

# **BAUM + WHITEMAN**

**INTERNATIONAL FOOD + RESTAURANT CONSULTANTS**

## **BAUM+WHITEMAN PREDICTS HOTTEST FOOD & BEVERAGE TRENDS IN RESTAURANTS & HOTELS FOR 2024**

November 2, 2023 FOR IMMEDIATE USE

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**Baum+Whiteman's opinionated 2024 forecast explores  
next year's food and restaurant trends:**

**Angry consumers confront "checkflation."**

**How a \$25 chicken gets to cost \$36.**

**New crunchy stuff for your sandwich**

**The Venezuelans are coming: Watch your guasacaca.**

**Sea-cuterie replaces butter boards.**

**What's making Hong Kong restaurants sizzle?**

**Why plant-based food nosedived.**

**Omakase dinners on the cheap-ish.**

**Aperitivo hours challenging happy hours.**

**Lots of new buzzwords.**

**And: Are American restaurants facing extinction?**

Baum+Whiteman creates high-profile restaurants around the world for hotels,  
restaurant companies, museums and other consumer destinations.

Their annual hospitality predictions follow.

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## PICKING DINERS' POCKETS: JUNK FEES & CHECKFLATION

There's a growing consumer backlash to deceptive menu pricing ... mostly practiced by independent restaurants. Junk charges at the bottom of your dinner check ... for "service charge" or "wellness surcharge" or "hospitality charge!" ... has consumers confused and fuming. While guilt-tripping their customers, that extra money often ends up in the operator's pocket. These bottom-of-the-check fees lure people into ordering a \$25 chicken dish and paying \$36 for it later. Here's how it works: Menu price for the chicken = \$25 + 20% "service charge" = \$30 + your usual 20% tip = \$36. More if you factor in local taxes. If the chicken were truthfully priced at \$30 on the menu, the total would be the same ... but you'd know it up front. (See example, below of checkflation.)

Chain restaurants aren't into this flimflamming because that could trigger class action suits. (Although Olive Garden in Times Square is adding a "suggested" surcharge, aimed no doubt at tourists.) Indeed, the Feds just included F&B junk pricing in its investigation on hotels'

and airlines' bills. California law bans these charges next year, but they're figuring out how to enforce it.

*(To be fair, many restaurants do distribute some or all of those charges to their staffs ... and they say so at the bottom of the check ... but lots more don't. Either way, these add-ons still leave a sour taste at the end of the meal.)*

One reason fees are proliferating: Cities and states are banning tip credits ... that allow

Dine In	
2 Buffet	70.00
2 Cadillac Marg	32.00
18 %	
18% GRATUITY	19.08
SUBTOTAL	106.00
SERVICE CHRG	19.08
5% KIT CHRG	5.30
TAX	12.39
2:01PM TOTAL DUE 142.77	

owners to pay low wages (like \$2.13 an hour) and make up the difference with tips. Chicago did it along with California, Minnesota, Oregon and four others ... more will follow. Tacking those rising labor costs to the bottom of the check allows restaurants to claim fallaciously “we haven’t raised our prices.” But it still is “checkflation.”

*Waiter: Are you enjoying your \$20 omelet?*

*Customer: I’d like some bread or toast, please.*

*Waiter: We don’t serve bread. But I can bring our bread basket for an extra \$10.*



## OMAKASE MEETS POCKETBOOK REALITIES

Tired of blowing next month's car payment at a \$500 or \$1000-a-person sushi emporium? Look forward to omakase restaurants serving dinner for one-fifth of the price ... a case where less-is-less may be good thing. A new breed of restaurants is scaling back the overwhelming number of courses to 10 or 12 ... and mixing in lower cost handrolls to hold down prices and spruce up variety. The idea is to maintain quality but speed seat turnover ... so more customers make up for lower prices. It takes some e-searching but you'll find them cropping up in Miami, Washington, the West Coast and New York. Meanwhile there are these cheaper deals ...

### ***Trendy new omakase experiments***

**Handroll Omakase:** Sitting at a counter, you might get up to a dozen different handrolls. The Handroll Project in San Francisco offers five-, seven- and ten-piece sets. The latter, at \$95, includes A5 Wagyu, fish eggs and uni.

**Crispy Rice Omakase:** Rectangles of sushi rice are crispy fried but warm and cuddly on the inside. They're topped with raw fish, truffled beef, uni and other delectables. A five-piece assortment will set you back about \$50 at Miami's Miss Crispy Rice.



**Chirashi:** These are bowls or platters of raw fish over a bed of sushi rice. Essentially an omakase in a single package. Saves time and labor in not forming and draping individual sushi pieces. Especially appropriate for takeout or delivery.



## **WATCH YOUR GUASACACA.**

### **VENEZUELAN FOOD MAY BE NEXT TASTE INFLUENCER**

Because of the growing migrant crisis, nearly 500,000 escapees from Venezuela will be allowed to work in the US until the end of 2024. Of those taking jobs, probably half will be in the hospitality sector ... so look for their ethnic foods and flavors to pop up in restaurant kitchens.

Better brush up on your *guasacaca* from Venezuela ... a creamy green sauce of avocados, cilantro, parsley, chilipeppers, vinegar, (sometimes lime), garlic and olive oil. A bit thinner and more pungent than guacamole ... great on grilled meats and fish, on egg dishes, and over vegetables. It is traditional in or over *arepas* (*see photo, below*) ... which also will appear on more Latin-inflected menus.



## HONG KONG-STYLE DINING AIMS FOR FUN AND NOSTALGIA

Old fashioned Hong Kong restaurants, with menus longer than your arm, are opening in North America with grand flourishes. Known as *cha chaan tengs*, they serve mashups of traditional Chinese café food along with dishes that were invented specifically for the Brits who had colonized Hong Kong for generations. *Chaan tengs* were early to the fusion game.

You'll find scrambled eggs and hot dogs with macaroni in tomato sauce; cheeseburgers in pineapple buns; pork cutlet with cheese, tomato and peanut butter; Spam, egg and noodle soup; a bread bowl with chicken bolognese, and dizzying arrays of heaping sizzle platters.

It's all very homey, fun and Instagram fodder. You might drop by for a snack or an entire

dinner ... finding it hard to spend twenty bucks ... thirty if you're in high splurge mode.

In Toronto, there's Hong Kong-style Mabu, also with a branch in New York, and Good Luck Hong Kong Café. In LA, you'll find Monarch in Arcadia. In Vancouver, Sin Tin Day lets you mix-and-match your own over-the-top breakfast. In Quincy, MA, it's Rubato for fried chicken thighs and sesame slaw in large baked bolo baos, and pork chop with tomatoes and cheese on egg fried rice.

Also coming soon: Restaurants doing fancy tricks with instant noodles (*photo above*).



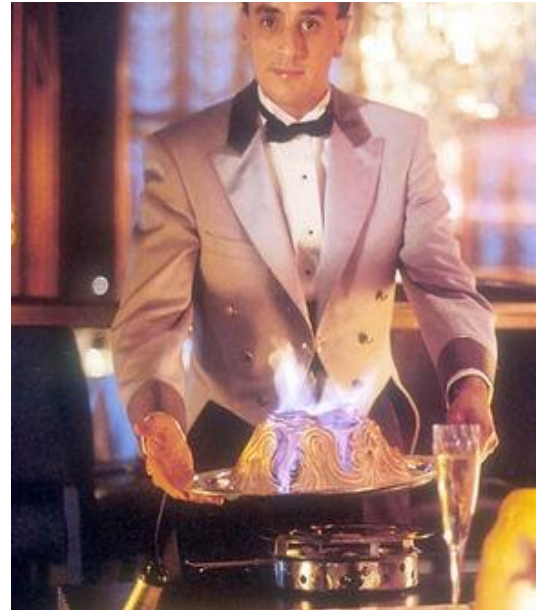
## ARE AMERICAN RESTAURANTS HEADED FOR EXTINCTION?

We scoured thirteen US cities' lists of their "best" restaurants for 2023. *Only one-fifth were what we used to call "American."* To reach that 20% number, we lumped together barbecue joints, soul food and Cajun eateries, sandwicheries, steakhouses, and those we identified as typically American restaurants.

When we examined those cities' lists of best *new* restaurants, the American category dropped closer to 10%.

Here's where all the top-ranking menu action is now:

- American, about 20%.
- Combine Thai, Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodian and Malay, and you get about 12% of the country's best restaurants.
- Italian restaurants ranked about 12%, as did Mexican and Japanese.
- Japanese, 9%
- Seafood restaurants tally around 6%
- French? Fugedaboudid. About 5%.
- Chinese, about 4
- Korean, Philippine, even less



*American restaurants endangered?*

Now, we're not chauvinistic, we recognize we're a country of immigrants ... and top-flight American restaurants are not (yet) on the endangered species list. Our tabulation is how the *critics* voted. It is not the way people in this country actually eat. That's because TGIFriday's, Longhorn, Cheesecake Factory, IHOP and their coterie don't get star ranking for their food. Instead, they win on popularity.

What the list actually reveals is the continued rise of interesting and intense" foreign" flavors ... and the ongoing dominance of casual dining in the upper reaches of money and gastronomy, since no one gets dressed up for pad thai or chilaquiles. These restaurants" unstoppable popularity reflects the new American way of dining in the "best" places.

## **GOODBYE BUTTER BOARDS. HELLO TO ... “SEA-CUTERIE” BOARDS?**

For generations a staple on kitchen tables in Madrid and Lisbon, fish in tins are now an expensive dining craze in the US. A two three-ounce can of mussels from Portugal costs more than a fresh pot of steamed mussels at your local bistro. Grilled sardines in your favorite taverna are bargains compared to cans costing up to \$44. A Times Square canned fish merchant sells this stuff the way souvenir shops sell t-shirts.

Called *conservas* on the Iberian Peninsula ... artisanal anchovies, squid in its ink, tuna belly in olive oil, mackerel escabeche, cod cheeks ... these items were trending as social signifiers for America’s dining elite. Now they’re mass-market luxuries, a craze launched by YouTube videos of canned fish date nights and collections of “seacuterie boards.” To be fair, many *conservas* are hand-filleted and precooked before packaging, whereas your supermarket sardines are mechanically processed and cooked in their cans. There’s a sophisticated difference regarding taste and texture.

Prediction: We give this trend about twice the life of butter boards ... and then we’ll return to Bumblebee at home and dine on tinned fish in trendy wine and tapas bars, which is precisely where they belong.





**NIX THE CHIPS IN YOUR NEXT SANDWICH.  
CUE IN CHILAQUILES.**

Mexican chilaquiles *sandwiches* are making US inroads. Typically a sit-down breakfast dish of corn chips moistened with red sauce and topped with eggs and cheese, chilaquiles are now adding spicy, crunchy texture to tortas ... as potato chips do for Bobby Flay's burgers. They're all over Mexico City and on US coasts and in Texas.

La Chilaquería, new in New York, ups the game by adding various meats to the chips-and-eggs mixture ... transforming a breakfast dish into an overstuffed all-day sandwich. Theirs is doused with brown *salsa almendras* ... a concoction of sesame seeds, almonds and chilies fried in butter. A taqueria in San Jose layers its chilaquiles torta with chipotle-tinged chicken tinga, cheese, eggs and pickled onions all lubricated with sour cream. Tortas de Chilaquiles in Mexico City packs its sandwiches with chicken Milanese and roasted potatoes or conchita pibil. None of these hangover helpers is for the faint of heart and all are wonderfully sloppy.



## **CELLS, NOT ROOTS. NO BEAKS, NO FEATHERS.**

It looks like venture capitalists are moving their chips to lab-grown meat ... and pruning investments in plant-based food. It's been two bumper years for plant-based foods. Probably half the people who tried them in '20 and '21 didn't buy them again in 2023 ... and probably won't in 2024. Sales collapsed 20% from July '22 to July '23.

Plant-based foods suffer from taste deficits and poor value in an inflationary economy ... and from bad press for being ultra-processed imitations of "real" food. Grocers are cutting back on shelf space and restaurants are skeptical that a single plant burger provides any green credentials. Restaurants are simply spotlighting *real* vegetables.

With lab-grown (or cell-grown or cultured) proteins, stem cells are harvested harmlessly from cattle, poultry and fish ... then grown in vats with nutrients until they form clumps that *theoretically* will taste like the creatures they were created from.

No beaks, no feathers, no hooves ... no coops, no poops ... no odiferous feed lots or maltreated hogs ... no animal rights protesters. (The meat industry contributes about 30% of the world's greenhouse gases.) Lab-grown meat is gaining kosher and halal approvals, including pork, maybe. Even some vegetarians are open-minded.

Previously available in Singapore if you knew where to look, lab-grown chicken got a boost last summer when US regulators approved two products for sale here ... but good luck finding them. Jose Andres and Dominique Crenn sometimes have them as small components of tasting menus in China Chilcano in Washington and Bar Crenn in San Francisco. We're told they taste like chicken.

Growing this stuff is time-consuming and tricky, so only teeny quantities are available. Your portion ... if you snag a reservation ... will weigh less than a Quarter Pounder. It will have cost astronomically more to produce ... and no one knows if the economics ever will work.

*Cultivating meat cells, above right, is an industrial process. Dominique Crenn, right, includes in it a complex presentation rather than plunking down a slab of chicken. Jose Andres spices and glazes small bits on skewers.*

The eco-idea is to feed the world without slaughtering millions of animals ... turning land that grows food for cattle into cultivating *plants* that people can eat directly. About 100 companies are gobbling investor money ... yet no one has scaled up production beyond demonstration projects.



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## APERI IS THE NEW HAPPY HOUR

Kick the highballs and sugar bomb cocktails. Now it's *aperitivo hour* ... featuring sophisticated lower-alcohol, bitter-tinged, brightly colored cocktails and lo-no beers.

This age-old European pre-dinner unwinding time is gaining traction versus booming, boozing happy hours ... often in hotels. Look for Campari spritz (Aperol's too sweet), Pellegrino with vermouth or bitters, dirty Shirley, Cocchi Americano. pastis. Cava and prosecco fit right in. Cheaters order a martini or Negroni with a single ice cube, making the drink look kosher for *l'apero* hour.

Tapas or small plates match these cocktails better than, say, coarse-tasting chips and salsa. In Italy, small plates called *cicchetti* fill the food component (see *Prosciutto and Champagne Aperitivo*, right).

In the US, mix-and-match cuisines are fine.

The underlying concept of aperitivo culture is to slow down and wind down ... quite the opposite of the noisy hurly-burly of American bars.

Traditionally, you'd go home or out to dinner afterwards. But there's a newcomer in Italy... called *Apericena*. Its smaller than a robust dinner but bigger than small bites ... a budget way of neither cooking at home nor springing for four heavy courses. Often the food is on a buffet or served on a large board or in bowls passed around family style.



## FRIED RICE IS A THING

Fried rice is popping on non-Asian restaurants. While no match for traditional mac-and-cheese, chefs are scouring their fridges for savory ingredients to goose up their fried rice variations ... Spam, prosciutto, mortadella, shrimp, myriad vegetables, foie gras, barbecued beef, smoked duck ... all are fit for the pot, often in combination.

Some chefs are toying with sizzling stone pots (*see right*) for a crispy bottom layer such as one finds in a true paella ... or at the bottom of a proper bibimbap pot.

In steakhouses it is lobster-fried rice, of course, but we've seen the dish with crab legs, too.

Oxtail fried rice is a big winner.



## BUZZWORDS FOR 2024

Food industry execs rightly fretting that weight-loss drugs will cause people to eat less ... Szechuan fried chicken sandwiches ... Thai fried chicken sandwiches ... chicken livers on toast ... fried rice variations and crispy rice cakes in non-Asian restaurants ... labneh, homemade and on menus ... more eatertainment, including shuffleboard, axe-throwing, doggie-dining socials, pickleball ... Syrian food ... Persian food ... “regenerative beef” is a trendy misnomer having little to do with beef ... comfort food snacking ... serious attacks on ultra processed foods since we now know why they’re addictive ... okonomiyaki getting increased play ... “Hospitality” in the service industry increasingly threatened by artificial intelligence and automation ... more no-seat restaurants ... drive-thru coffee ... restaurants disconnecting their telephones ... why hasn’t laksa latched on to the noodles-in-soup trend? ... madcap street food mashups ... Italian vermouth and soda, or just by itself ... better quality sumac for more flavor impact ... aji amarillo

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