

When assessing dishes like this Luau Salad, The Cheesecake Factory's Robert Okura has learned to set aside his own flavor preferences and focus instead on the overall menu and quality of ingredients.



# Accounting for TASTE

Smart chefs learn that a successful menu balances personal flavor preferences and mainstream appeal

BY DEBORAH GROSSMAN

**H**ow many chefs cook according to their own food and flavor preferences? The reality of the hospitality business often dilutes the passion for personal culinary proclivity. Most menus dole out a large compromise between what the chef wants to cook and what the diner wants to order.

What might be considered a simple business solution — figure out what people want to eat and feed them — becomes more complex when chefs' tastes factor into the equation. Chefs' individual palates are vastly different. Their food preferences are influenced by heritage, training and DNA. Though they build the menu with their unique culinary leanings, the overarching structure reflects cooks' shifting palates and unpredictable swings in customer likes and dislikes.

Keeping this triad of flavor influences in balance is one key to a restaurant's success.

## GETTING TO KNOW FLAVOR

"At the core of being a chef is an interest in learning about new cultures through food and drink. In general, chefs are adventurous and like to explore different flavors," says Martin Heierling, executive chef at Silk Road and Sensi in Las Vegas.

But, for a young chef, learning how to put flavor on the plate takes time, adds Dennis Samala, senior culinary manager, innovation and R&D, for Jack in the Box. Young chefs easily master food science and techniques. Understanding how to apply one's own sense of flavor, taste and texture grows with experience, says Samala.

"The 'art' side of cooking — layering, combining foods and incorporating seasonal ingredients into quick-serve restaurants' limited-time offers — is hard," he admits.

Some chefs, he notes, never learn this lesson and end up acting like mad scientists in the kitchen, unconcerned about their diners' palates.

Lawrence McFadden, hotel manager at the Ritz-Carlton in Naples, Fla., believes that only about 1 percent of chefs are successful at cooking solely to their own palate without considering the diner's tastes. When he was corporate chef for Ritz-Carlton hotels, he observed his chefs' journey to fine-tuning their palates. After learning the mechanics of food production, chefs experiment to please their palates or mimic their mentor's flavor leanings.

"If they venture on their own, they seek the tiny minority who will eat whatever Chef serves. The lucky few profit as destination restaurateurs," McFadden observes.

# TRACKING TASTES

Pros' tips for staying on top of consumer flavor preferences

**KNOW THE NEIGHBORS:** For some chefs, keeping track of diners' food preferences entails staying close to home. Edward Westmoreland of the multi-unit Eddie Papa's American Hangout in northern California reads the local newspapers avidly and dines often in San Francisco. Here, he says, the trends begin, and he applies them with caution. Big-city tastes don't always translate in the suburbs. After discovering bacon-infused vodka in San Francisco, Westmoreland found that his diners, with more conservative palates, showed little interest in a savory vodka drink.

**DINE AROUND:** At the Ritz-Carlton in Naples, Fla., former corporate chef and hotel manager Lawrence McFadden stops by the local high-end steakhouse to check out the specials. Adrian Hoffman, culinary director at the Lark Creek Restaurant Group, keeps attuned to diner preferences by dining out widely at diverse restaurants.

**HOST A WORKSHOP:** Each winter, Percy Whatley hosts the Chefs' Holidays series at The Ahwahnee in California's Yosemite National Park. During a one-month period, 24 chefs share his kitchen, where the talk revolves around techniques, ingredients and guests' dining habits.

"We carefully observe the type of food they are making here, knowing that it sells well in their restaurants, whether in Manhattan, San Francisco, Chicago or Los Angeles. We use this learning to our advantage; it is our personal, annual culinary school," says Whatley.

**STAY FOCUSED:** Independently run focus groups are the best way to help multi-units like Jack in the Box identify customer flavor preferences.

"We do it all — participate in trade events and read all the industry publications," says Dennis Samala, senior culinary manager, innovation and R&D, for Jack in the Box. "But, when it's time for consumer research, I assume the average diner's point of view and listen to our research results. As a chef, I want to meet consumer needs. I look for a happy medium between what I want and what they are looking for in a meal."

## GROUNDING IN FLAVOR

After cooking extensively in Europe, Adrian Hoffman had to adapt quickly to serving up seasonal American fare at One Market in San Francisco. Now culinary director of the Lark Creek Restaurant Group, Hoffman recalls integrating his European training with local sourcing.



JACK IN THE BOX

**Multi-unit operators often rely on research results from focus groups to help ensure their menu development stacks up to consumer preferences.**

"My background and food preferences are regional Italian and French. But I soon translated One Market's emphasis on local, farm-fresh ingredients into coq au vin with a local Rocky Jr. chicken, Hobbs' bacon, local mushrooms and Napa Pinot Noir," says Hoffman.

He discourages his chefs from randomly adding global influences, such as Asian ingredients and flavors, at the group's 10 restaurants. "I'm okay with fusion food with a historical element, such as Vietnamese-French. At our core, we cook American food."

Silk Road's Heierling was born in Germany but prefers to eat the food of other cultures, especially that of Southeast Asia. In German food, primary flavorings come from onions, salt, pepper, capers and mustard, explains Heierling, noting that to his taste, these are heavier and not as explosive in flavor as other cuisines.



SILK ROAD

What really sparks his palate are the spices available along the countries bordering the Silk Trade routes, such as Persia, India and Southeast Asia.

“I fell in love with the concept of hot, spicy, salty and sweet,” says Heierling.

#### SETTING PERSONAL PREFERENCES ASIDE

Delving deeper into the Silk Road menu, Heierling’s German-influenced palate does pop up. When the restaurant opened in 2009, Heierling couldn’t resist putting boudin noir on the menu with apple-and-fennel slaw and potato-and-egg salad. “I knew it might not work, but you can’t risk not putting it on,” he explains. And the most-popular breakfast item includes chippolata sausages.

“These artisanal sausages, flown in from New York and made from pork, marjoram, thyme, salt, pepper and nutmeg, taste like sausages I loved in Germany,” says Heierling.

But not everyone likes the classic flavors of home cuisine. During Robert Okura’s childhood, his parents brought their Japanese culture to the table. Everyone loved Japanese

spicy heat — except him. The Cheesecake Factory’s vice president of culinary development does not like wasabi — or horseradish or mustard — in any form.

“I’m obligated to taste dishes like our wasabi-crusted ahi and grilled fish with wasabi glaze. I’ve developed my palate to appreciate the styles and quality of ingredients.”

Though banana desserts are popular at the Lark Creek restaurants, Hoffman finds no reason to like the fruit. And, while many chefs gravitate to the refreshing qualities of mimosas, he tastes only fermented orange juice.

Many chefs say that repetition and considering consistency and quality allow them to evaluate flavor and put personal preferences aside.

“I respect a New York steak, but it doesn’t mean I gravitate toward it,” says Percy Whatley, executive chef at The Ahwahnee Hotel at Yosemite National Park in California. He admits to an interest in the “odd bits” of ingredients that don’t often translate to mainstream tastes.

“I love the texture of head cheese,” he says, “the mouthfeel and texture and the meatiness

**At Silk Road in Las Vegas, dishes like this charred, marinated beef carpaccio are inspired more by ancient spice routes than by chef Martin Heierling’s German background.**

of bits from the snout and ears. Our cooks love to make and eat charcuterie — but it doesn't sell."

### ADAPTING FOR THE MASSES

On the opposite side of the exotic-flavor spectrum, the palates of executive chefs like Steven Quiñones of Eddie Papa's American Hangout in Livermore, Calif., tend toward the basic. "I'm your regular picky eater. I didn't like seafood of any description," admits Quiñones.

But he tastes all the dishes on the wide-ranging, all-American menu, including ahi poke, which he checks for balance of sesame oil, soy and sweet Thai chile sauces. He samples the oysters for freshness and tests for heat in the spicing of the jambalaya. And, over time, he's grown fond of the San Francisco crab-and-artichoke dip.

McFadden at the Ritz-Carlton Naples has always loved sharp, robust layers of flavor. From gazpacho to meat rubs, he learned to scale back the spice when cooking for 2,000 hotel guests.

At Jack in the Box, Samala also likes big flavors. But his preference for sweet heat gets short shrift on the menu.

"For me, there's nothing better than mango-habanero sauce. You can elevate that party of flavors from sour, sweet, spicy and salty to a concert. But not all our customers like these same flavor notes."

For his work in quick-serve, Samala brings the "party of flavors" to the menu in different ways. He controls every element of taste and texture on the menu. For burgers, he toasts the bun for a bonus flavor pop. He makes sure the pickles have extra crunch to add a compelling textural element. The umami flavor from the beef explodes in the mouth, along with the smoky scent and bite from bacon.

### HIDDEN UMAMI BOOSTS

Sometimes the chef's job as a flavor purveyor means using a gentle touch to guide cooks' and diners' tastes, or what Whatley calls "hiding the yummys." For instance, he menus a pasta dish simply as tagliatelle with linguica and broccoli rabe.

"We enrich the flavor profile with pork trotters and the stock that the trotters were boiled in. The texture is very unctuous, and the depth of the flavor is rich and supple," he explains.

At Silk Road, Heierling serves pan-roasted halibut with curry sauce on tomato confit, preserved-lemon confit and braised artichokes. Guests may not recognize the salt element as pureed anchovies.

Salt, says chef Tom Douglas, is the most-over-used ingredient in the kitchen. The owner of Dahlia Lounge, Etta's and three other Seattle restaurants believes that many ingredients substitute beautifully for salt. While working as a teen in a fancy hotel kitchen, Douglas thought Aromat was the ultimate seasoning agent, because the Swiss executive chef sprinkled it everywhere. Douglas later realized that the mix was all about salt and MSG, which led to his mission against over-salting.

"To avoid having diners wake up at night thinking they're in the middle of the Sahara, we substitute a dash of Aleppo or cayenne pepper or zest of citrus. Another favorite is the Middle-Eastern herb sumac," says Douglas.

Not only do chefs have to confront their own predilections and biases, but they also have to contend with those of their cooks. Douglas believes that chefs who smoke cigarettes tend to over-salt to compensate for loss of

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Finding ways to boost umami with ingredients like aromatics and fish sauce instead of salt is one personal preference that can work for a chef.

taste sensation. Young chefs, he says, eagerly over-taste everything and wear out their taste buds, leading to over-salting to bring out flavor.

Early in his tenure as an executive chef, Quiñones at Eddie Papa's learned to tame his love of all things salty. He now adds smaller amounts and tastes his way to balance.

Edward Westmoreland, owner of the two Eddie Papa's in northern California, finds that his chefs tend to apply aromatics too strongly. It goes with the territory: Chefs are drawn to flavor, and that passion can often translate to bolder flavors than the average diner prefers.

"When our culinary director made mustard to accompany our St. Patrick's Day corned beef, I dialed back the amount of crushed mustard seed," recalls Westmoreland.

"We also monitor the flavor punch of our beverage program. We sampled two barrels of bourbon from Buffalo Trace for our label. Though our team preferred the bourbon with the stronger aftertaste, I chose the softer, milder version, because our guests generally don't have our bold palates."

### COMMON-SENSE CONSIDERATIONS

Cooks possess more than ingredient preferences. Whatley at The Ahwahnee has a sous-chef with a strong desire to cook Pan-Asian and Caribbean food. Whatley's goal is to encourage creativity and collaboration, but he challenges them to stay local and seasonal — and to remember the guest's palate.

Hoffman encourages his chefs to submit different flavor combinations if they're well prepared, seasonal and local. Recently, he nixed a sous-chef's dish of tomatoes with truffles.

"Call it my love of regional cooking," says Hoffman, "but in Italy, these ingredients are picked in different seasons and would never appear on the same plate."

Samala also solicits fresh ideas from his culinary staff. If someone loves smoked salt or pink salt, he says, he recognizes that it would offer a richer flavor. But at the QSR side of the business, change comes slowly. Samala is researching sea salt with his team as a more-flavorful alternative to plain, iodized salt, but less-exotic than smoked.

Just as consumer tastes evolve, so do Culinarians' palates. Hoffman muses over his personal development: "I am so much more open-minded on culinary trends than I was. As a young chef at One Market, I focused solely on farm-fresh, high-end American food. Now I have to consider family-friendly concepts like our Yankee Pier restaurants," says Hoffman, referring to Lark Creek's upscale "clam shack" concept.

"There, I adapt my style and listen to my chefs and broaden our offering to fit the tastes of our diners." ☺

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### TAKE-AWAY TIPS

**TASTE, RINSE, REPEAT:** Repeated tastings help get beyond personal preference and make it easier to assess consistency and quality

**HOLD THE SALT:** Use other umami-boosting ingredients, like citrus, garlic and anchovies, to keep salt in check

**GROW TOGETHER:** The old rule about "what grows together goes together" is a good guide when pairings get off course