

FINDING FLAVOR

Rocco DiSpirito's new book follows his quest for good flavor

He has a rock star name and aura, Hollywood looks, regular gigs on the morning TV circuit and his own reality show that has managed to stir up as much controversy and questions as it did his Mama's meatballs. Amidst all the Rocco ruckus, it's easy to forget that Rocco DiSpirito is also an extremely accomplished cook whose pioneering ways of combining Southeast Asian flavors and western techniques put him and New York's Union Pacific restaurant on the map.

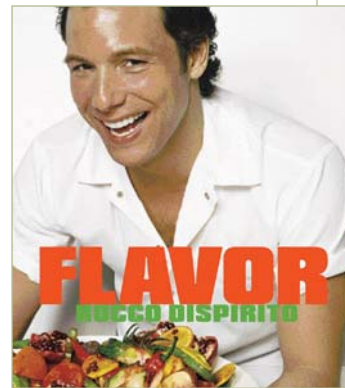
Good for Rocco that he's also the author of a new book entitled *FLAVOR* and that its theories, techniques and recipes stand as excellent reminders of how his delicately balancing sweet, sour, salty and bitter while also isolating that "big, stand-up-and-be-noticed flavor" is what brought him all the attention in the first place.

Pioneering spirits like his own, plus a boom in ethnic ingredients and a merging of cultures prompt Rocco to declare that we are "basking in the golden age of American cooking." With its tips and appendices for choosing tools, techniques and ingredients based on seasonal availability, *FLAVOR* serves as a tribute to our golden age and a guide to using flavor as a way to "elevate cooking from a craft to an art."

In the following excerpt from "Finding Flavor," the first chapter of his book, Rocco describes his own dish development process, his quest for perfectly balanced flavors, and the inspiration he finds in single ingredients or in classic pairings.

Whatever the initial source of inspiration, we develop dishes according to a list of checkpoints of descending importance: balance, flavor integration, texture, and presentation. I don't mean to imply that how a dish looks isn't important — that's not the case at all. But we can always give a beauty makeover to a dish after it's cooked. Conversely, I'd have trouble making a gorgeous plate of food taste good after the fact. Besides, I've found that food that tastes the way I want it to needs very little cosmetic enhancement. Delicious food tends to be great-looking food.

If you were to walk in on a dish-development session in my kitchen, the conversation you'd hear would revolve primarily around the four tastes (bitter, sweet, salty, sour). "It's too sweet," my sous-chef might say. "Right, let's get some bitter in there," another cook will chime in. Or, I might be unhappy with the salt content of a particular dish. We balance the level of sour, salty, sweet, and bitter the way a record producer mixes tracks of guitar, bass, drums, and vocals in a song. To suit your personal preference, at times you may need to amplify one track, at other times, muffle another.







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A dish typically goes through several drafts before I introduce it to the menu, and much of the retooling process is about nailing the balance. For me, there is a pretty specific arrangement that I look for; I’ll rework a dish until I hit it. Each of the four tastes has got to have a presence, but none can dominate. When I’m focused on balance, I look exclusively to my palate for approval.

My target arrangement is by no means universal. It’s yet another subjective component of a highly personal cuisine. You might taste a sauce that I find to be perfect and decide that it’s too acidic (sour). That’s fine! No two personal cuisines are identical. Differences in what you and I perceive to be “balance” in a dish result from differences in genetics (your taste buds might be more sensitive to bitter substances, for example) and established preferences.

Ingredients become like numbers in a mathematical equation when you’re seeking taste equilibrium. Over the years, I’ve come to rely on just a handful of ingredients to balance dishes. Narrowing down the universe of foods to a few that I know intimately has made me a more efficient cook. I use citrus fruits, tart fruits, and flavored vinegars for sour; seaweed, sea salt, and cured fish for salty; sugar, honey, and browning for sweet; and charred skins, mustard, and bitter greens like chicory for bitter. Although I have my favorites, I still experiment with new foods. In fact, one of the benefits of using the flavor system to cook is that you can experiment readily.

Perfect balance between the four tastes, of course, does not alone make a great recipe. Flavor brings food to life. Whereas taste happens on the tongue, aromas

COD SANDWICH WITH CURRY AIOLI

I won't claim any lofty inspirations for this sandwich: it's the evolution of my childhood passion for Mrs. Paul's fish sticks and my later discovery of British fish and chips. I started getting creative with fried fish condiments in college, when I worked part-time in a cafeteria at Harvard (not just any cafeteria, mind you!). The aioli here has some great flavors, including curry, garlic, and lime.

- 1 head garlic, top 1/4 cut off
- 1 cup plus 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 1/2 tablespoons curry powder
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 2 tablespoons fresh lime juice (about 1 lime)
- 1 tablespoon white wine vinegar
- 1 egg
- 1/2 teaspoon salt, plus more to taste
- Ground pepper to taste
- 1/2 cup corn oil
- 2 boneless cod fillets, 6 to 8 ounces each, cut in half lengthwise
- 1 cup Wondra or all-purpose flour
- 12 scallions, dark green tops only, sliced lengthwise into ribbons 1-inch thick
- 8 slices brioche, challah, Pullman loaf, or other good-quality white bread
- 1/4 cup butter (1/2 stick), at room temperature

Preheat oven to 375° F.

Wrap the garlic in foil and roast in oven until cloves are completely soft, about 40 minutes. Remove from oven and, when cool enough to handle, squeeze garlic paste from individual cloves.

Heat a small sauté pan over low heat with 1 tablespoon of the olive oil. Add garlic paste and curry powder, and lightly sauté for 3 minutes, stirring. Remove pan from heat and stir in sugar, lime juice, and vinegar. Stir until sugar is completely dissolved. Transfer paste to a food processor and purée until smooth. Add egg and 1/2 teaspoon salt through the feed tube, and continue to purée until smooth. Slowly pour the remaining 1 cup of olive oil through the feed tube, adding it drop by drop until an emulsification is created, then adding the rest in a steady stream. Transfer aioli to small bowl and season to taste with salt and pepper. Hold aside.

Heat a large skillet or sauté pan, preferably cast-iron, over medium-high heat. Add the corn oil and heat until very hot. Season cod fillets with salt and pepper and dredge in flour. Shake to remove excess. Carefully slip fillets into the skillet and cook until golden brown and crisp on both sides, about 5 minutes per side. Transfer fillets to paper towels to drain.

To the same pan, add scallion greens and sauté until wilted and tender, about 3 minutes. Remove the greens and wipe pan with a bunch of paper towels.

For each slice of bread, butter one side and spread the other with aioli. Assemble sandwiches by layering cod and scallions inside bread slices with the aioli sides facing in.

Reheat same pan over medium heat. To cook all 4 sandwiches at once, heat a second skillet or sauté pan over medium heat. Place buttered sandwiches in pan(s) and sauté, turning once and pressing with a spatula to flatten, until golden brown on outside. Remove sandwiches from pan and cut in half along the diagonal. Serve with more curry aioli on the side, if desired. Serves 4.



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perceived in the nose are responsible for flavor and as much as 80 percent of what makes foods "taste" the way they do. Unlike taste balance, which for me is a hit-or-miss thing, flavor cannot be expressed as "right" or "wrong," "on" or "off." Think of reactions you've had to different perfumes. You can like a flavor (or flavor combination) or hate it; find it timid or overpowering; or think it's boring or bizarre. A flavor may evoke memories or emotions. I suggest you think about the four tastes quantitatively, but flavor qualitatively.

An analogy: when each of us gets dressed every day, we are more or less obliged to put on certain articles of clothing. A man will pick out a shirt, pants, and shoes. If one of those items is missing, he may get some strange looks at the office. Similarly, I don't consider any dish to

be fully "dressed" until it is garbed with appropriate amounts of sweet, salty, sour, and bitter. After that, I'm tuned in to nuances of flavor. How they complement one another. How they contrast one another. Provoke. Pacify. Intrigue. Do the individual flavors come together to make a new flavor? All the details that flavor brings to the mix are like the colors, patterns, fabrics, and other design details that make an outfit work.

Which flavors go best together? You could spend a lifetime traveling the world in pursuit of a catalog of answers. There are tons of classic food pairings — apples and cinnamon, chocolate and bananas, tomatoes and basil, and champagne and caviar are familiar ones. In their book *Culinary Artistry*, Andrew Dornenburg and Karen Page came up with lists of tried-

and-true “food pals.” Food pairings are and have always been the most elusive culinary information I know of, perhaps because there are no clear right or wrong answers. I remember begging my CIA instructors for published resources. Unfortunately, *Culinary Artistry* and books like it didn’t exist at the time.

Classic food pairings are a great source of inspiration. After all, they’ve become classic for a reason. But you’ll be rewarded for your efforts to come up with unique combinations. Over the years, I’ve developed my own mental lists of “food pals.” To my palate, celery flavors partner phenomenally with mackerel. I find that taro root and truffles, two earthy flavors, are natural bedfellows. Sometimes I’ll update a classic food match by substituting one of the ingredients with a similar ethnic one. Tomatoes and basil were to my Italian childhood what peanut butter and marshmallow fluff were to some other people. Now I make a summer salad with local heirloom tomatoes and Thai basil.

In her review of Union Pacific, Ruth Reichl, editor-in-chief of *Gourmet* magazine and former restaurant reviewer for *The New York Times*, wrote that I “think of food in ways no one else does.” I am still not sure if that was meant as a compliment, but it is exactly what I want you to do. Think outside the box. If you’ve never imagined chocolate outside its standard dessert context, challenge yourself to incorporate it into a savory dish. Unsweetened chocolate is unbeatable as a bitter note. (Many versions of Mexican mole sauce, by the way, contain unsweetened cocoa). In desserts, experiment with spices, herbs, and other traditionally savory ingredients. There really are no right or wrong food associations. Only your imagination will limit the possibilities.

Once you settle on what flavors are going to commingle in a dish, you’re left to decide how. Layering a single flavor in a dish is a strategy I use a lot, and one that anyone can pick up. Sometimes I want to feature a flavor prominently without having to work a big portion of it onto the finished plate. If anise flavor is what I want, I might use Pernod or licorice stick in the stock, make a

fennel purée, and dust the plate with anise seed. It’s a subtle way to drive home a flavor.

Texture comes next. A variety of textures is what I go for. A lot less guesswork is needed here. Since the flavor scheme has usually been determined before we get to thinking about texture, we pick the technique that will achieve the desired effect in the product. In my Halibut with Young Ginger and Shallot Crackling, the buttery soft flesh of the halibut begs for a toothsome topping. Easy enough! I serve the fish with a generous sprinkling of crispy pan-fried shallots.

As you’ve probably gathered, creativity plays an enormously important role in my food. I thrive on it, and in turn a stream of new ideas allows me to serve food that jolts my customers’ often-jaded taste buds and gives diners something to indulge in conversationally as well as gastronomically. But creativity for creativity’s sake is never the point. A plate of esoteric ingredients that falls flat on the palate is just weird, not interesting. I don’t award badges of success to dishes unless they wow me and at least a handful of guinea pigs. It’s as simple as that. ☺

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