



## The Essential Guide

# Nuevo Asian: Chefs Are Incorporating Asian Flavors into Latin- Inspired Menus

**kikkoman** 

**W**orlds are colliding, and that's good news for restaurant-goers. Consumers want a bold mix of flavors, and chefs are seeing opportunities to combine the flavors of Latin and Asian cuisines.

"The world is shrinking, and the flavors of the world's kitchens are rubbing elbows with each other," says Bill Briwa, a chef instructor at the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone, St. Helena, CA. "We are seeing a new style whereby traditional foods are being amended and reimaged."

Last August, the CIA at Greystone and Kikkoman hosted an event in which chefs were invited into the teaching kitchen to incorporate a full line of Kikkoman Asian sauces—from soy to ponzu to hoisin and sriracha—into Latin foods. The goal was to see whether the flavor combinations would inspire chefs to create new dishes, develop different flavor profiles and, eventually, attract new customers to their restaurants.

The results of the event were overwhelmingly positive. Chefs were surprised at how well certain Latin and Asian flavors came together in everything from appetizers to desserts. But don't call it fusion, Briwa says. "Fusion cuisine got a bad reputation 15 years ago, because chefs were putting things together that didn't belong together and without sensitivity," he explains. "People

were saying, 'This isn't fusion, it's confusion.'"

Today, chefs are more aware of different global flavors, have more training and are exploring a broader world of food. Meanwhile, consumers are ready for a melding of international flavors. According to the National Restaurant Association's 2012 Restaurant Industry Forecast, the top five trends for ethnic cuisines and flavors are ethnic fusion, Peruvian, regional ethnic, Cuban and Southeast Asian cuisines.

For some, the trend might be "all of the above."

### The Flavor Connection

"People are really looking for bold, delicious, well-balanced flavors," says Andrew Hunter, foodservice and industrial chef for Kikkoman.

He adds that many similarities exist between Asian and Latin foods, so it makes sense to blend some of the aspects. "Some of the things that connect the cuisines are technique, fermenting, drying, grilling or caramelizing—all things that enhance flavors in both cuisines," he says.

Peru was the first Latin nation to establish diplomatic relations with Japan, Japanese workers immigrated to Chile to work in the mines and Chinese laborers immigrated to Cuba to build the railroads.



In fact, there are also historical reasons for Latin and Asian flavors to come together. East meets West is an age-old phenomenon, as people immigrated to different parts of the world in the 19th and early 20th centuries. More than 100 years ago, Peru was the first Latin nation to establish diplomatic relations with Japan, Japanese workers immigrated to Chile to work in the mines and Chinese laborers immigrated to Cuba to build the railroads.

Many workers stayed, and over the years the flavors of the foods came together. "All through the Caribbean and Central and South America, there has been a history of Chinese influence in food," says Robert Puerto, chef and co-founder of Taqueria Tsunami in Atlanta. "It is very small but present."

Other Asian flavors are being featured in Latin-inspired food. At Taqueria Tsunami, one of the most popular dishes is Asian Nachos, an appetizer that features fried wontons instead of corn chips, topped with queso, pico de gallo, corn salsa, lettuce, fresh jalapeños and seasoned ground beef or Kogi barbecued short ribs. "It's familiar and simple, and it looks like regular nachos but it has more in-depth flavors," Puerto says.

Other popular dishes include the Shrimp Tempura Taco, which is topped with Asian slaw, fresh cilantro and a hoisin-lime aioli; Asada Zing Taco, with Bulgogi (Korean) marinated steak topped with shiitake mushrooms, lettuce and soy-sesame vinaigrette; and Avocado Cilantro Eggrolls, which are served with Santa Fe ranch Dressing and a sweet-and-spicy Thai sauce.

Puerto attributes the recent popularity of these mixed flavors to the Los Angeles food-truck craze. These are the quintessential small operators who are free to experiment with new flavors and can quickly adapt to changing consumer tastes. Indeed, a quick Internet search of food trucks, not just in California, but in other markets shows several versions of Latin-Asian food trucks serving



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tacos with Korean beef, empanadas with Vietnamese pork, or banh mi sandwiches with pork and onion escabeche, a Spanish dish typically made with pickled fish that is cooked by either poaching or frying.

These new flavor combinations are showing up not only in food trucks, but in restaurants nationwide — from quick-service eateries to fine-dining establishments to commercial and noncommercial foodservice. Try an Internet search for “Asian Latin fusion,” Briwa says, and you will find dozens of restaurants nationwide. (Some examples: Tamari in Pittsburgh, Zengo in Denver and Chifa, Chef Jose Garces’ Peruvian-Cantonese restaurant in Philadelphia.)

### Enriched Sauces

So what’s behind these trendy new flavors? Soy sauce. Or at least, soy sauce is the beginning. “Soy sauce is loaded with



savory flavor,” Briwa says. “It’s the consummate seasoning that can make foods taste delicious.” Soy sauce helps accentuate other flavors. Salt can do this, too, but sometimes salt can overwhelm the other flavors.

Hunter notes that it helps to use a naturally brewed soy sauce. Kikkoman’s naturally brewed process gives the sauce a mellow, balanced flavor that complements other flavors. Also, the color of Kikkoman Soy Sauce is lighter, closer to amber, compared with non-brewed soy sauces that often feature a dark color and a chemical flavor.

When you add soy sauce to a recipe, the key is to add a few drops at a time, and taste frequently. “We’re not mechanics; we’re cooks, so we taste as we go, and hopefully we record what we’ve done so we can replicate it,” Hunter says.



Better yet, have someone else taste the two versions side by side. For example, prepare a salsa and add soy sauce to one. “They will like the one with soy sauce better,

but they won’t know why,” Hunter says. “They might say, ‘The tomato tastes more tomato-y’ or, ‘Did you put bacon in the sauce, because bacon makes everything taste better.’”

Hunter suggests trying soy sauce in a mole. Mole should have a deep, rich and musty flavor, with a hint of chocolate. Prepare a mole and put small portions in two bowls, then add naturally brewed Kikkoman Soy Sauce to one. Add enough so the soy sauce is one percent of the mole. The soy sauce acts as a flavor enhancer, and you should be able to taste the bitter chocolate, the chiles and other flavors more vibrantly.

Kikkoman also makes Less-Sodium Soy Sauce, which—like the original—is naturally brewed but contains 37 percent less salt than regular Kikkoman Soy Sauce. This is important for consumers who wish to lower their sodium intake.

### Spice, Lime and Other Flavors

Other sauces work well, too. Puerto suggests adding Kikkoman Sriracha Hot Chili Sauce to make mayonnaise spicy. Sriracha



sauce has long been a favorite in the front of the house, as a table sauce in Thai, Vietnamese and other Asian restaurants. Now the popular sauce is making its way into other restaurants, partly as a result of consumers' desire to customize their meals. Also, chefs are adding sriracha to sandwich sauces, dipping sauces and dressings for salads and seafood.

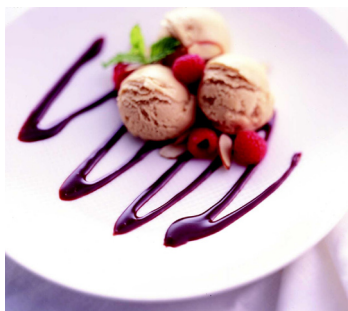
Hunter says consumers have broadened their interpretation of spicy foods. In addition to hot chiles, restaurant-goers also look for other fiery flavors, such as garlic, onions and fermented foods. At the CIA Greystone event, Hunter prepared a wasabi crema using new Kikkoman Wasabi Sauce. The sour cream and lime were the ingredients that served as the Latin contribution, and the wasabi and pickled ginger represented the Japanese contribution. Hunter says, "One chef said we should freeze this and turn it into ice cream."

In fact, soy sauce does have a place in desserts. Puerto says he tried a chocolate sauce that contained soy sauce and was surprised at the pleasing flavor. He suggests another taste test: "If you taste chocolate by itself and then you taste chocolate with soy sauce, I can guarantee people will go for chocolate with soy sauce," he says.

The beauty of this high-impact flavor is its simplicity. "It's not a thousand different things, and it's not complicated," Puerto says. "It's two simple flavors that just pair together perfectly."

Chefs say that other sweet dishes can be enhanced with Asian sauces. Briwa prepared cajete de piña, a traditional Mexican dessert that includes bananas, pineapple, caramelized goat's milk and other ingredients that are cooked down to a thick, apple butter-like consistency. He added Kikkoman Sweet Soy Glaze, a pre-thickened and delicately sweetened sauce, to the dish to make it sweet and savory and create an appetizing sheen. "It just came alive," he says.

Lime is another flavor that works well in Latin and Asian foods. Kikkoman Ponzu Citrus Seasoned Dressing & Sauce is a tangy, lightly seasoned sauce that can be used in ceviche and a variety of other applications. The seafood dish, popular in Central and South America, typically consists of raw fish marinated in lemon or lime juice—which changes the protein's structure so that the fish appears cooked—and flavored with chile peppers. Kikkoman Ponzu Citrus Seasoned Dressing & Sauce, which is available in Lemon or Lime flavors, adds another dimension—vinegar and seasonings—to brighten the savory ceviche.



## Translates Well: Chefs Seek Umami

Umami has generated much attention lately. Foodies, cooking-show viewers, bloggers and other culinary enthusiasts are talking about umami, the so-called fifth flavor. Restaurants are adding umami as a descriptor on menus in everything from ketchup to cocktails to desserts. American adults might remember the grade-school lesson of the four tastes: sweet, salty, sour and bitter. The Japanese discovered umami, which translates to "delicious," "savory" or "brothy." Umami is present in sharp cheeses, such as Parmesan, and in meats and shellfish, mushrooms, tomatoes and other foods that are high in glutamates. Kikkoman recently introduced NuMami Sauce, a natural flavor enhancer that is a universal umami-booster. NuMami Sauce can be used instead of monosodium glutamate (MSG) and has only 12 percent of the sodium found in table salt. (Table salt has 6,300 milligrams of sodium per tablespoon, while NuMami has 810.) The new product has a pale golden color and is perfect for a lighter-colored protein, soup, marinade, dressing or dip. It can even be added to desserts to boost the flavor of chocolate, fruit or caramel.

Find recipes for Latin-Asian dishes, such as Moo Shoo Beef Fajitas, Papas Bravas and Szechuan Chili, at [www.kikkomanusa.com/foodservice/products](http://www.kikkomanusa.com/foodservice/products).