

BIG IDEAS



Sean Brock's chile-sauce Micheladas at the Cook It Raw party in Charleston, SC.



Chicken with chiles at Grand Sichuan House in Brooklyn.



Momofuku Noodle Bar's spicy Korean fried chicken in NYC.



Green chile cheeseburgers at a Santa Fe, NM, burger contest.



A fermented food feast at Chosun Galbee in L.A.



Extra hot sauce with pizza at L.A.'s 800 Degrees.

RESTAURANT TRENDS

Are Big Flavors Destroying the American Palate?

Like many restaurant fanatics, F&W's **Kate Krader** has become addicted to ever-spicier, -funkier and -tangier flavors. What does this mean for roast chicken?

I HAVE A crystal-clear memory of one of the most perfect dishes I've ever eaten. It was a little potato gratin, served in a polished copper dish. The crispy mahogany-brown potato rounds on top glistened with duck fat; inside, the gratin was mashed-potato-tender. It was the late '80s, and I was at La Caravelle, an elegant, old-school French restaurant in midtown Manhattan that's now long gone.

Today, it isn't hard to find an exceptional potato gratin. Considering the heirloom potatoes that are out there now and the reverence for butter, lard and all those other fats, we are probably in the golden age of potato gratins. The problem is that I'm no longer so interested. When a dish isn't laced with chiles or some kind of fermented paste or doused with vinegary sauce, I can pass it by. I've accepted the fact that I crave a hit of fire, acid or funk in my food. The question I'm working through: Is this an evolution or a devolution?

PHOTOGRAPHS: KATE KRADER

KATE'S INSTAGRAM FEED IS FULL OF SPICY, FUNKY, TANGY FOOD.



Fried garlic bread with burrata at San Francisco's State Bird Provisions.

A colleague at F&W has dubbed this predicament my culinary arms race—my quest for bigger and bigger flavors. It's not just me, though. The brick-red hot sauce Sriracha was one of the nation's most talked-about ingredients last year: A rumored shortage freaked everyone out. Then there's the pickling and fermenting obsession. Now every ingredient at the farmers' market gets pickled or half-pickled or, best of all, loaded with spice and pickled. The hot-and-tangy trend extends to cocktails,

too. Chile-spiked drinks are hugely popular; so are pickleback shots (whiskey with a pickle-juice chaser). Sour beers are trending, as are extra-tart wines like Riesling (which happens to pair well with all the super-tangy food I eat).

When the excellent chef Andrew Carmellini opened his brasserie Lafayette in Manhattan last year, I marched over to get my hands on the signature rotisserie chicken—and then didn't eat much of it. The bird tasted boring. "What's up?" I asked Carmellini, who serves a super-flavorful roast chicken at Locanda Verde, his Italian place. Turns out, he wasn't satisfied with the Lafayette dish either. "I don't know what to do with it," he lamented. "Slather it in Sriracha? This is a French place. At Locanda, there's a lot more spice on that chicken than people realize: crushed red pepper, herbs, a ton of black pepper. It's high-end Wish-Bone Italian chicken." For the record, he has since made the Lafayette bird better; now he braises the legs with sherry vinegar. Still, I eat any leftovers with one of the hot sauces in my fridge.

"People are looking for a bigger blast when it comes to flavor," says Vinny Dotolo, chef and co-owner of Animal restaurant in Los Angeles, which specializes in over-the-top cooking. He thinks small plates and shared dishes have contributed to this evolution: When you only have one bite of something, it has to make a big impression. A best seller at Animal is the hamachi tostada, which sounds tame until you realize that the raw fish is topped with an especially pungent, tangy cabbage slaw. "We almost overdress that slaw with fish sauce and lemon juice so it can flavor the hamachi, too," he notes. Dotolo also credits the sous-chefs from Latin America and Asia who add flavor to the kitchens they work in. "Back in the day, 20 years ago, the head chef made the food; that was it. Now, kitchens are like a band: Someone will say, 'Hey, try this note,' or bring in a chile sauce he got from his cousin in Laos."

Bay Area chef James Syhabout has a unique perspective on the culinary shift. Born in Thailand, he was raised in Oakland; his family had a restaurant outside the city. "American Thai food used to always be so sweet," says Syhabout. He would ask his mother why they couldn't serve the spicy, intense dishes his family ate at staff meals, like crudités with chile paste and burnt garlic. "My mom would say,

'It's not the way Americans eat.'" At that time, pad Thai was a discovery for most Americans. Now, after years of watching adventurous TV chefs and culinary travelers like Tony Bourdain explore the globe, as well as making their own trips to foreign spots that serve potent specialties, people want whatever funky dishes the cooks are eating at the corner table. "My customers go for intense flavors like shrimp paste and miso," says Syhabout, who specializes in robust Southeast Asian food at one of his restaurants, Hawker Fare. "I'm really into this unfiltered fish sauce called *pla raa*. It's like a dirtier version of fish sauce; it's mixed into our beef tartare, and it makes the papaya salad more interesting. When I was growing up, we were afraid to use fish sauce. Now we can go crazy with the extra-funky kind."

As I debate whether my obsession with in-your-face flavors is a good thing or not, I consider the downside. Does everything I eat now taste to some degree like Sriracha? Have I lost the ability to appreciate the nuances in an elegant dish of sole in nasturtium broth? If a new Chinese restaurant isn't using a lot of Sichuan peppercorns and shrimp paste, will I dismiss the cooking as boring? I think I can still appreciate delicate flavors, but there's the strong possibility that I'll try the nasturtium broth once and never again.

Still, I'm a positive person, so I prefer to consider the upside, which is this: Nowadays, no matter where I am, I can almost always find the strong flavors I love, invariably prepared by a very talented cook. When I was at Syhabout's Hawker Fare, I loaded up on the chile-paste-tossed fried chicken, which had the word SPICY next to it on the menu in capital letters. Plus, there were two kinds of hot sauce on the table, including authentic Sriracha from Thailand.

Across the Bay, at the outstanding San Francisco restaurant State Bird Provisions, my in-your-face food choices were more limited. Chef Stuart Brioza employs some fermented and spicy ingredients in his American-style dim sum, but not a lot; his food is layered with subtle flavors. And I discovered a new favorite dish. It's just-fried, doughnut-like garlic bread, topped with fresh burrata, rosemary salt and a sprinkling of pepper. The creamy, slightly chewy cheese covers the crispy, fatty pastry, melting just a little. Maybe, I thought, I'm becoming addicted to food with incredible texture. My evolution continues. ●

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