

A World



of Flavor

Buñelo: uni, jamón ibérico, caviar - Belly of the Beast (Spring, TX)

Global flavors are moving from niche to mainstream as chefs build dishes that balance familiarity with discovery

By Jeffrey Spear

Chefs and restaurateurs are pushing beyond familiar flavor combinations, building dishes that lean into contrast, texture and surprise. That shift is coming from a broader global pantry, used not just for inspiration, but for ingredients that bring new aroma and depth to the plate.

Flavors and ingredients from Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean and Latino cuisines are shaping how chefs are developing new dishes. Much of this movement is driven by contrast and play, combining textures, temperature and global influences in ways that feel both surprising and approachable.

For **ACF Chef Martin Yan, HAAC, HHOF**, Host of *Yan Can Cook*, this shift is visible and accelerating across the industry. Drawing on decades of global travel, he points to the growing popularity of dishes that are bold, interactive and rooted in tradition. "People are enjoying food that is fun, communal and



ACF Chef Martin Yan, HAAC, HHOF

full of flavor," he says, noting the rapid rise of hot pot, dumplings and noodle-based broths across US markets.

Ingredients such as pandan, black sesame, berbere and black cocoa are also gaining traction, balancing familiarity with discovery across sweet and savory applications. At the same time, tropical fruits like mango, yuzu or guava; sour and fermented elements such as pomegranate molasses, calamansi and specialty vinegars; and floral infusions like orange blossom, hibiscus or elderflower are being used to layer flavor, texture and aroma, creating more dynamic, sensory-driven dishes.

Chef Yan has also seen a surge in foundational Asian ingredients becoming part of everyday cooking. "When I first came to the US, there was maybe one soy sauce on the shelf," he says. "Now you see many varieties, along with chili sauces and chili crisp everywhere." These pantry staples, along with ingredients like ginger, are no longer niche, but widely used across multiple cuisines.

For many chefs, emerging flavors aren't about novelty for its own sake, but about reworking familiar formats in ways that feel both new and accessible. **ACF Chef Darrick Tucker**, Chef-owner of the Southern Roots food truck (Merrillville, IN), sees that balance as key. "People are excited by things they recognize, but with a twist," he says. Drawing on Italian, Mexican and Chinese influences, he creates dishes that stay grounded while introducing subtle shifts in flavor. One standout, smoked pork nachos topped with roasted poblano pepper salsa, exemplifies the approach: familiar at first glance, but layered with unexpected depth.

According to statistics published in Morgan Myers 2026 Flavor Trends, 85 percent of consumers are at least somewhat open to new flavors. From a generational perspective, Gen Z is eager for variety and trend-driven; Millennials and Gen X seek flavors that are both indulgent and offer functional health benefits; and Baby Boomers tend to favor familiar tastes.

Chef Tucker has found that willingness to try new flavors often comes down to trust. "Once people know you understand your flavors and you've done your homework, they're much more inclined to try something new," he explains.



Chef Thomas Bille



Roasted Lamb with baba ganoush, pita and pomegranate salad - Belly of the Beast (Spring, TX)

At Belly of the Beast (Spring, TX), Co-owner and **Executive Chef Thomas Bille**, the 2025 James Beard Best Chef Texas, is constantly refining his menu to reflect both his culinary perspective and the experience he aims to deliver. "My overriding philosophy is to work with seasonal ingredients. From there, I'll find ways to use them in a manner that's unexpected." One example is his aguachile, where seasonal fruits such as mango, peach and strawberry are incorporated into the marinade, transforming a traditional dish into something new. He also keeps a variety of vinegars on hand, using them to shift the source of acidity across dishes.

Etix Tamal: red pipián mole, hoja santa, ayocote beans - Valle (Oceanside, CA)



When asked about the emergence of new global ingredients, Chef Bille notes that many of the most interesting and flavorful ingredients can be found in Asian markets, which he sees as foundational to some of his favorite foods. "If you want to understand global cuisines, eat other people's food," he adds. "Even if you don't like them. Eat them and learn."

Even when a restaurant's culinary foundation is rooted in a specific tradition, such as the Baja Mexican cuisine at Valle, the only Michelin-starred restaurant in Oceanside (CA), **Chef-owner Roberto Alcocer** continues to seek out new influences. "The foods I prepare should deliver a concentration of flavor. They should sparkle in your mouth," he says. To stay current, he travels extensively, noting that while ingredients once moved with trade routes, today ideas travel directly from chef to chef.

In more regional markets, chefs often act as cultural translators, introducing guests to flavors they may have heard of but not yet experienced. Based in the Midwest, Chef Tucker sees this firsthand. "In places like California or Texas, certain foods are already part of everyday culture," he says. "Here, you



Chef Roberto Alcocer



Chef Gaurav Chawla, Farzi Café (Bellevue, WA)

have to introduce those ideas and make people love them.” Dishes like breakfast tacos, reimagined with smoked meats, help bridge the gap between familiarity and discovery.

Known for its molecular take on classic Indian cuisine showcases dishes such as dal chawal arancini, Guntur chilli chicken bao and Peshawari paneer tikka lasagna, all of which draw from global influences. “While everything we make is elevated and visually striking, it is imperative that we maintain the cultural soul of our food,” explains Chef Gaurav Chawla, Brand Executive Chef. He adds that while sourcing locally is a priority, certain ingredients must be imported to preserve authenticity and consistency.

The demand for globally inspired flavor-forward experiences shows no signs of slowing. For chefs, the opportunity lies in using these ingredients to create dishes that feel both innovative and accessible. For diners, the reward is a more dynamic, engaging and memorable dining experience.

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Chef Thomas Bille



Keema shepherd's pie, Farzi Café (Bellevue, WA)

Ingredients Shaping the Global Flavor Landscape

Calamansi (Philippines)

Bright and aromatic, bringing both sweetness and sharp acidity to sauces, marinades and beverages.

Yuzu (Japan)

Fragrant and intensely tart, used to add refined citrus complexity across savory dishes and desserts.

Pomegranate Molasses (Middle East)

A concentrated sweet-tart ingredient that adds depth to dressings, glazes and finishing sauces.

Berbera (Ethiopia)

A bold spice blend that delivers layered heat, increasingly used beyond traditional applications.

Gochujang (Korea)

Fermented chili paste offering a balance of sweet, savory and heat, now widely used across menus.

Black Sesame (East Asia)

Nutty and slightly bitter, with strong visual appeal, moving from traditional desserts into broader applications.

Pandan (Southeast Asia)

Aromatic and vanilla-like, used to infuse both sweet and savory dishes with distinctive flavor.

Sumac (Middle East)

Bright and citrusy, used to add lift and balance to rich dishes.