

Modern State of Fusion

Fusion cuisine went from huge fad to huge failure. Now proponents say it's time to give it a second chance.

By Melanie Wolkoff Wachsmann



Cervena Venison

At Double Crown, Cervena Ssam features smoked, seared or “chicken-fried-steak” venison in a Korean-style lettuce wrap.

Fusion. Just seeing the word makes many chefs cringe. It's easy to understand why. The concept of blending together different cuisines to create something entirely new became so trendy that not only did it seem like everyone was doing it, but they were trying to outdo each other in the process. An influx of Cuban-Italian-Vietnamese-Vegan-fill-in-the-blank restaurants resulted. Fusion quickly became “confusion” cuisine.

“Fusion still has a bad name from failed or misguided attempts, and has almost gone underground into hiding,” says Brad Farmerie, executive chef, Public and Double Crown, New York. “Many people, unfortunately, have had bad versions of fusion, where chefs throw too many things on the plate or don't understand the flavor profile that they are doing a twist on.”

While the flurry of “confusion” restaurants has mostly fizzled, fusion hasn't disappeared. After a quiet hiatus, it's reintroducing itself. Modern fusion looks more refined, more carefully thought out and, thankfully, more appetizing.

Fusion redefined

Farmerie couldn't be happier. After living in London for nine years, he couldn't wait to open a restaurant showcasing the ingredients he fell in love with while working abroad. But when he described Public's concept of fusing together the cuisines of Australia, New Zealand, the Middle East and South East Asia, he stumbled into a public-relations nightmare. “A PR person actually said there was no way in hell we could call our food fusion, even though that's exactly what it was. We only used the term internally,” he says.

Five years later, Public remains open, and Farmerie proudly calls it a fusion restaurant. “Fusion's returned,” he says. “It's a simple twist, a whisper of something new. It's not about how many ingredients I can list that you've never heard of—that's just shock value.”

Farmerie's process involves analyzing each dish component, be it acidity, richness, crunch or earthiness, and replicating the flavor profile with different ingredients. Bangers and mash are prepared with wild-boar sausage and served with wow

Before you fuse

"Understand the philosophy and culture of the different cuisines you're working with. Don't just blend together flavors. For example, first learn why the Chinese use a certain ingredient, or why the Vietnamese eat an ingredient a certain way."

— Roy Yamaguchi, founder/chef, Roy's Hawaiian Fusion, Honolulu, Hawaii

"Consider your menu prices, and price the most unusual things low. Pig-head

terrine is the cheapest thing on our menu. It does very well."

— Brad Farmerie, executive chef, Public and Double Crown, New York

"Fundamentally, think about how the dish eats with all the other flavor combinations. It needs to make sense. You don't need 13 elements on a plate."

— Monica Pope, chef/owner, t'afia, Houston

wow sauce (chicken stock, port or red wine, white-wine vinegar, Worcestershire sauce, mustard, horseradish, parsley and tarragon) and beet chutney. Snail and oxtail ravioli paired with oven-dried tomato, pickled shiitake mushrooms, pea shoots and smoked paprika oil was inspired by an oxtail and snail broth Farmerie ate off the coast of Vietnam.

"It may sound unusual, but in your mouth, it's familiar. I'm not recreating the wheel. It's just a new spin on the flavor profile," he says.

At Double Crown, which focuses on London-style cuisine, Farmerie builds Wellington using venison. Cervena Ssam places smoked, seared or "chicken-fried-steak" venison in a Korean-style lettuce wrap.

The fusion concept has fared well for Red Pepper Café co-owners Bee and Kay Thao. Their one-year-old St. Paul,

Minn., restaurant continues to receive rave reviews for its mix of Hmong, Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai cuisines. Popular items include butternut squash curry, pineapple fried rice with shrimp and sweet pork belly with egg. "Diners tell us they have never had anything like this before. They love our food," says Bee Thao.

Other chefs approach fusion by dismissing the label. At the Houston-based t'afia, Monica Pope, chef/owner, prepares coastal Mediterranean cuisine inspired by local ingredients. She marries balsamic caramel beef cubes with sticky rice and shaved coconut, and chicken dumplings with sweet soy-sambal sauce. Pad thai salad is built using Riccia noodles, lump crab, enoki mushrooms and cornmeal onion rings.

"I'm not sure why the term 'fusion' bothers me. I guess it's because I don't fuse two different cultural items," she



BREADBAR

Breadbar's lobster ceviche with coconut, tapioca, red onions and cilantro.

says. "I love to do food people recognize, and bring different cultures into the kitchen. I want it to make sense and have some grounding."

Mix and mingle

Fusion isn't limited to individual dishes. Distinctively different cuisines appearing side-by-side on one menu represents fusion, as well. Twist, in the Renaissance Hollywood Hotel & Spa, Hollywood, Calif., provides California eclectic cuisine with an Asian twist. Cobb salads, Reubens and burgers share menu space with Asian fried rice, spring rolls and tamarind-glazed chicken. The popular taco sashimi crisp combines Asian and Latin flavors in an appetizer that presents a layer of avocado relish (avocado mixed with shallots, tomatoes, jalapeño, lemon juice, lime juice, olive oil and salt), shiitake relish (shiitake mushrooms sautéed with shallots, garlic, olive oil, pickled ginger, stock and rice wine vinegar) and seared



Hass Avocado Board

Twist Restaurant at Renaissance Hollywood Hotel & Spa combines Asian and Latin flavors in this taco sashimi crisp appetizer.

ahi tuna atop a tortilla crisp. It's garnished with wasabi crème fraîche.

"As long as there are new concepts and menu items blending different cultures and cuisines and putting different spins on classic dishes, fusion will be around," says Charlie Gold, sous chef at Twist.

Breadbar, a three-unit operation based in Los Angeles, turned its artisanal bakery/bistro concept up a notch thanks to consulting chef Noriyuki Sugie's Japanese- and Spanish-inspired small-plate menu.

"Chef Sugie's food is not directly tied into Breadbar's concept, but why can't it be?" asks Daniela Galarza, breadelier, in charge of marketing and education. "It's not our standard fare, but people are looking for something different."

Taco-Shimi Crisp

Twist
Renaissance Hollywood Hotel & Spa
Hollywood, Calif.

7½ oz. crème fraîche
½ oz. wasabi paste
Micro greens, for garnish

Yield: 12 servings

1 10-inch flour tortilla
1½ T. + 2½ t. olive oil, divided
1 t. crushed sesame seeds
1½ large (8 oz.) ripe fresh Hass avocados, peeled, seeded, ¼-inch dice
2½ oz. minced shallot, divided
3-4 fresh Roma tomatoes, peeled, seeded
1 T. seeded, minced jalapeño pepper
4½ t. fresh lemon juice, divided
1½ t. fresh lime juice
¼ t. salt
3 garlic cloves, minced
1½ T. pickled ginger
7½ oz. shiitake mushrooms, stems removed, sliced
1½ oz. + 1½ t. tsuyu stock, divided
1½ t. rice wine vinegar
1½ t. teriyaki
¾ t. fresh ground pepper
9 oz. sushi-grade ahi tuna, cut 1½-inch x 1½-inch and about 6 inches long

1) Brush tortilla with 1 t. olive oil; sprinkle with crushed sesame seeds. Bake at 350°F for 4 minutes, or until golden-brown. Cut into 12 wedges. **2)** For avocado relish: In bowl, gently stir together avocado, 1¼ oz. shallot, tomato, jalapeño, 2¼ t. lemon juice, lime juice, 1½ t. olive oil and salt. **3)** For shiitake relish: In hot sauté pan, put remaining olive oil, remaining shallot, garlic, ginger and mushrooms, sauté until tender. **4)** Add 1½ oz. stock and rice wine vinegar. **5)** Mix together teriyaki, pepper and remaining stock to create tuna marinade. Marinate tuna for 10 minutes. **6)** In hot sauté pan, sear tuna for 5 seconds on all sides. **7)** For wasabi crème fraîche: In small bowl, mix together crème fraîche, wasabi paste and remaining lemon juice. **8)** At service: Drizzle 4 t. wasabi crème fraîche on platter. Top, in this order: flour tortilla crisp, 1T. avocado relish, 1T. warm shiitake relish, ¾ oz. slice seared ahi tuna. Garnish with micro greens.

Diners order crab guacamole with wild-rice puff and preserve lemon purée; lobster ceviche with coconut, tapioca, red onions and cilantro; or ricotta gnocchi topped with balsamic glaze and fried sage leaves. Assorted sliders, such as

crab cake, Angus beef or black cod, are served on housemade buns.

Galarza says the new menu has been very successful. "The fusion aspect is unique. We have different sections of our menu,

This crab guacamole with wild rice puff and preserved lemon purée is a customer favorite at Breadbar.

so if you don't want sashimi, you can have a slider, and if you don't want a beef slider, you can get black cod. We keep classics, like the club sandwich, on there, too, so we don't alienate any customers."

Setting the bar

Not all chefs were victims of the fusion movement. Honolulu, Hawaii-based Roy Yamaguchi, founder/chef, Roy's Hawaiian Fusion, weathered the fusion storm unharmed. His first restaurant opened in 1988, and today there are 28 Roy's locations throughout the continental U.S.

Born and raised in both Tokyo and Hawaii, and a graduate of The Culinary Institute of America, it made perfect sense for Yamaguchi to cook what he knew: Hawaiian fusion, a marriage of Asian and Hawaiian cuisine prepared using European techniques. His signature items include roasted macadamia nut-crusting mahi mahi with lobster/cognac butter sauce; blackened island ahi with spicy soy/mustard butter sauce; and lobster pot stickers with a spicy togarashi (Japanese spice mixture)/miso butter sauce.

"I've always done what I've done," Yamaguchi says. "A lot of chefs who tried fusion were not successful because they didn't understand what they were doing. The ones weeded out will not return. The ones who are successful really understand flavors."



The key is maintaining clear goals. "Ask yourself, 'Are you trying to incorporate Asian flavors in a dish, or make a Chinese dish?' As a Japanese/American chef, I know I won't make a Chinese dish right. It's as simple as that," Yamaguchi continues. "I love to make sauces and marinades. I won't make a Chinese marinade. I'll make a fusion marinade with Japanese and Chinese flavors. This is what I know best."

Fusion's future

Yamaguchi predicts seeing more fusion dishes on mainstream menus. A glance at chain menus for TGI Friday's (pot stickers), Outback Steakhouse (teriyaki-marinated sirloin) and The Cheesecake Factory (Vietnamese shrimp summer rolls, Thai lettuce wraps and sweet-corn tamales) confirms this. "Twenty years ago, you wouldn't have seen this," Yamaguchi says.

Farmerie believes independent operators will take a more mellow approach to fusion. "It's no longer this overwhelming theme that's in your face in every dish,"

he says. Rather, it's a more organic approach, which Farmerie says has happened all along.

"The biggest misconception is that fusion is a forced process that has just come into vogue over the past 20 years," he says. "It shows up in almost all regional cuisines and has been taken for granted by the general population. What would Italian cuisine be like without the introduction of foreign items like tomatoes, or Thai food without chilies? Fusion is a natural progression for food and cuisine, and it will continue to happen whether it's labeled that way or not."

Is fusion back? Yes, and no. Some chefs feel it never went away, while others believe it's just beginning to reinvent itself.

Melanie Wolkoff Wachsmann is a freelance writer based in Louisville, Ky., and a former editor of Chef and Chef Educator Today.