



Accent on Cuisine:

Streetwise South American

BY AMELIA LEVIN



At Llama Inn in Brooklyn, N.Y., diners stick around for *anticuchos*—Peruvian-style shish kebab.

Move over, tacos: Street food is taking a new and trendy turn toward South America, from Argentine empanadas, barbecue and chimichurri to Peruvian chicken and Chinese-influenced dishes.

“The old standbys between Mexican and Southeast Asian and Mediterranean food have become part of the typical lexicon of American food, but I think what we’re finding now is millennials and even boomers are looking for more adventurous food,” says Julie Dugas, principal partner at Studio H2G, a retail design and branding firm in Birmingham, Mich. “People also want to eat ‘cleaner’ and enjoy dishes that are more authentic and made from scratch and not processed.”

A taste of Peru and beyond

These two forces have helped South American cuisine find some footing in today’s culinary experimentation, Dugas notes. Peruvian in particular has grown 12 percent on menus in the past two years, according to Technomic. The Peruvian subcuisine *chifa*, which draws influences from Chinese immigrants, has leaped in popularity thanks to top chefs like Jose Garces, a Food Network Iron Chef, and most recently Chef Erik Ramirez of Llama Inn in Brooklyn, N.Y., who have explored its uniquely hodgepodge dishes.

“People can relate to Chinese and Japanese food more than other styles, so that helps make Peruvian that much more approachable,” Ramirez says. “Peruvian and South American ingredients, like different peppers and fruits, are also more available in the States.” Quinoa—a now ubiquitous grain—pops up in many Peruvian dishes too.

While some South American dishes may seem intimidating



Chef Q&A:

Cleaning up the ingredients list

Eliminating “undesirable” ingredients from in-house food products is a growing concern for many retailers, including Minneapolis-based Supervalu. The grocer’s initiative to pare certain ingredients from some of its private label products has fallen on the shoulders of Chef Catherine Proper, senior director of product development/quality assurance for Supervalu Private Brands. Proper, who also serves as president of the Research Chefs Association, oversees the development of Supervalu’s Wild Harvest products—a “free from” and organic brand that numbers 600-plus SKUs. Among the ingredients on the chopping block are artificial colors, artificial flavors, MSG, high fructose corn syrup, nitrates/nitrites, antibiotics, hormones and artificial sweeteners.

Grocerant Solutions: What do you think is driving consumer interest in cleaner food?

Catherine Proper: Consumers perceive that cleaner-label products are healthier. While this may or may not be true, consumers have a higher trust level in product ingredient declarations that contain mostly familiar ingredients.

GS: What are the biggest clean label challenges for the grocerant?

CP: The grocerant is an extra challenge for operators due to the fact that literally time equals money with respect to perishable products. Ingredients that extend shelf life can be those that consumers don’t want to see on their food labels. Some specific product categories impacted here are compound deli salads (potato, macaroni, slaw, etc.) and breakfast baked goods (muffins, bagels, donuts, etc.). You always want to serve the freshest products within these



Chef Catherine Proper, Supervalu Private Brands

categories to deliver against consumer expectation and to differentiate from competition. This means precisely straddling the line between freshness and the financial realities of a retail operating environment.

GS: Other than added chemicals, how can a grocerant achieve extended shelf life?

CP: Many product development professionals are working through this on their benches today. Formulation replacement options continue to evolve. Certain herb extracts, such as rosemary, oregano and thyme, are starting points.

Another option is to apply high-pressure processing (HPP), which inactivates microbes and pathogens, allowing for extended shelf life and a clean label while maintaining sensory characteristics. A growing number of manufacturers are exploring this solution, especially given the “free-from” trend.

GS: What kinds of replacement solutions do you suggest for high fructose corn syrup?

CP: In baked goods, HFCS is a common and practical functional ingredient to yield desirable flavor, texture and to protect freshness by maintaining moisture. However, it is increasingly being removed from ingredient labels. Alternative sweeteners that will function similarly include malt syrups, honey, agave and molasses. Also, traditional sucrose is seeing a comeback and has earned consumer acceptance as an alternative to HFCS.

— Jody Shee