

BAUM + WHITEMAN

INTERNATIONAL FOOD + RESTAURANT CONSULTANTS

BAUM+WHITEMAN RELEASES ITS 23rd ANNUAL RESTAURANT AND FOOD TRENDS REPORT

Three Big Trends Run Through Our 2026 Forecast:

- How ethnicity is dominating food trends.
- How artificial intelligence will create menus and dishes.
- How questing for proteins and weight-loss drugs are changing the ways consumers engage with restaurant menus.

Plus these hot topics:

Cardamom is the next spice. Kimchi in everything.

How tropical fruit and silk road spices are dominating restaurant flavors.

Why global fashion houses are seducing celebrity chefs.

Indian food goes luxury. Caribbean cuisine explodes. Fermented honey.

Beef fat is good for you? They're taming the heat of chili crunch.

Get ready for mushroom soda.

New-wave ethnic wine bars and coffee houses.

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

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THREE EMERGING CUISINES

- UPSCALE INDIAN BREAKS THE PRICE BARRIER
- NEW WAVE CARIBBEAN BREAKS OUT OF NICHE STATUS
- NEW ETHNIC STEAKHOUSES BREAK WITH TRADITION

HERE COMES INDIAN OPULENCE

Forget tikka masala takeout, wave goodbye to bad renditions of butter chicken ... luxurious Indian restaurants are migrating from England. Their menus will be unambiguously flavorful and regionally focused. Opulent **Ambassador's Clubhouse** ... with upscale Punjabi cooking ... is opening a 7,900 sq.ft. duplex in Manhattan. And sister restaurant **Gymkhana** (two Michelin stars) is opening a big splurge restaurant in the Aria resort in Las Vegas. Backed by LVH money, 11-unit **Dishoom** is opening in lower Manhattan. And **Darjeeling Express** may be headed here as well. Previous blockbuster successes by local Indian restaurants take the risk out of these massive imports' investments.



Musaafer's extravaganza interior

You can't get a table at Unapologetic Foods' restaurants ... **Dhmaka**, **Masalawalla**, **Adda** and **Semma** (#1 restaurant in NYC). Their food is nerve-jangly incendiary, buttressed by overdoses of Indian spice blends. You can't get into **Bungalow** either ... jammed nightly with chic South Asian clientele. And Michelin-starred **Musaafer** from Houston opened a 10,000 square footer in Manhattan earlier this year with sky's-the-limit interiors. With an Indianized birria taco.

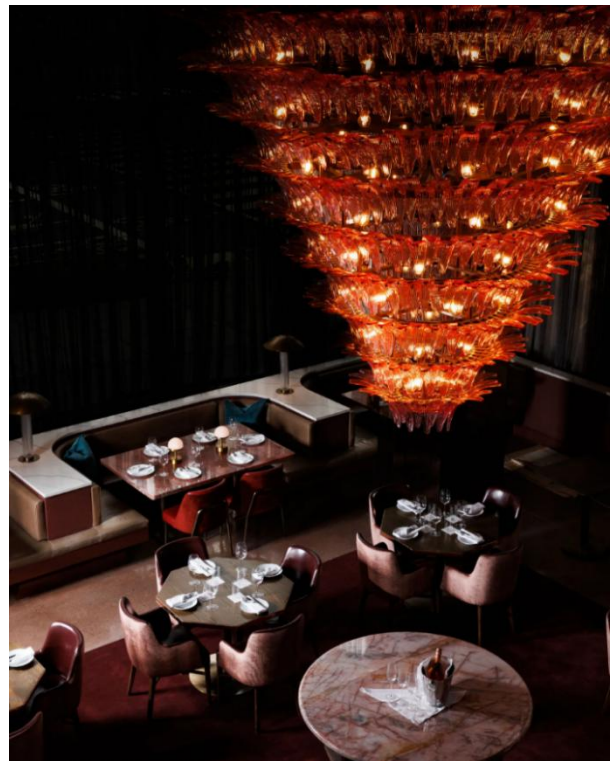
Indian-Americans' high family incomes ... combined with our country's quest for new flavors ... combined with more sophisticated gastronomic tastes ... all signal that Indian food is no longer a niche business. Expect investors to shower money on expanding these concepts.

BREAK OUT THE RUM: NEW WAVE CARIBBEAN IS THE NEXT FLAVOR EXPLOSION

Bye-bye Bahama Breeze. Boisterous, blistering and rum-fueled, Caribbean restaurants are next year's stars. Immigrants from the Islands have kept their scintillating cuisine mostly in their ethnic neighborhoods. So Caribbean ingredients are a reach for American diners: roti, scotch bonnet, guava, fiery Jamaica curry, plantains; especially jerk seasoning rich in clove, pimiento, nutmeg, allspice, and chilies; oxtail, breadfruit, salt cod. But that's all changing ... with tropical ingredients and techniques now showing in upscale restaurants across the country.

In New York, Caribbean-inflected Tatiana serves jerk cod with buttermilk soubise and braised oxtails while the New York Philharmonic is thrumming upstairs. (Upscale-downscale: Chef Kwame Onwuachi has a Caribbean meat patty venture, upscale Dogon in Washington, and is godfather to Las Lap rum bars in Miami and NY).

Paul Carmichael ... a Momofuko alum ... also has it both ways with a \$145 tasting menu at new wave Kabawa in Manhattan (*goat confit with spicy scallop creole and fried bay leaves*) and a next-door bar (*short rib patties with bone marrow and conch*). Has expansion written all over it. Isla (*photo right*) with dazzling décor in Washington, serves *smoked chicken with jerk jus, pickled pimento and fried curry leaf*. LA there's high-design Lucia with its no-kidding Carib menu featuring *saltpish-fig croquets* and *Guyanese lobster chow mein*. And Michelle Bernstein's opened her second middle-of-the road La Canita restaurant in Kendall, Florida.



ETHNIC STEAKHOUSES GO ROGUE

Never mind drought, shrinking cattle herds and soaring prices: Steakhouses continue expanding ... *but now with serious ethnic menus*. Clever strategy: They simply insert a traditional American steakhouse menu onto a traditionally ethnic menu. Look for premium Mexican, Argentine, Korean and Japanese steakeries ... and Thai, Chinese and Israeli chophouses. Jose Andres, who turned us onto aged grass-fed steaks from old cows, opened a Basque-style asador called Txula, with 60-day aged beef. A cool Brooklyn group is importing an Italian steakhouse to Miami with interiors to match Florida's vibes. DC's Brasero Atlantic puts its Argentine grill right at the front door (*photo, right*).



Oddly, none of these ethnic restaurants messes around their steaks ... which are served simply grilled, as you'd get at Del Frisco or the Palm. No chili-avocado butter on your filet; no jerk glaze on your tri-tip; no kimchi marinade on your filet. The flavor overlays are reserved for ethnic starters and mains.

What's more, the steak world is boosted by dieters jabbing themselves with appetite-suppressing GLP-1. Jeong Yuk Jeom Korean bbq in New York serves an ultra-protein dinner of ribeye, some short rib preparations, pork belly and pork jowl. Francis Mallman in Miami serves an Argentine *parrillada* of skirt steak, ribeye, Australian lamb, chorizo and morcilla. Cote has a steak omakase in Vegas for \$225 per person. Kappo in DC has one, as does Omakase Shoji in Chicago.

TRENDING FLAVORS AND INGREDIENTS FOR 2026

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS THE FUTURE OF MULTI-SENSORY MENU-MAKING:

Think about crunchy, salty, spicy, sticky, creamy, tangy. Four of these sensations in a dish is good; five is great. Thick pickles on your pizza. Dubai chocolate. Smashburgers. Kimchi aioli on your loaded fries. Tuna crispy rice. Getting these qualities into recipes will force wise chefs into the realm of neuroscience ... where for example noise in your mouth translates into a taste sensation. This shows where artificial intelligence can take you. We asked Ai to invent a dish with five of the sensory factors listed above ... and in six seconds it gave us: **Crunch & Burn Prawns, fried crisp, tossed in a sticky glaze of chili oil and tamarind, served over a cool coconut lime crema.**

FERMENTED HONEY Hot honey's so last year. Fermented honey is catching chefs' attention. It's a bit less sweet but highly complex ... with tangy and funky notes. You use it in sauces and glazes or whisk it into vinaigrettes and bbq mopping sauce. Photo (right) is 60-day-aged tomahawk marinated for three days in garlic-infused fermented honey before being grilled. Chefs will create "signature flavors" for their restaurants using fermentation techniques and artificial intelligence will invent totally new tastes.



TOUM is the condiment you should explore next. Simply garlic, oil and lemon juice whipped to a thick froth ... producing an intense, garlicky egg-free, dairy-free mayo-like spread or dip. Lebanese originally, now popping up on Med Rim restaurants around the US. Finish pasta, soups and braises with a dollop of toum, or spread *gently* into a sandwich. Pronounced "toom."

CARDAMOM is next year's go-to spice for savory dishes. Aromatic and a bit mysterious, it flavors food from India, Middle East, Med Rim, Iran. BEBERE is next year's spice blend.

KIMCHI CARBONARA and RASTA PASTA are becoming a thing for home cooks. Creamy, tangy, salty, spicy. Restaurants will follow with inspired new uses for kimchi.

QUESTING FOR THE “NEXT” MUSHROOM Current darling of chefs is the lions mane mushroom ... served as a side dish or used to make mock crab and lobster salads, and bbq sandwich stuffings. King oyster mushrooms are stand-ins for steak, and blue oyster mushrooms are gaining traction. Great for flexitarians, along with health benefits like cognitive and immune enhancements, stress reduction. Next are reishi, chaga and cordyceps, mushrooms that don't hit any gastronomical high-notes but are big in supplements. Tivoli Mushroom Co. upstate New York is launching a mushroom soda. Coming: exotic 'shrooms in mainstream lattes, coffees, and shakes.



MAHA hahaha: Tallow makes a comeback. Fifty years ago, the food police pummeled fast feeders for frying in beef fat. Numerous Hindus rebelled over undeclared tallow in McDonald's fries. McD *et al* switched to vegetable oils. Now the MAHA is ganging up on (potentially) harmful ultra-processed seed oils – so lots of restaurants are frying in tallow again. Is lard far behind? Are they better for you or worse? No one knows ... but things taste better with beef fat.

GLOBALISTS TAKE THE STING OUT OF CHILI CRUNCH

Flavor trumps fire: Chefs will blend ingredients like fennel seed, green peppercorn, oregano, lemongrass, cocoa powder, marcona almonds, anchovy, salsa matcha, berbere spices, sesame seeds ... for new fusions of chili crunch ... each blend for a specific use: on pizza, over fish, in a burrito, lathered onto well-buttered New York strips.

TRADER VIC'S CRAB RANGOON IS BACK! Old-timers will remind you that these fried won tons ... filled with crab, spices, scallions and cream cheese ... were the ultimate '50s and '60s Polynesian bar bites. They're having an Instagrammable resurgence. Put that in your burrito.



CONCHAS MAY BE THE NEXT CROISSANT Probably an overstatement but you'll find them spreading beyond the borders of Mexican neighborhoods. Named for their shell-like shapes, conchas have fluffy interiors and crunchy, scored exteriors. They've viral on the West Coast and getting hot on the East. Often filled with traditional ingredients like chocolate or strawberry, newfangled variations include crème brulee, pb&j, Nutella and figs ... but also savorys such as ricotta with lavender and thyme, or avocado mousse. Massed produced, they're disappointing. Find good ones at a local Mexican *panaderia*. Panaderias also are trending.



ETHNIC WINE BARS Korean, Thai, Cambodian, Mexican, pan-Caucuses, Chinese ... new wave wine bars explore what to serve with sweet-and-sour lobster, birria burritos, braised innards of lamb, fiery Szechuan chicken, pad thai ... other than such fallbacks as champagne, riesling and lager. Mexican wine, you ask? Valle Wine Bar in Dallas has 16 on their list. Luya Omakase Japanese wine bar in Brooklyn has a global list by female producers. Jillie in San Francisco focuses on Korean wines and booze to go with kimchi rigatoni.

TROPICAL EXOTICA Yuzu, passionfruit, lychee and guava, dragon fruit ... familiar to grocery shoppers in flavored beverages and ice creams ... are ready for more restaurant exposure. Pretty-in-pink guava and look-at-me orange passionfruit add body and mystery to mixed drinks ... and they're now appearing on menus as glazes for fish and poultry, in globalized bbq sauces, in cheesecakes, blended into ceviche. Guavaritas and passionfruit margaritas surpass outdated Aperol spritzes.

BEYOND KHACHAPURI Growing interest in food and wine from the Black Sea country of Georgia, between Armenia and Russia. A cross-cultural mix of Middle Eastern, Iranian and Mediterranean flavors. Dumplings, kebabs, pomegranates, ground walnut sauces, orange wine, sweet-tart stews, lots of garlic.



GULP! GLP-1 WEIGHT-LOSS MANIA SHIFTS CONSUMER SPENDING

The entire food world will be transformed by a new “Weight-Loss Economy”. Already, users of drugs like Ozempic and Wegovy say they’ve chopped \$200 per month from their food spending. Of that \$200, about \$75 comes from fast food and snacks ... and another \$55 disappeared from restaurants and bars.

Customers are radically reorganizing how they engage with restaurant menus. They’re sidestepping carbs, scanning menus for bigger hits of protein and fiber, shunning cocktails and beer ... even ordering from children’s menus ... because their bodies can’t cope with the overload of “normal” portions.

While consumers focus on “this/not that” dining, restaurants are gasping to keep up. New dishes heavy with protein and fiber will be required for smaller appetites. *(Ai will help; see top of page 5)* Two-tier size options will populate new menus. Appetizer sections will grow inventively with more mixing and matching to assemble a satisfying meal. Snacks will be rebranded as “Protein Bites.”

Look for smaller main courses with upscale ingredients as restaurants strive to maintain their average checks. *Supermarkets will add apps that make shopping lists for GLP users.* Look for half-size cocktails and wholly new no-alcohol cocktails focusing on fresh ingredients. Hotels, diners and breakfast-dependent fas-cas and fast feeders have a big rebranding opportunity.

How radical is all this? One study claims that GLP-1 users order 84% fewer desserts and 70-80% less pasta, burgers and booze. Another study says they consume 15%-40% fewer calories. About 12% of Americans have used GLP-1 drug and 14% say they’re interested --- *a quarter of the country!* Another study says that up to 35% of our population is “interested.”

Even if inaccurate, these numbers are profound.



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GULP! GRATUITOUSLY ADDED PROTEIN.

Starbucks' now has a 28-gram protein latte and is proteinizing cold banana cream foam on your matcha latte. Protein sodas; instant mashed potatoes (already loaded with additives), and baked desserts are getting so much “proteinification” that there’s hardly room on packages for all the health claims.



GULP! FIBER IS THE NEXT PROTEIN. Grabbing momentum from consumers’ trendy consumption of excess protein, fiber is the next hot food additive. Pepsi says so ... adding fiber to its signature cola along with canned Starbucks coffees and packaged snacks. Look for more fiber-forward sodas, pastas, power bars and bagels. Lazy consumers take the easy route ... drinking their fiber in “enriched” juices and smoothies rather than cooking. It’s time for barley ... especially whole grain ... to appear on restaurant menus, probably as “risotto” or adding excellent “chew” to blended burgers. After barley, maybe lentils will get some respect.

TWO EMERGING COFFEE CULTURES

YEMENI COFFEE HOUSES Another diaspora takes culinary root in the US: Yemeni coffees are sweet and spicy. Their coffee houses open later, with comfy seating. No hookahs or booze makes them more hospitable for younger women. More of a “third place” than Starbucks. Beans often are roasted in-house, flavored with cardamom, cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, and clove. Their customers come from Pakistan, India, across the Middle East, even southeast Asia ... and among intrepid foodies. Find them



in Brooklyn, Chicago, Fresno, LA, Michigan, Oakland. Some outfits are franchising. Haraz chain (Dearborn) has 27 coffeehouses with globally trendy cold drinks.

FILIPINO COFFEE HOUSES Another growing niche, riding the wave of those lurid purple ube lattes on TikTok. These coffeehouses go big on flavors: pandan, cassava, calamansi, powdered chocolate, banana, peanut, jackfruit. They double as event venues and are “third places” for young diaspora Filipinos. LA, metro NY, Bay area, Chicago, Philly, Portland ... often anchored by bakeries or mom-and-pop cafes. Side Practice café in Chicago sells a *bay leaf-flavored coconut milk syrup latte*. Kape Lasita in LA has a *salty mocha drink with cold brew, hot chocolate and peanut butter*. In Union, NJ, Ayala serves caramelized honey butter toast (*photo*) and a “Mangorind Tonic” of *house-made tamarind syrup, mango, tonic water, espresso, and lime*.



FOOD WARNINGS FROM THE REGULATORY STATES

In New York City: Chain restaurants are sprouting little spoons on their menus, warning customers of excess sugar. It's the first in this country. New rules require chains to post warnings about such health hazards as type 2 diabetes, weight gain and tooth decay. The little spoon joins saltshaker symbols warning of excess salt, and postings of calorie information. Could allergies be next? See next item.



In California: Restaurants with 20 or more *national* locations will disclose major food allergens on their menus starting July 2026. California is first state mandate menu alerts if any of nine allergens are used, either through printed information or digital formats like QR codes. They will have to disclose ingredients including milk, eggs, shellfish and tree nuts when they know or “reasonably should know” that they are in their products. Wonder what a fat symbol looks like?

ALSO TRENDING

- Japanese Milk Bread on American menus
- Sourdough Bagels
- Pastries with Savory Fillings: croissants, babkas
- Water Buffalo Butter for chefs who can afford it
- Blooming Onion making a comeback
- Fish Schnitzels and Milaneses
- Global Cheesesteaks

I'd enjoy hearing about the trends that you are watching right now.

Until next year ...

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