

Recipe for Today's Cuisine: Banish the Banal – Celebrate the Authentic

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More and more consumers are seeking out food that is made with integrity and respect for culinary traditions. No matter what cuisine is being offered, consumers increasingly expect that food to be true to its roots and culture. Even when the menu being presented mixes and matches elements of cuisines for nouvelle or fusion effects, diners assume that the ingredients will reflect the essence of the dishes that were the inspiration for the synthesis.

Consumers do not want insipid, watered down, banal versions of a cuisine; they want to embrace and celebrate that cuisine. Rather than generic versions of a nation's culinary arts, diners are seeking out more authentic, local variations – not just Mexican food, but Oaxacan dishes or other regional specialties. Customers would rather a restaurant incorporate authentic ingredients and provide a faithful experience of a culture's food than dispense the mere simulation of a dish. And those who can provide patrons with an authentic experience earn their trust and build a relationship with their consumers for the long-term.¹

- 62 percent of operators see strong demand for authenticity
- 66 percent of consumers say food defines authentic experiences
- 64 percent of consumers consider authenticity important when choosing a restaurant
 - ✓ 69 percent of Hispanic consumers consider authenticity important
 - ✓ 67 percent of millennials consider authenticity important
- 47 percent of consumers are willing to pay more (at least 5 percent) for an authentic meal
 - ✓ 51 percent of Hispanic consumers are willing to pay at least 5 percent more
 - ✓ 58 percent of millennials are willing to pay at least 5 percent more

Animal Fat Shortenings are THE Original Cooking Fats

Since humans began domesticating animals nearly 10,000 years ago, we have been cooking with their fat -- long before we first extracted oils from plants. Indeed, although various fruit oils, such as olive oil, have been used for thousands of years, modern vegetable oils as we know them were not invented or commonly used until the 20th Century. It wasn't until the invention of chemically refined partially hydrogenated cottonseed oil in 1911 that widespread use began. This was Crisco®, made specifically to mimic the cooking properties of lard.

¹ The Growing Value of Authenticity, Technomic, Inc., 2016 (commissioned by Sysco)

In other words, for most of human history, animal fat shortenings were the primary cooking fats. Nearly every cuisine around the world relied on animal fats as a foundation. A few examples:

- When you think of Italian food, you probably think of olive oil and perhaps butter for Northern Italian dishes. But what do you think the original deep frying fat for cannolis was? Lard, of course. Lard and tallow are very much traditional cooking fats in Italian cuisine used in everything from pizza dough to pastries, from ragù to roast vegetables.

[An apocryphal story has Julius Caesar visiting what is now Northern Italy and tasting butter for the first time. He reportedly was disgusted, comparing its flavor to that of rancid tallow.]

- What would Mexican cuisine be without animal fat shortenings? Lard or tallow is used for just about everything, from the making of carnitas and chicharrones, to refried beans, enchiladas, flour tortillas and, of course, tamales. Tortilla chips fried in vegetable oil? Don't make my abuelita laugh. Street vendors fry their churros in roiling cauldrons of lard. Fish tacos - también. If authentic Mexican cooking is your goal, you need to cook with animal fat shortenings.
- Andrea Nguyen, author of *The Vietnamese Kitchen*, once asked her mother if they cooked with peanut oil in Vietnam. "She laughed and said, 'We used to grow peanuts to eat. How would we have pressed the [peanuts] into oil? Pork fat is what we used.'"² In China, where the pig was originally domesticated, lard remains a primary cooking fat. British fish and chips, which came to the island nation by way of Jewish refugees from Spain, were fried in beef tallow.

We could go on (and perhaps write an entire book), but you get the picture. Cuisines from around the world have relied more on animal fat shortenings than we generally acknowledge. And that is especially true of our own cuisine.

Traditional American foods relied extensively on animal fat shortenings. Southern fried chicken was fried in cast iron with lard or tallow. The best crusts for apple pie are made with lard. The popularity of donuts soared after WWI as Salvation Army "Donut Lassies" baptized their dough in pots of boiling animal fats.

It wasn't that long ago that animal fats were commonly used in the U.S. McDonald's French fries were famous in part because they were prepared in beef tallow. It wasn't until 1990 that McDonald's switched to vegetable oil. In fact, after making the switch, the company added beef extracts in order to mimic the flavor profile of tallow.

If you want authenticity in your food, you should be using animal fat shortenings.

² Nguyen, Andrea, Favorite Asian Cooking Oils and Fats, Viet World Kitchen, 30 Oct. 2012, <http://www.vietworldkitchen.com/blog/2012/10/asian-cooking-oils-and-fats.html>.

'Authentic is the New Healthy'

For many people, the biggest concern about using natural animal fat shortenings is the belief that animal fats are bad for one's health. In the 1980s the USDA dietary guidelines promoted low-fat diets, demonized saturated fats and, for this very reason, recommended that people switch to "healthier" partially-hydrogenated vegetable oils full of artificial trans fats.

That recommendation proved to be a public health disaster. It turns out that trans fats are so bad that they have already been prohibited in many states and will effectively be banned nationwide in June 2018. Moreover, despite many people switching to lower-fat diets, rates of obesity have continued to increase. When people reduce the fat in their diet, they are also reducing the flavor, and frequently adding more sugar or refined carbohydrates to make up for it: this is the so-called "Snackwell" effect. Low-fat diets are an utter failure and, recently, the USDA has begun moving away from its ill-considered recommendations, according to a Harvard physician.³

Over time, the general public has come to realize that the USDA got it wrong. In its Top 10 nutrition trends for 2017, *Gourmet Retailer* noted that "Fat Phobia is Ending."⁴ Customers are much less likely to shy away from dishes containing natural animal fats, especially millennials who had less exposure to the low-fat propaganda from the USDA during the 1990s.⁵

The fastest-growing specialty diets, such as Paleo and Atkins, encourage cooking with and consuming minimally-processed animal fat shortenings. Indeed, many proponents of low carbohydrate, higher fat diets tout the health benefits of consuming animal fats, such as increased absorption of fat-soluble vitamins A, D, and E.

Understanding of these health benefits is gaining traction. Lard is the new olive oil, according to the 2017 health food trends spotted by *Fitness First*.⁶ After all, lard has more monounsaturated fat than saturated fat. Indeed, oleic fatty acid is the primary component of both lard and olive oil. No wonder "fat is back in a big way."

³ Ludwig, David. "Doctor: Low-Fat Diets Stuffed with Misconceptions (Opinion)." CNN, Cable News Network, 17 Oct. 2016, www.cnn.com/2016/10/05/opinions/debate-low-fat-diet-ludwig/index.html, accessed 2 Aug. 2017.

⁴ Mocktails, Healthy Fats Tops Natural Grocers' Nutrition Trends, *Gourmet Retailer*, 6 Jan. 2017, <https://gourmetretailer.com/mocktails-healthy-fats-tops-natural-grocers-nutrition-trends>, accessed 2 Aug. 2017.

⁵ Coast Packing/Ipsos Research Consumer Survey, 24 Oct. 2016.

⁶ Health Food Trends from 2017 Fantastic Food + Drink Show, *Fitness First Magazine*, Jun. 2017, <http://ffimag.com/health-food-trends-2017-fantastic-food-drink-show/>.

People now recognize that their great-grandmother knew what she was doing by keeping a jar near the stove to collect and use the drippings from her roasts and bacon. It made her pancakes and fried eggs reliably flavorful, but it didn't make them unhealthy. That idea turns out to be a myth. Your *nonna* cooked with lots of animal fat shortenings, but obesity reached epidemic proportions only after the introduction of chemically refined vegetable oils. Consequently, consumers in the know view traditional foods as healthier than ultra-processed and engineered foods that were designed with calorie counters in mind.

Authentic is the new healthy.

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