

# The Layered Look

In the new world of flavor layering, flavor is added in a variety of methods throughout the creation of a menu item.

**B**oiled chicken, baked potato and steamed broccoli? No way! This straight-up menu might be fine for diet food, but it's no longer appropriate for restaurant fare. These days that chicken is much more likely to be spice-rubbed, applewood-smoked and sauced; the potato stuffed and twice-baked; the broccoli sautéed with garlic, hot pepper and extra-virgin olive oil.

Welcome to the brave new world of flavor layering, where flavor is introduced at every stage of the cooking process, from bold ingredients and high-profile prep techniques, to flavor-boosting marinades, sauces, garnishes and accompaniments. When it comes to flavor, in fact, more is definitely better.

"That's pretty much what we do as chefs," says John Manion, chef-owner of Mas, a Nuevo Latino restaurant in Chicago. "And it's one of the main reasons customers come to restaurants — to taste new things."

New things is right. Over the course of the past four years, Manion has built a national reputation based on his unique interpretation of Latin food — signature specialties such as Lombo (chile-cured pork tenderloin served with white beans and truffle jus), Pollito (ancho-roasted poussin with Serrano ham and wild mushrooms),

Even a gazpacho is layered with flavors at Mas in Chicago — chilled roasted tomato soup is accented with savory croutons and Jonah crab meat.



COURTESY OF MAS, CHICAGO

and PB&J Crème Brûlée (raspberry crème brûlée layered with peanut butter caramel custard in a chocolate-peanut crust served with cocoa-berry glaze). This is food his customers aren't likely to be making at home — or finding at anybody else's restaurant. And that's the whole point.

### FLAVOR BOOST PAYS OFF

The Subway sandwich chain has come to the same conclusion with its Selects line of upgraded sandwiches, introduced to resounding success in the summer of 2000. The

“gourmet-inspired” selection currently consists of five sandwiches, including the blockbuster Sweet Onion Chicken Teriyaki Sub (teriyaki-glazed white-meat chicken strips enhanced with sweet onion sauce); Red Wine Vinaigrette Club (roast beef, turkey breast and ham topped with red wine vinaigrette sauce); and Dijon

Horseradish Melt (turkey, ham, bacon and melted cheese topped with Dijon horseradish sauce). In addition

At Fortunato in Chicago, whole-wheat pasta and smoked chicken are layered with regional Italian flavors like mozzarella, pancetta and olive oil.

to introducing new sauces, the success also depends on a line of new full-flavored gourmet breads such as

Parmesan oregano and honey oat; these breads are also offered as alternatives for Subway's other sandwiches.

“Prior to Selects, Subway served typical mainstream sandwiches, but we felt strongly that we needed to boost the flavor profile,” explains Nick Hauptfeld, manager of new product development for the Milford, Conn.-based chain, now more than 16,000 units strong. By upping the ante on flavor, says Hauptfeld, management hoped to introduce new customers, increase frequency and traffic, and give Subway a more “gourmet” image.

The strategy has worked, in spades. The first year, four new sandwiches spurred sales increases of 17 percent, the biggest year-over-year improvement in the company's history; 2001 saw an additional 13-percent gain. This year's growth, though “not quite double-digit,” according to Hauptfeld, still represents resounding incremental sales, as the company continues to refine and add to its selections.

The Selects line hinges on five full-flavored sauces that were developed exclusively for use at Subway restaurants. The company will continue to develop new sandwiches around these sauces. In addition, Subway has added new limited-time breads such as jalapeño cheese to its rotation.

“This was a huge step for us,” allows Hauptfeld, introducing new sandwiches, sauces and breads, as well as upgrading the quality of the meats and adding new vegetables, all at the same time, across thousands of locations. “It was a big training and operations challenge, but it's been absolutely terrific for business, since its very inception.”

In Delray Beach, Fla., chef Gary Wood is using distinctive flavors and one-of-a-kind accompaniments to help set Aura restaurant apart from more traditional steak-and-chophouses. Though steak accounts for some 60 percent of sales, this is steak



COURTESY OF FORTUNATO, CHICAGO

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COURTESY OF DAVE & BUSTERS



With Dave and Buster's chicken and ribs, a seven-step cooking and marinating process makes for multi-layered flavors.

with a difference, as in Prime Filet of Beef on tarragon-braised escarole, truffled steak fries and cabernet-juniper berry reduction.

There's a pork chop, too, but it's spice-brined and served with sweet potato purée, apple-tart onion and Neuski's bacon compote. "Everyone loves pork chops, sweet potatoes, and apple sauce, but this is different," explains Wood, "without being strange." The pork is brined for three hours in a flavorful liquid of brown sugar, salt, black pepper, bay leaf and water, which helps the meat retain moistness during its time on the grill. But Wood is particularly proud of the compote: chopped applewood-smoked bacon sautéed with shallots, garlic, diced Granny Smiths that have been poached in chicken stock, and dried tart cherries reconstituted in sherry vinegar. After the compote has cooked down a bit, Wood adds fresh diced apples for added texture. "It's got the tart cherries and sweet apples, with the smoky, salty counterpoint of the bacon," says Wood. "The best dishes have that all-around flavor balance of sweet, salty, savory and tart."

### FLAVOR-BUILDING TECHNIQUES

Flavor can also be built up through the cooking process itself, points out Oona Settembre, executive chef of Dave & Buster's, the trendsetting casual chain based in Dallas. Adding flavor at various stages builds up balanced complexity and just makes food taste better, and it's very important to what Settembre has done since joining the chain several years ago with a mandate to improve quality. "Customers aren't sure how you've done it, but they do know they'd rather eat yours than anybody else's," she laughs.

Dave & Buster's ribs, for instance, aren't merely cooked off until tender. First they're marinated, charbroiled to "crack the skin" and melt off some of the fat, and then marinated again in a second mixture that's a variation of the first (thus making sure the flavors are complementary, and deepen rather than clash). After chilling in the second seasoning mixture, the ribs are finally cooked in the oven, before being basted with barbecue sauce — either Jack Daniels or original — and finished off on the grill.

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- OONA SETTEMBRE, DAVE & BUSTER'S

Another example of the flavor-building process is a new seafood item, Blackened Tilapia with Shrimp and Chardonnay Sauce. The dish is made in three steps, in three different pans, practically unheard-of in a high-volume chain operation. The tilapia filets are dusted with blackening spices and dredged with flour, then quickly sautéed in clarified butter. Meanwhile, seasoned shrimp are sautéed off in a second, smaller pan, with butter, garlic, mushrooms and parsley. The cream-spiked wine sauce is assembled in yet another pan, and the entire presentation only comes together on the plate: fish, topped with shrimp, topped with sauce. “From our perspective it would certainly be easier to do this all together in one pan, and many would,” says Settembre, “but believe me, it just doesn’t eat the same.” Even the accompanying citrus rice is made in stages: sauté onions, add rice, moisten with citrus juices and wine, bake in oven; when the rice comes out of the oven, it’s enriched again with butter, fresh lemon and lime juice and zest. “Adding these at the end of the cooking process keeps the flavor and color bright and fresh,” she notes.

Marinades, spice rubs and other “pre” seasonings play a big role in flavor layering. At Wish in Miami, chef E. Michael Reidt has created a number of signature dishes that depend on this added step for their flavor and marketability. Cachaca Marinated Tuna – the restaurant’s most popular item and the recipe Reidt prepared when he tested for the job – adds a tropical spin to a favorite fish via a 6- to 8-hour bath in cachaca (sugarcane “rum”), lemongrass, cilantro, ginger, pineapple juice and soy.

*The essence of Italian cooking is simplicity, and Fortunato’s Jennifer Newbury looks not so much at what she can add to a dish, but what she can pare away to its most elemental flavors.*

## Menu Sampler

### *Chelsea Grilled Chicken*

Grilled chicken breast with roasted tomato garlic sauce, roasted red peppers and sliced Jack cheese on a freshly baked Asiago cheese roll  
MANHATTAN BAGEL COMPANY, EATONTOWN, NJ-BASED CHAIN

### *Sugar & Chile-Cured Duck Breast*

With green-chile macaroni gratin  
ROARING FORK, SCOTTSDALE, AZ

### *Chipotle-Bleu Cheese Bacon Burger*

Spicy and smoky with chipotle pepper sauce, bleu cheese crumbles, bacon, lettuce, tomato, pickle and bleu cheese dressing  
CHILI’S, DALLAS-BASED CHAIN

### *Charcoaled & Banana Leaf-Wrapped*

#### *Annato-Marinated Dolphin*

With sherried black beans, pickled onions, avocado and spicy charcoaled tomato salsa  
MARK’S LAS OLAS, FORT LAUDERDALE, FL

### *Double Cheddar Grilled Cheese Sandwich*

With whole grain mustard, tomato and grilled onions  
UNION RESTAURANT & BAR, SANTA MONICA, CA

### *Apple Bourbon Grilled Chicken*

Boneless chicken breasts covered with melted Jack cheese, smoked bacon and apple-bourbon sauce  
DAMON’S GRILL, COLUMBUS, OH-BASED CHAIN

### *Salt & Pepper Shoestrings*

Thin-sliced crispy fries topped with salt, coarse black pepper and herbed breadcrumbs  
CLAIM JUMPER, IRVINE, CA-BASED CHAIN

### *Camarone Frio*

Grilled, chilled and marinated tiger shrimp with micro greens and horseradish chimichurri  
JICAMA GRILL, LOUISVILLE, KY

### *Bittersweet Chocolate Layer Cake*

With peppermint glaze and chocolate-mint sorbet  
WASHINGTON PARK, NEW YORK CITY

“The rich, meaty flavor of the tuna is balanced by the alcohol in the cachaca, which starts to very lightly cook the fish as it’s marinating,” explains Reidt. “And when you sear it, the marinade caramelizes to create a delicious crust.” Accompaniments of jicama quinoa, seared watermelon and avocado hollandaise sauce continue the sweet-tart, tropical theme.

Sonoma Quail Escabèche, meanwhile, is marinated after cooking (a traditional South American flavoring and preserving method), with the quail added hot to a flavorful mixture of red wine vinegar, sugar, chiles, soy and fresh lime juice. “I use a lot of soy, not to bring in Asian flavors, but to add saltiness and color to foods.”

### INTERESTING WITHOUT OVERPOWERING

For Jennifer Newbury, chef-owner of Fortunato in Chicago, flavors and ingredients are a vehicle for making her Italian cooking style more modern and “in the moment.” A dish like whole-wheat trennetta with asparagus, house-smoked chicken and mozzarella, pancetta and extra-virgin olive oil is evocative of regional Italian cuisine, rather than a recreation of it — whole-wheat noodles and smoked chicken are, after all, a more American invention.

The essence of Italian cooking, however, is simplicity, and Newbury looks not so much at what she can add to a dish, but what she can pare away to its most elemental flavors. Everyone has mussels on the menu, for instance, but Newbury’s

are oven-roasted in terra cotta, steamed open

simply in their own juices with oven-

roasted tomatoes, and then

splashed with fennel-infused

cream. “Oven-roasting the

tomatoes give them more

depth, more tomato flavor,”

she says, “and the cream

adds a nice, sweet balance.”

Even an item as time-

honored as prosciutto and melon

gets a twist at Fortunato. The imported

Parma ham is paired with grilled pineapple and figs that

have been glazed with balsamic syrup — aged balsamic

vinegar that is carefully boiled down for intensity. Roasting the fruits, adds

Newbury, gives them a savory edge that melds beautifully with the rich prosciutto

and the sweet balsamic glaze.

“You don’t want to overpower the good basic flavor of ingredients,” concurs Andre Halston, who has spent the last three years upgrading every facet of the menu at Champ’s Americana, where he is director of culinary operations. “But you do want to make the food more interesting.” Halston has designed the 38-unit casual chain’s menu with the ultimate flexibility: weekly specials that may eventually evolve onto the core selection.

Recent winners include the Pepper-Jack Bacon Stack Burger, an over-the-top construction of sesame-seed bun, two 8-oz. choice hamburger patties, two slices of pepper-Jack cheese, three strips of applewood bacon, spicy tomato relish and lettuce, tomato and pickle, accompanied by waffle fries smothered in spicy queso cheese. There’s even an olive-skewered chopstick stuck through the burger to bring height to the plate, which commands a whopping \$9.95 — more than any other sandwich on the menu.



COURTESY OF MAS, CHICAGO

“Customers come to try new things,” not what they can make at home, reminds John Manion of Mas. His Pollo is an ancho-rubbed chicken breast served over winter greens and lunas de calabaza.

"I wanted something really big, really 'wow,' with a lot of different flavors going on," says Halston, who thought "guy food" when he created this burger, even though plenty of women order it. "There are even two layers of heat in there, with the pepper Jack hitting you in the front of the tongue, and the queso giving a smoother but more intense 'burn'."

And who wouldn't want to order the new Walnut Crusted Chicken, 15 oz. of brined chicken breast, pounded, breaded in seasoned flour with mild chile and paprika, then egg-battered and crusted in Panko and roasted walnuts to create great

depth of flavor and texture. The chicken is pan-fried in olive oil, and then finished in the oven to bring out the walnuts' toasty nuttiness, before being finished with a pecan-Frangolico cream sauce and served with mashed potatoes and soy- and sesame-caramelized vegetables.

"It's great that I can test new items as specials," says Halston, who has developed a whole program of "scoop sheets" and other methods to elicit feedback, from both customers and staff. "With most chains, it takes months to test new menu items. I know right away if something works or doesn't."

Where does all this inspiration come from? A trained chef carries a

highly ordered taste memory that allows for experimentation. "I think about what complements what, and I build from there," says Mas' John Manion. He describes the process behind the development of a popular appetizer called Tiburon — grilled achiote-marinated shark with peaches, arugula and salsa verde vinaigrette — starting with the perfect ripe peaches of summer.

"I saw these absolutely beautiful early peaches at the Green City Market, and I thought, 'How can I use these? Not in a dessert, but something savory.' I considered something with pork, but it seemed too heavy." But Manion also wanted to play up the sweet peaches with achiote, a spice paste with a nutty, slightly tart flavor, so he knew he needed something that could stand up to that: shark. He marinated the shark for 24 hours in achiote spiked with citrus juices, which help drive the flavor into the meat, then grilled it. "The marinade makes the fish both lighter-tasting and firmer," he explains.

The grilled fish was plated over arugula, with its bright, peppery flavor, and then topped with tomatillo-salsa vinaigrette, which adds its own tartness and heat. And the sweet peaches? They're sliced to order and arranged over the salad, along with a coulis-like peach reduction (Manion could thus use imperfect or overripe fruits), creating a delicious contrast of sweet and spicy, hot and cold, green and pink.

"It's a deconstructed Mexican dish based on peaches, which you would never actually see in Mexico," muses the chef. "But it starts and ends with the flavor of those peaches."



COURTESY OF DAVE & BUSTERS

Not simply dressed, salads like Dave & Buster's Honey Mustard Salad are spiked with flavor at every step of preparation.