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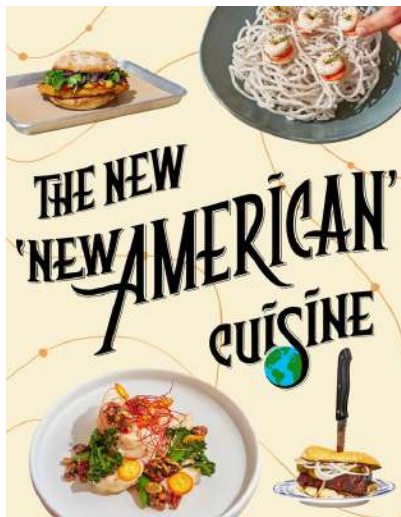
FOOD & DRINK

The New 'New American' Cuisine: A Guide to the Country's Most Exciting Restaurants Now

Fusion has long been a dirty word in culinary circles. But the version currently trending in restaurants across the country is something new and (dare we say?) authentically delicious.

By Joshua David Stein

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IN OKLAHOMA CITY, Jamaican-born chef Andrew Black cooks his turnip sous-vide, with star anise, juniper and lemongrass. Diners at his restaurant, Grey Sweater, eat the turnip—or seared Norwegian scallops, perhaps—with rundown, the Jamaican coconut-milk sauce. At Nudibranch, in Manhattan's East Village, fried shrimp are tossed in aioli and accompanied by granola and hot honey in a homage to the Cantonese banquet mainstay he tao xia (walnut shrimp) by way of California and Tennessee. And by the light of a Lakers game flashing on a flat-screen at Pijja Palace in Los Angeles, Avish Naran serves a tandoor spaghetti, its Italianate strands flecked with smoked chile. Pair that with an order of achaari buffalo chicken tenders, if you like.

In earlier times, this freewheeling commingling of cuisines might be called fusion, a term coined by Florida chef Norman Van Aken in a speech delivered at a Santa Fe symposium in 1989. Though for Mr. Van Aken, the term simply meant “an interplay, a fusion, between regionalism and restaurant technical know-how,” fusion has since come to suggest blighted, chimerical mashups of world cuisines. Cheeseburgers with ramen for buns. Burritos with tikka masala filling. Novelty fare for the gimmick minded. By the turn of the 21st century, for many chefs, fusion had become a byword for cultural appropriation and bad taste.



“Fusion seemed only to apply to Asian cuisine,” said Matthew Lee, a partner at Nudibranch. Yet Avish Naran of Pijja Palace, with typical Angeleno sang-froid, said, “I don’t hate the term. I just make good food with good vibes. Call it whatever you want.” But at any rate, let us not call this fusion. Rather, let’s call this the food of the new America: a New New American Cuisine, an organic outgrowth of demographic shifts, democratic kitchens and the never-ending pursuit of flavor.

At the time of Mr. Van Aken’s speech, fine dining in this country was still dominated by a cadre of mostly white men who had trained in French kitchens. Yet even then the face of America was rapidly changing in ways that naturally affected its culinary evolution. From 1980 to 1988, according to the Census Bureau, the Asian American population increased from 3.8 million to about 6.5 million. Thirty-four years later, the children of that wave of immigrants have become the chefs of many of these New

New American restaurants.



Fusion has become less something to do than something that is. Today's New New American is an organic expression of biographical fact. Calvin Eng, whose cha siu McRib (a nod to the McDonald's sandwich) and wun tun en brodo have turned Bonnie's into the hottest table in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, grew up a few miles away in Bay Ridge consuming bodega bacon-egg-and-cheeses, his mother's Cantonese cooking, Happy Meals, corner slices and chicken Parmes. When he opened Bonnie's—borrowing the name his mother went by in America—he incorporated all of it into the menu. "Chefs have always done this," he said. "But now that there are chefs that look like me, the food will obviously evolve."

Chef Calvin Eng grew up eating his mother's Cantonese cooking, Happy Meals and chicken Parmes.

Mr. Naran of Pijja Palace put it this way: "I didn't have to fuse anything to get here. The food is authentic to me." Rachel Yang, whose Seattle restaurant Joule was an early New New American pioneer when it opened 15 years ago, agrees. "Today is a much more multidirectional, multipolar world," she said. "A whole lot of diverse chefs are cooking without borders."

Ms. Yang's notion isn't new, according to Mr. Van Aken. "There is no new fusion," he told me. "Just like there is no new oxygen." But the perspective has shifted. The rise of chefs from diverse backgrounds has allowed for a more expansive fusion. The everything bagel meringue at the (loosely) Korean Joomak Banjum, in Manhattan, and the scallion pancake with smoked salmon roe at Joule feel more like appreciation than appropriation.



None of this is to suggest, however, that New New American Cuisine is or can be executed only by minority chefs. That would smack of the same essentialism dictating that a Vietnamese chef cooks only Vietnamese food. Any true American cuisine can't help but be as layered as limestone. When fine-dining veteran Alex Stupak opens his new New New American restaurant Misha later this year, he'll serve a hot dog with aji dulce pimento cheese, dry-aged brisket chili and kimchi. "The menu represents my entire team: Filipino, Ukrainian, Mexican," Mr. Stupak said. This approach reflects the catholic tastes of America and an increasingly democratic kitchen, where ideas come from all corners.

At Valentine, a fine-dining restaurant in a former dry cleaner building in Phoenix, the dish of crispy cauliflower, native seed tahini, stonefruit escabeche and wolfberry harissa is simply an accurate, if inventive, reflection of local history, according to owner Chadwick Price. "You put all the pieces together of this region's dark past and you look for the silver linings," Mr. Price said. "The food is fusion. We didn't pick it. It made itself."



From left: Chef Casey Felton opened Banh Oui in Los Angeles four years ago; Chef Jiho Kim at Joomak Banjum in Manhattan serves up his everything-bagel meringue
YASARA GUNAWARDENA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (FELTON), LAURA MURRAY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (KIM)

A CROSS-COUNTRY GUIDE TO NEW NEW AMERICAN RESTAURANTS

1. Banh Oui, Los Angeles

Key Dish: Fried Chicken Sandwich (Vietnamese + Armenian + Japanese)



Banh mi is an edible record of the French occupation of Vietnam. But at the 4-year-old Banh Oui, Japanese-American chef Casey Felton weaves in even more far-flung elements. In Ms. Felton's fried chicken sandwich, the panko comes from her Japanese mother; the garlic sauce is inspired by Zankou Chicken, a local Armenian chain; and the kale slaw is "a homage to Southern California health heads." Ms. Felton approaches her menu with care. "I am not Vietnamese, and this has understandably caused mixed feelings. I am careful to describe my banh mi as not traditional, but as a dish that captured all my favorite taste buds in one bite," she said. "I'm also careful to ask in return: As a half Japanese and half Caucasian American, what cuisine am I allowed/supposed to cook?"

2. Nudibranch, Manhattan

Key Dish: Shrimp, Hot Honey, Granola (Cantonese + Tennessean + Californian)



Though Nudibranch co-owners Jeff Kim and Matt Lee are Korean, their restaurant—named after a psychedelically hued sea slug—draws on Cantonese, French, Vietnamese, American, Italian, Spanish and Japanese techniques and ingredients (among others) too. Korean tteok (rice cake) pairs with country ham; Japanese soba with Italian bottarga. Cantonese favorite walnut shrimp gets a global spin with hot honey and granola.

3. Grey Sweater, Oklahoma City

Key Dish: Sous-Vide Turnip (Caribbean + Thai)



“Stories come from all over the place,” said Andrew Black, the chef at Grey Sweater. “And so food, too, comes from all over the place.” Take, for instance, Mr. Black’s turnip, cooked sous-vide with juniper, lemongrass and star anise. “I grew up with my mother making coconut chutney, so I include that too,” said the Jamaican-born chef. When serving the dish, waiters say simply, “A turnip.” As Mr. Black put it, “We’re inviting them to participate in the story.”

4. Pijja Palace, Los Angeles

Key Dish: Saag Pijja (Indian + American Sports Bar)



In early 2022, Avish Naran opened his “sports bar with good food.” Because he grew up in the Echo Park neighborhood eating his mother’s Gujarati cooking, here good food means a synthesis of sports-bar canon and Indian traditions. Think also tikki sliders and BBQ wings tinged yellow with turmeric. Saag pija consists of spinach (saag) curry atop a thin New Jersey-style crust topped with Goan sausage, a legacy of Portugal’s colonization of Goa.

5. Bonnie’s, Brooklyn

Key Dish: Cha Siu McRib (Cantonese + American)



Chef Calvin Eng insists his restaurant Bonnie’s is Cantonese-American and not the other way around. “It’s always going to be Cantonese flavors through an American lens,” said Mr. Eng. The Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, native gleefully recontextualizes Cantonese dishes like cha siu (BBQ pork) in the vernacular of American fast food (McRib), while other dishes, such as the fuyu cacio e pepe mein and wun tun en brodo, showcase Mr. Eng’s fine-dining chops.

6. Joomak Banjum, Manhattan

Key Dish: Everything Bagel Meringue (Korean + Chinese + French)



Fine-dining restaurant Joomak Banjum takes its name from a type of Korean tavern that serves Chinese fare. Chef Jiho Kim describes what he does as “New York City cuisine.” The first bite of the tasting menu is a tiny milk meringue made with everything-bagel spice and finished with cream cheese, smoked salmon and salmon roe. A dish of sourdough jajangmyeon (black noodles) comes with Comté cheese, shrimp and pickled shallots.

7. Valentine, Phoenix

Key Dish: Crispy Cauliflower with Native Seed Tahini (Mexican + Moorish + Italian)



The American Southwest has been battled over for centuries. Each occupant and occupier, going back at least as far as the Mayans and the Aztecs, brought their own foodways. At Valentine, chef Donald Hawk mines them all. In a former filling station, he and owner Chadwick Price rely on native and local ingredients but go wide in terms of technique. In a crispy cauliflower dish, native-seed tahini, stone fruit escabeche and wolfberry harissa nod to the North African influence brought by the Spanish.

8. Joule, Seattle

Key Dish: Chinese Scallion Pancake, Smoked Salmon Roe, Crème Fraîche (Korean + Chinese + French)



“We have been blurring the lines between fusion and ‘traditional’ food in order to create ‘authentic’ food for a long time,” said Rachel Yang, who founded Joule with her husband, Seif Chirchi, in 2007. Perhaps their most beloved dish is spicy rice cake with chorizo and pickled mustard green. Ms. Yang points to this French-inflected scallion pancake as an example of the menu’s constant evolution.

9. Four, Oyster Bay, N.Y.

Key Dish: Alp Blossom Arepa (French + South American + Japanese)



At Jesse Schenker's 10-seat tasting counter on Long Island, cha siu and pomme mousseline are turned into tiny croquetas. Beef tendon is made into a crispy Mexican-style chicharron, accompanied by caviar and bottarga. The second of the 12 courses in the \$265 menu was inspired by the restaurant's family meal. Many of Mr. Schenker's staff are Latin American; the chef renders their beloved arepas in miniature form and stuffs them with Bavarian Alp Blossom cheese.

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