Local aromas wafting through the iron grids of a city imbue the memory better than a snapshot. They also inspire chefs.

For those searching for authenticity and simplicity, street food is a wonderful muse. Chefs we spoke to traipse the cities from which they derive their menus—breathing in the smells and tasting local foods served from trolleys and cooked on hibachis.

Moved by the tastes and traditions of regional specialties and local favorites, these chefs bring them back to their menus—interpreting the dishes for their clientele. Therein lies one of the challenges of menuing street food: its proletarian tradition is based on simple, inexpensive ingredients. It's also designed around true quick-service; street food is the original fast food. Folks pour out of offices and migrate to their favorite vendors. While eating a quick, cheap, filling bowl of Hainan chicken in Singapore or a steaming

tamale in Mexico City, people socialize on the streets, then go back to work.

To bring international street food to American menus, chefs have to choose dishes carefully, then successfully incorporate them to match the menu's tone. Some go for the pure experience



Rattan Pan-Asian Bistro + Wine Bar

This satay sampler features the ever-popular Thai skewers of meat, served with a roasted-peanut sauce.

Michael Bloise at Wish sells this light broth dotted with chicken slices on his breakfast menu.



with no modification. Others upscale the street food, leaving its essence intact, but branding it with recognizable touches.

“Eating street food is a culinary adventure,” says James E. McMillan, executive chef at Rattan Pan-Asian Bistro + Wine Bar in Houston. “Bringing that adventure home is where the fun is.”

### Asian inspiration

Street food is to Asia as fast food is to America. Tiny Singapore boasts a whopping 40,000 food stalls. Tokyo’s streets are famous for their udon and soba noodles in delicate broths. In Taiwan, street vendors hawk oyster pancakes and fried tofu. The streets of Hanoi are dotted with food vendors selling pho (a Vietnamese noodle soup), and just about everywhere in Asia sells a version of satay.

Michael Bloise, executive chef at Wish at The Hotel in Miami Beach, Fla., came back from a culinary tour of Vietnam inspired. “One of the amazing things about Vietnamese food is the ability to balance really deep flavors, but keep them light at the same time,” he says.

Gleaning from the various phos he tried there, he created a breakfast pho for Wish.

“There, they eat pho for breakfast, lunch and dinner,” he says. “I didn’t know how it would play here for breakfast, but pho isn’t as unknown as it used to be, and it’s doing really well on our breakfast menu.”

Although he kept the traditional beef-based broth, he serves paper-thin chicken breast instead of the more common beef. “I didn’t want to scare people with a beef soup early in the morning,” says Bloise.

To infuse depth into the pho, he chars whole onion, ginger and shallot. He peels them, then adds them to a pot with roasted beef bones, chicken stock, garlic, cilantro, five-spice powder, star anise, cinnamon, fish sauce, chili-garlic sauce and salt and pepper.

“When you travel through Vietnam you get a grasp of how poor people are,” Bloise says. “Charring gives depth of flavor. We would get that from meat, but they don’t have as much, so they char other ingredients for color and depth.”

Once the broth has simmered for a few hours, he strains it, then cooks rice noodles. For service, he puts bean sprouts, fresh herbs and chili peppers in a bowl. He adds the chicken, then the boiling broth. “I try to keep the presentation as authentic

as I can,” he says. Along with the pho, he serves a garnishing platter of sprouts, herbs and lime, as well as fresh basil, hot chilies, hoisin and Thai chiles.

A third-generation Japanese-Texan, Rattan’s McMillan has a familial relationship with Asia’s street foods. His menu is derived from all of Asia, but his satays hail directly from Thailand.

“I didn’t do any modifying for the American palate with my satay,” he says. His satay sampler, an appetizer offering chicken, pork and beef skewers with a roasted-peanut dipping sauce, is hugely popular.

“It’s the aroma of street food that makes it so amazing,” says McMillan. “They make that peanut sauce from fresh, roasted peanuts to order. It’s so intoxicating.”

He coats the meats in a sauce made with coconut milk, fish sauce, light-brown sugar, lemon grass, garlic, chili, Masaman curry, kaffir lime leaves and shredded coconut. He skewers the meats on wet bamboo, then grills them to order. The dipping sauce is made with mirin, dark soy sauce, sweet soy sauce, ground fresh-roasted peanuts and sugar.

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His entrée of miso-glazed Chilean sea bass is inspired by Tokyo's street food. “You see it there as street food, but I got this recipe from my grandmother,” McMillan says.

He marinates sea bass for 72 hours in white miso paste, sake, mirin, brown sugar, granulated sugar and *kombu* (dehydrated kelp). He then pan-sears and broils the fish. He serves it with Japanese eggplant, Chinese long beans, red bell pepper, snow peas and shiitake on a bed of sushi rice. “Obviously, on the street,

you just get a plate of the cooked fish,” says McMillan.

### Latin inspiration

In Latin America, street food is the ultimate in fusion, melding African and Spanish with native cultures, such as Incan and Aztecan. Empanadas are stuffed pastries found across Latin America and the Caribbean, and are a popular street food. Their stuffing proclaims their regionality. In Argentina, empanadas house a filling of beef seasoned with

cumin and paprika, green olive, onion, raisins, boiled egg and perhaps potato. In Bolivia, fried cheese empanadas are dusted with icing for an afternoon treat, and in Ecuador, they're filled with steamed meats, peas and potatoes.

“We always feature a few different empanadas on our menu,” says James Schenk, executive chef/owner of Destino in San Francisco, a South American restaurant with a contemporary twist.

Such twists can be seen on his empanada menu. For his Caribbean pork empanadas, he combines ground pork with onion, garlic and red wine. He adds pimento-stuffed olives, organic prunes, cumin, oregano, thyme and salt and pepper. “It's

## Pho

Michael Bloise, Executive Chef  
Wish at The Hotel  
Miami Beach, Fla.

Yield: 2 servings

1 yellow onion, skin on  
2 oz. ginger, skin on  
2 shallots, skin on  
3 lbs. beef shank bones or oxtail bones  
4 qts. chicken stock  
6 garlic cloves  
1 bunch cilantro stems  
1 T. five-spice powder  
3 star anise  
1 cinnamon stick  
½ cup fish sauce

2 oz. chili-garlic sauce  
Salt and pepper, to taste  
1 lb. rice noodles (*banh pho*)  
1 cup mung bean sprouts  
1 bunch fresh mint  
1 bunch Thai basil  
1 bunch fresh cilantro  
2 chili peppers, sliced  
8 oz. chicken breast, sliced paper-thin  
1 lime  
1 yellow onion, sliced thin  
1) Char whole onion, ginger and shallots on grill or in broiler until black. Once cooled, peel; set aside. 2) Roast bones at 350°F until golden brown. In large stock-pot, put bones and charred whole onion,

ginger and shallots; cover with chicken stock. Add garlic, cilantro stems, five-spice powder, star anise, cinnamon stick, fish sauce, chili-garlic sauce and salt and pepper. Simmer on medium 2-4 hours, strain; set aside. 3) Bring pot of salted water to boil. Add rice noodles; cook carefully until tender. Drain, cool; set aside. 4) Divide half the bean sprouts, fresh herbs and chili peppers into two serving bowls. Put chicken slices in bowls; add cooked noodles. Bring broth to boil; ladle into bowls. (Meat should be thin enough that hot broth cooks it instantly.) Slice lime; arrange on garnish platter with sliced yellow onion and remaining sprouts, herbs and chili peppers. Serve with soup.

got a great earthy flavor with that *pueblo* heartiness to it," says Schenk.

He serves it with a cinnamon *mojo*, made with organic honey, extra-virgin olive oil, red-wine vinegar, cinnamon and cinnamon sticks.

Other empanada offerings include a caprese empanada, featuring mozzarella, fresh basil and tomato, and a mushroom medley empanada with goat cheese.

Peru's *anticucherias* (street-food stalls hawking skewers of meat) inspire his *anticuchos de corazon*, beef-heart skewers served with an *aji-panca* reduction. Schenk, whose mother is Peruvian, calls Peru his second home. "I grew up with Peruvian street food. It's a great country for fusion cooking," he says.

He skewers the beef-heart slices and marinates them overnight in olive oil, garlic, white-wine vinegar, *aji panca* (a Peruvian hot pepper), cumin, lemon juice, salt and cilantro. He grills them, basting with the marinade.

"People who know this dish, love it," he says. "Also, those who are adventurous will order it and love it."

At Nacional 27 in Chicago, chef/partner Randy Zweiban pulls from all 27 Latin countries for his street-food inspiration. "We take street food and give it more of a restaurant feel and touch of elegance," he says.



His take on the Central American *papusa*, a stuffed masa pancake, is a chimichurri chicken *papusa* stuffed with pepper Jack cheese and served with a Salvadorian slaw.

He makes the *papusa* in-house out of masa flour and pork fat. He marinates chicken breast in chimichurri, poaches it in olive oil, then shreds it once it has cooled. He splits the *papusa* and adds the chicken and cheese, then folds it. For the side of slaw, he steeps shredded cabbage and carrot in hot water, then dresses them in Worcestershire sauce, chipotle/ancho sauce, olive oil and white vinegar.

From the Andean mountains, he takes the tradition of *arepas*, corn-based bread, and stuffs them with whipped goat cheese and roasted red pepper. Zweiban finishes them with a mustard *crema*.

He starts with fine-ground masa, and works that into patties with grated Jack cheese, duck fat or lard, cooked corn

Chefs take the tastes and traditions of regional specialties and menu their own versions of street food, using simple, inexpensive ingredients from their local markets.

kernels and water. He pan-fries the *arepas* with a bit of oil until they are cooked through. They're stuffed with the goat cheese and red pepper, to order.

"The great thing about Latin American street food is that it's really simple stuff," says Zweiban. "It's great to add to a tapas or appetizer menu, introducing these fantastic foods in small plates."

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