

# THE INCREDIBLE APPEAL OF DUMPLINGS



By Jeffrey Spear

**N**o matter where you look, chefs are refreshing their menus, introducing dishes that transform everyday meals into something increasingly flavorful and memorable. While familiarity remains important, many younger consumers are craving more adventurous, globally inspired dining experiences. Without question, international cuisines are satisfying this demand, delivering authentic flavors through ingredients, techniques and presentations that feel both exciting and accessible.

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White chocolate teddy bear buns by Chef Guorong Fan are a crowd pleaser at Lucky Cat Dim Sum (Jacksonville, FL)

## DUMPLINGS ARE A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

In response to these dynamics, there's one application, best described as "filled dough," or more simply, dumplings, that's experiencing tremendous popularity. Integral to cuisines around the world and prepared in both savory and sweet forms, dumplings' versatility allows them to appear anywhere on the menu as appetizers, small plates, main dishes, desserts or bar snacks.

According to Datassential, a global food and beverage intelligence company, dumplings have been attracting attention for some time, from ubiquitous Italian ravioli and tortellini to Japanese gyoza, Polish pierogies and Chinese dumplings. More recently, Chinese xiao long bao (soup dumplings), Indian samosas, Spanish empanadas and Tibetan momos have been trending, though many remain unfamiliar to U.S. diners. Other dumplings, such as Georgian khinkali, Korean mandu, Eastern European kreplach and Russian pelmeni, are only just beginning to gain wider recognition.

What's clear is that chefs are experimenting, drawing inspiration from traditional dumpling forms while elevating them through modern culinary techniques. They're making a splash on the plate with naturally occurring coloring agents (beet red, butterfly pea flower blue, turmeric yellow), creative pleats, twists and folds, and innovative fillings such as kimchi mac and cheese, asparagus and spring pea, guava cheesecake and Philly cheesesteak.

## ELEVATED CHINESE DUMPLINGS

At Lucky Cat Dim Sum (Jacksonville, FL), Chef Guorong Fan offers Buffalo chicken buns and cheeseburger shumai, both playful tributes to iconic American comfort foods. He also creates filled, animal-shaped buns (pig, panda, cat, bear) that are eye-catching, tasty and add a sense of whimsy to the dining experience.

Some of the most visually striking dumplings today are being produced by Frankie Gaw, a blogger and cookbook author operating under the name Little Fat Boy. In his book *First Generation*, Gaw pairs bold, flavor-forward fillings with multicolored doughs, creatively pinched, pleated, folded and twisted to create dumplings that make dazzling impressions.

At Palette Tea House in San Francisco, dim sum Chef Guoxiong Ruan is reimagining dumplings in a fun, modern and visually striking way. The lobster dumpling, for instance, is a twist on the classic ha gow (shrimp dumpling), elevated with a lobster and shrimp filling and a small pipette of lobster butter sauce.



Charcoal colored black swan taro puffs, made with minced pork, shrimp and duck, from Palette Tea House (San Francisco, CA)





Traditional Argentine and American fusion empanadas from Empanada Girl (Tampa, FL)

## NEW FLAVORS & INGREDIENTS

While other versions of “stuffed dough,” such as pierogies, empanadas and momos are trending, innovation has often focused primarily on fillings, elevating traditional recipes and introducing thought-provoking flavors without significantly modifying the outer dough wrapper.

**Chef Jake Bukowski** at The Galley (Philadelphia, PA) has created pierogies that go beyond classic potato and cheese or sauerkraut and mushroom, introducing contemporary fillings such as crab Rangoon, cheesesteak and Buffalo chicken.

Similarly, South American empanadas, traditionally filled with beef or chicken, are being adapted for American audiences. This is evident on The Empanada Girl’s (Tampa, FL) menu, which features varieties including bacon, sausage, egg and cheese; mushroom and caramelized onion; pepperoni and cheese; and curried sweet potato and butternut squash.

Other chefs offer savory empanadas filled with coconut curry, teriyaki chicken and chicken tikka masala, alongside sweet options made with guava and cheese, blueberry and goat cheese, caramel apple, and Nutella-banana.

Another dumpling, momos, originates in the Himalayan regions of Tibet and Nepal. Traditionally prepared with ground meat (often yak) and resembling other Asian dumplings, their defining characteristic lies in their boldly seasoned fillings and accompanying sauces. At Fomo Momo (New York, NY), founders **Ankita Nagpal** and **Impreet Sodhi** have reimagined momos using Indian flavors that feel fresh and unexpected. Standout varieties include paneer, ema-datshi, tandoori, Manchurian and achari.

## ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES

While Asian dumplings continue to trend, chefs are also demonstrating creativity through surprising alternatives, from profiteroles filled with braised duck to playful sweet versions stuffed with peanut butter and jelly. Pommes dauphine, light and crispy potato puffs, are being elevated with fillings such as smoked salmon, various cheeses and braised short rib, offering an engaging alternative to French fries. Indian panipuri, distinctive fried masa puffs, are similarly being reimagined with both traditional fillings (potatoes, chickpeas, onions) and upscale ingredients such as crème fraîche and caviar. The bottom line is that when it comes to dumplings and other foods described as “stuffed dough,” the creative potential is virtually limitless. All that’s required is an appreciation of their origins, a little culinary dexterity and a willingness to push familiar forms in new, thoughtful directions.



Visually striking dumplings by “Little Fat Boy” Frankie Gaw (Seattle, WA) showcase creative pleats, folds and color