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Beyond Dipping: The International Sauce Explosion Gochujang, Harissa, Sambal Pack Umami Punch

Exotic, spicy sauces are the growing darlings of the culinary world. WSJ's Sarah Nassauer reports on Lunch Break with Tanya Rivero. Photo: Charissa Fay for The Wall Street Journal

By Sarah Nassauer
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There's a good chance the secret sauce in your next restaurant hamburger or fried-chicken dinner will be a traditional Asian or North African condiment.

Chefs at restaurants serving a range of popular cuisines are slipping in sauces and pastes made from chilies, fish sauce, fermented soybeans, spices and other ingredients to achieve rich, well-balanced flavor.

Tucked into the meal could be harissa, a North African chili paste, gochujang, fermented Korean chili sauce, or sambal, a Southeast Asian chili paste. The sauces often combine spicy and sweet notes with fermentation to pack a umami punch. The amino acids and so-called fifth taste bless Parmesan, mushrooms and other foods with rich flavor.

Chefs are drawn to these sauces to subtly add complexity to dishes that might once have called for black pepper or red pepper flakes, both one-dimensional in comparison. Diners and chefs have also developed an affinity for Asian and North African foods and an interest in bright, light tastes over heavy, labor-intensive French sauces.



John Carr, co-executive chef at Eli's Table in New York prepares dishes made with traditional Asian and North African sauces. *PHOTO: CHARISSA FAY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

“I didn’t know what gochujang was. I didn’t know how to pronounce it,” a year ago, says Kyle Bailey, chef at Birch & Barley, a Washington, D.C. restaurant. The restaurant serves distinctly un-Korean food including a brat burger, house-made charcuterie, and a Gala apple salad. Last year Mr. Bailey attended a Korean food event and tasted gochujang (goh-choo-johng). “I started putting it on everything,” he says.



In his restaurant, the deep red sauce made from malted barley, fermented soybean flour, glutinous rice flour, honey, salt, and Korean chili flakes, has found its way into a wild boar dish, scallop crudo and sofrito. Gochujang is traditionally served as a Korean condiment with meats and seafood, in soups or bibimbap, which is rice mixed with meats, vegetables and other fermented ingredients. Like many traditional Asian and North African condiments, there are myriad slight variations of gochujang depending on the region of origin or family making it

Traditional Asian flavors are a growing fascination for consumers, who are likely to have eaten a wider variety of ethnic food than their parents. These consumers traveled internationally more often, are more ethnically diverse and crave a wider variety of flavors, spurring a boom in Asian restaurants and dishes. Chefs say these customers expect a restaurant meal to be tasty as well as a new experience.

Gochujang, a fermented Korean chili paste. *PHOTO: MOTHER-IN-LAW'S KIMCHI*

People are primed to experiment with new cuisines via condiments, says Kara Nielsen, culinary director at Sterling-Rice Group, a product design, branding and advertising firm with a strong food-focus based in Boulder, Colo. “All these kids grew up dipping their chicken fingers and their baby vegetables in ranch dressing. They have a very long standing relationship with dipping,” says Ms. Nielsen.

Sterling-Rice has identified “advanced Asian” as a mega food trend this year, Ms. Nielsen says. “Whatever place you are with Asian food, you will have the urge to take it one level deeper.”

Bottled or homemade, sauces and condiments are a large part of traditional Asian cuisine. Often a dish is paired with a specific sauce on the side, such as bibimbap with gochujang, or Vietnamese spring roles with nuoc mam, often a mix of fish sauce, chili, sugar and lime, Ms. Nielsen says.



Birch & Barley scallop crudo is drizzled with gochujang. *PHOTO: BIRCH & BARLEY*

The average home cook may be drawn to using these condiments as dipping sauces, but chefs often use them more subtly, perhaps throwing a dash of harissa into an Italian tomato sauce. As diners become more familiar with traditional uses for these condiments, even large restaurant companies are starting to call out these ingredients on menus to show off their creative-cooking chops.

When a duck wing appetizer appears on Seasons 52 restaurant menus this spring, gochujang will be in the glaze, covering the serving plate and listed on the menu as an ingredient, says Jim Messinger executive chef for the brand, which along with Olive Garden and LongHorn Steakhouse is owned by [Darden Restaurants Inc.](#) **DRI 0.26 %** based in Orlando, Fla.

Some company employees thought “we should call it duck with red chili,” says Mr. Messinger. “I said no.” Guests will like learning about it, he says.

Previously, chefs at Seasons 52’s 42 restaurants kept tubs of gochujang and ssamjang, another Korean condiment, in the kitchen, to be added to dishes behind the scenes, but not mentioned on menus.

Salty Southeast Asian fish sauce is also kept on hand, but the idea of putting it on menus was voted a potential turnoff by employees, he says. At company test kitchens, Seasons 52 chefs are experimenting with sambal, a spicy southeast Asian chili paste that often includes fish sauce, garlic, ginger and sometimes cooked fruit.

Of course, this all started with sriracha, most commonly sold in the U.S.



A dish of octopus at Eli’s Table in New York City uses gochujang. *PHOTO: CHARISSA FAY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

as a bright-red chili sauce with vinegar, garlic, salt and sugar. The Southeast Asian-inspired condiment has made its way so far into the mainstream that it is featured in a national ad campaign atop Red Lobster shrimp and offered as a drizzle on Pizza Hut pizzas. Chefs say many of the condiments that are now the new darlings of the high-end food world have less bite than sriracha and more fermented, earthy, smoky and salty flavors, creating a rounded taste.

When tossing these flavors into an untraditional dish, the key is subtlety, says John Carr, the co-executive chef at Eli's Table, specialty food market guru Eli Zabar's new Manhattan restaurant. On the menu harissa is part of a buttermilk marinade for fried chicken. Sambal is in the chicken's dipping sauce along with sheep's milk yogurt, honey and lime zest. Mr. Carr adds gochujang to the brown butter vinaigrette atop grilled octopus.

The condiments "shouldn't be the dominant thing you taste," says Mr. Carr, who spent his childhood in Asia and has lived in Turkey. If you add too much "the dish is one-dimensional and flat," he says.

Yet a dash of the special ingredient is crucial. "You add that umami to it that just plain black pepper will never have," he says.

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Eli's Table's harissa-infused fried chicken. *PHOTO:*
CHARISSA FAY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL