

by A. Elizabeth Sloan

## A New Wave of Asian Cuisine

**R**ight after Italian cuisine, Chinese and Japanese are the cuisines consumers around the globe most enjoy, according to YouGov's 2018 *Global Cuisines Survey*.

Asian/noodle eateries posted the biggest gains in the limited-service U.S. restaurant sector, with sales up 8.8% in 2018, per Technomic's 2019 *Top 500 Chain Restaurant Advance Report*. Panda Express led growth with sales of \$3.5 billion, up 13%.

Asian was the most ordered cuisine in fast casual and full-service restaurants and most purchased among retail fresh prepared foods last year. KFC now menus *Korean Fried Chicken*; Jack-in-the Box offers an *Asian Fried Chicken Sandwich* featuring Asian slaw, cucumbers, and gochujang mayonnaise.

According to Technomic's 2018 *Ethnic Food & Beverage Consumer Report*, Chinese cuisine is the most tried and liked Asian cuisine, chosen by 86%, followed by Japanese at 50%. Thai, Korean, Indian, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Filipino, and Malaysian round out the list (in descending order).

Sales at South Korean chain Bonchon jumped 35% in 2018, according to Technomic, while sales at Little Sheep Mongolian Hot Pot grew by 19%, and sales at Jollibee's, which offers Filipino fare, were up by 9%.

While Baby Boomers are by far the most interested in eating Chinese food (75% versus 63% of younger adults), per Mintel's 2019 *International Food Preferences—U.S.*, Millennials are driving other Asian cuisines mainstream. Half (49%) of Millennials are very interested in Japanese/sushi offerings in food-service; 39% are very interested in Thai/Vietnamese.

According to Technomic, three of the top 10 fastest-growing flavors in restaurants over the past five years were Asian: honey sriracha, gochujang, and matcha. The Japanese shichimi togarashi spice blend and gochujang are among the top five global flavor trends, per the National Restaurant Association's *What's Hot*

### 2019 Culinary Forecast.

One in five Gen Zers and Millennials eat Asian noodles as a weekday lunch; one-quarter do so for dinner, per Ypulse's 2018 *Cooking & Food Trends Survey*. Sushi, now a \$1.3 billion category, posted sales growth of 12% for the year ended June 20, 2018, per Nielsen; sales of poke bowls grew by 9.8%.

Dollar sales of frozen Asian entrées, appetizers, and side dishes grew almost two-and-one-half times faster than total frozen sales of those items in 2018, according to IRI; Asian bowl meal sales jumped 31%. Expect Japanese rice bowls called donburi, curried rice bowls, and the Korean rice dish bibimbap to move into the spotlight.

Use of the term fermented on menus increased by 46% over the past four years and fish oil mentions were up by 54%, per Datassential's 2018 *MenuTrends*, which reported that mentions of kimchi and gochujang were even greater—up 92% and 200%, respectively.

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Expect seaweed snacks and sea vegetables to get more attention. In 2017, 28% of Millennials ate seaweed snacks and 23% of Gen Xers did so, per Packaged Facts' 2017 *Snack Nutrition Trends* report. Asian soups—especially miso, hot/sour, Asian cabbage, and egg drop—are a missed opportunity at scoop-and-go deli counters.

As consumers move to more plant-based meals, tofu and tempeh are fast emerging as center-of-the-plate meat alternatives, per Nielsen. Meanwhile, small bites/appetizers and dips drove sales in prepared food departments in 2018, per IRI, so it seems likely that other Asian tidbits, such as Cantonese shumai, Filipino lumpia, or Japanese oyaki are poised for mainstream acceptance.

For the fifth year in a row, street foods are cited among the hot culinary trends by the National Restaurant Association. Saigon rice paper rolls, satay, gua bao (Taiwanese hamburgers), and Indian panipuri are among the Asian grab-and-go concepts easily importable stateside.

Katso sando, a Japanese cutlet sandwich, is projected by the National Restaurant Association to be this year's hot ethnic sandwich offering. Chinese bao buns, Japanese milk and curry breads, and Taiwanese coffin bread bowls are other exciting carriers.

Shakshuka and fried rice are among the fastest-growing breakfast dishes in casual dining, per Datassential's 2018 *Casual Dining FoodBytes*. Ethnic-inspired breakfasts were the fourth top culinary trend overall for 2019. Expect China's favorite street breakfast, jianbing, a savory crepe, to move center stage.

Beyond tea cookies and Thai-rolled and mochi ice cream, Asian desserts are an overlooked category. The custards of China,

Taiwanese snow ice, the Chinese fried dough twist mahua, Vietnamese sweet corn puddings, and the Japanese confection dorayaki are quickly moving onto U.S. ethnic menus.

Frothy Thai cheese teas, Vietnamese iced coffee, ginger water, and Asian liquors/flavors are also increasing in popularity. Lastly, more interactive foods may well be a major opportunity for driving newer Asian cuisines mainstream. Think do-it-yourself rolls/crepes, such as moo shu pork, Szechuan hot pots and dry pots, and the Americanized pu pu platter. **FT**



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