

CULINARY 

Sweet Fruit Meets Savory

By *George M. Sideras, C.E.C.*

It is a commonly held assumption that fruit belongs to a class of foods primarily used as a snack, a dessert or, at most, a sweet accompaniment to a main meal. However, on further examination, fruits are extremely versatile and have many applications in savory foods that benefit from the touch of sweetness and other appealing benefits fruit can bring.

Much historical evidence suggests that sweet and savory have gone hand in hand since the beginning of recorded culinary traditions. Middle Eastern cooks have long combined dates and pomegranates, as well as raisins and preserved lemons, with cooked meats.

European culinary tradition has also used savory and fruit combinations. Medieval cooks added dried fruit to large pots of simmering salted, preserved meats, which toned down the saltiness, thickened the liquid and provided overall flavor. One possible carryover is the uniquely British mincemeat—rendered, boiled-down meat or suet combined with fresh and dried fruits that creates a thick, protein-rich food that could be preserved for future consumption. The current incarnation found in most supermarkets today does not do the original justice; it provides little more than a sweetened fruit pie. Northern Europeans likewise have a strong culinary tradition of pairing fruit with meats. For example, dried plums often find their way into the famous braised-rabbit dish of hasenpfeffer.

The viability of fruits in all their forms—fresh, dried, puréed, frozen and powdered—offers the modern product designer a wide range of options to explore and to inspire new ideas.



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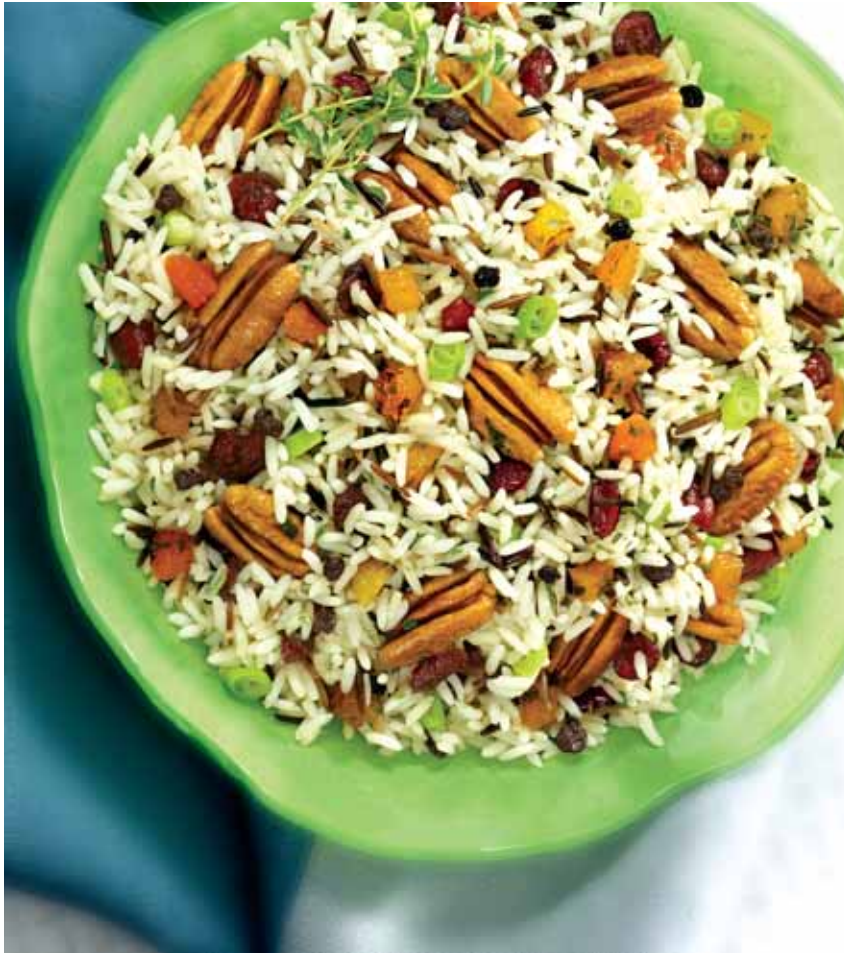


Photo: Georgia Pecan Commission

Chutney versatility

Chutneys are a time-honored tradition in the culinary world. Chutney is a classification of condiments used to enhance the flavors of a dish. They may be sweet, salty, spicy, sour, pungent, hot or a combination of these. By definition, chutneys are slowly cooked fruits with spices and herbs. They traditionally follow a sweet-sour profile, although they often include aromatics, such as garlic and onions, in addition to typical sweet ingredients, such as papayas, dates, raisins, mangoes, coconuts, tomatoes and tamarind. Chutneys also may contain chile peppers for a lingering heat and complementary flavor. As is often the case in culinary development, flavor preference directly results from adapting one's palate to a necessary or available flavor. Chutneys come in a variety of flavors that range from traditional Indian green mango, peach brandy or

more fusion-influenced styles, like dried fig with star anise.

Chutneys are not meant to stand alone; they are meant to accent or accompany a wide range of products. These flavor amalgamations most often enhance the flavor of proteins, but it is not hard to envision them originally masking meat rancidity. Whatever their original function, fruity chutneys remain another tool in the culinary treasure chest and provide product developers with the ability to manufacture a condiment that is readily scalable and shelf stable, and makes use of seasonal low-cost ingredients to add depth to main entrées and other applications.

Product designers could adapt a broad range of chutneys to meet any flavor profile or application. Consider the cheese puff. This ubiquitous appetizer would be much improved if a small amount of dried-cherry and

Dried fruits, such as cranberries, currants and raisins, combine well with nuts like pecans to add a sweet, flavorful note to savory side dishes while simultaneously providing visual and textural contrast.

onion chutney was wrapped inside. In vegan and vegetarian cuisine, chutneys lend themselves perfectly to many vegetable and meat-analogue applications. Face it: Tofu can use all the help it can get.

One on-trend dish found at Quarter Bistro in Mariemont, OH, pairs a chutney of dried apricots, apples, cherries and pears with a pan-seared foie gras. The tartness of the sweet-sour chutney makes the perfect accompaniment to the rich, fatty taste of the duck liver.

Fruitful salsas

Salsa, the kissing cousin of chutney, has proven to be the most widely used and successful item in the culinary world. Fresh or cooked, it has become the No. 1 condiment in the United States—even surpassing ketchup.

Traditionally, we think of salsa as a chunky, tomato-based dipping sauce that accompanies a Mexican meal. Yet it is not hard to find chefs using fresh fruit salsas to create new taste sensations. A simple Google search for “fruit salsa” yielded over 100,000 hits.

Generally, chefs combine fresh fruit with aromatics and hot peppers, adding tomatoes, and possibly including some vinegar or citrus juice to contribute acidity. The most-common fruity salsas tend toward variations on pineapple or mango. From a culinary point of

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Fruit-based salsas can complement many meat applications, including grilled turkey.

view, when making a salsa, the key is to blend sweet with acid and have a spicy heat source tie the dish together and finish.

The category is only limited by the depth of a fertile imagination, and one can easily find inspiration in many cuisines. What about a Moroccan salsa with fresh oranges, mint, cumin and red pepper on a grilled fish? Or how about a Pacific Rim approach of Asian pears, ginger and rice-wine vinegar over roasted pork?

Salsa's applications go beyond a side dish or garnish; they can add significant impact to the dish's overall impression. Salsas contribute texture and color while enhancing the entire meal. They make excellent additions to wraps and panini sandwiches, and are the perfect accompaniment to grilled vegetables. Imagine how wonderful a grilled-pineapple salsa with fresh cilantro and lime might be on a bed of fresh, steamed asparagus.

New takes on purées

As we delve down into this subject, we inevitably come to fruit purées. While certainly not at the forefront of savory-fruit applications, they do have a place in the culinary world. They provide cost effectiveness, because they can use blemished or less-than-perfect fruit that might not work elsewhere. Also, purées stand up to processing and freezing with minimal color and flavor loss, and they permit ease of handling and more-compact storage solutions than fresh fruit.



Photo: National Turkey Federation

Today's trendy chefs are using purées in several guises. One approach is to pair the purée with a pepper (that sweet-and-hot effect again) and use it as a foil against a rich, fatty, savory item. For example, the Napa Grille in Cincinnati pairs a blackberry Thai chile purée with a sautéed goat-cheese roulade. Paired with a simple salad of mesclun and roasted shallots, this is a sensory party in your mouth. The sweet berry and the heat from the chiles are the perfect foils to the acid-creamy texture of the goat cheese.

Chefs are also using fruit purées to create salad dressings with unique mouthfeel and flavor. Also, the bulk of the purée can help reduce the fat content of the dressing; the purée acts as a kind of fat mimetic by providing body and altering the flavor. Blood-orange vinaigrette, red-currant and champagne-vinegar dressing, and chukar-cherry-cider dressing would all pair well with any salad, especially one that sports some of the more-bitter lettuce types.

Purées can also act as ready-made dipping sauces. After all, what is ketchup but a fruit-based condiment? A growing and persistent trend in ketchup is using different fruit bases. Every day, you see them creeping onto upscale menus as chefs search to find the next big thing. They come in many guises, including tomato-apple, mango-curry, grilled-peach and even banana types.

While these flavors may not immediately appeal to widespread sensibilities, it is important to note that current agreement on what defines ketchup has only been around since the middle of the 20th century. Ketchup started out as a general term for sauce, typically made of mushrooms or fish with herbs and spices. Some popular early main ingredients included anchovies, grapes, cucumbers, cranberries and lemons.

Pomegranate purée is currently trendy—and has been around since the dawn of time. This time-consuming and messy fruit, whose seeds are the main attraction, has become the new darling in the product-devel-

opment world. Pomegranates have a rich, astringent, ruby-colored juice loaded with antioxidants and vitamins. It pairs well with fatty food.

Powder power

Another tool in the product-design arsenal is fruit powders. For years, chefs have been adding these to breadings and coatings. However, most restaurant chefs have limited access to fruit-powder ingredients and often find themselves dehydrating fruits and zest to make their own powders.

Mixtures of sea salt, herbs, spices and fruit powders can form the basis of new coatings or breadings. Imagine a dried lime zest, fine sea salt and wasabi powder rub on a seared tuna steak, or possibly a pork chop lightly dusted with a strawberry powder, rosemary and smoked paprika, and grilled. Fruit powders in breading can work as a natural sweetener, which can add coloring or sweetness and help create a more-wholesome ingredient declaration.

A cutting-edge application is using powders to enhance trendy culinary foams. A powered mango-and-chile foam to accent scallops might be the next big thing.

Powders might not always be the most cost-effective way to deliver a fruit flavor. However, if the trend in labeling continues toward “cleaner” and “natural,” you can bet that these items will continue to grow in popularity.

Indispensable IQF

Freezing allows product designers to take advantage of fruit year-round. Individually quick frozen, or IQF, fruits have become indispensable in the food-service arena, because no additional ingredients are added, and it best replicates the quality of fresh-off-the-tree

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fruit. The benefits are many and the downsides few. Stable pricing, consistent quality and fixed labor costs make using IQF a winning scenario. They work in most applications, with minimal change in the outcome.

Often, processors can take some of the prep work out of fruit in an IQF product. For example, one company recently released an IQF fruit line that included roasted Fuji apples. This product captured the imagination of chefs around the country as they embraced it for chutneys, dressings and stuffings. One favorite application is an apple-stuffed pork loin wrapped in prosciutto.

Reduced-moisture IQF fruits can provide advantages when additional moisture in an application might affect finished-product quality.

Stepping out with savory

Another area of interest for savory fruit items is in beverages. Often, fruits are relegated to the sweet end of the spectrum, such as simply increasing the sugar content of alcoholic drinks. However, there is a small trend in the restaurant industry to infuse drinks with “house-made flavors.” These flavors have run the gamut from kumquat-ginger to spicy-cherry or mint-shallot-

orange types.

While some of these experiments have met with various degrees of success, one of the most appealing combinations was grilled-pineapple vodka. The smoky, grilled flavor combined with pineapple in a chilled martini glass can only be described as memorable.

This is a rich and fertile area of exploration, not only in the adult-beverage market but also for soft and sports drinks. Perhaps an audience exists for adult tastes not predicated on sweet, but rather with an emphasis on savory.

And while we’re on the subject: Has anybody ever thought about savory fruit applications for sports bars? How about a dried-pear blue-cheese energy bar? Stranger things have happened....

Fruit is an exciting palette to the chef. It offers the opportunity to use color, taste, texture and flavors in a multiplicity of functions. To create the next million-unit seller, product developers have to kiss a lot of frogs. But with fruit, sit back and survey the plethora of ingredients and the rich culinary traditions that exist—and be assured that a few princes or princesses are out there waiting. ■