

Longitudes and attitudes

Recognizing and adjusting to the distinct palates and menu “must haves” of each region of the country can yield loyal patrons, open up worlds of culinary experimentation

By BRET THORN

(June 16, 2008) When **Mimi’s Café** was looking to open restaurants in Texas, its staff on the ground there insisted that fried pickles absolutely had to be offered as an appetizer.

Fried pickles can be made from either spears or chips, explains Lowell Petrie, vice president of marketing for the Tustin, Calif.-based chain, which operates 133 units in 22 states. Mimi’s decided to bread and fry the chips and offer a large pile of them with a rémoulade-type sauce for \$6.99.



Now they’re offered in Mimi’s locations not just in Texas, but also in Oklahoma, Arkansas and every unit east of the Mississippi.

“It’s our No. 1- selling appetizer in those areas,” Petrie says. “It beats chicken strips and quesadillas and everything else.”

But fried pickles were a complete flop when Mimi’s tested them in California and Utah.

“They found the concept a little foreign,” Petrie says.

If the United States is a big melting pot, it hasn’t been stirred very well, operators say. Regional differences in food tastes abound, and chains seeking to expand beyond their home turfs have found that they have to adjust their menu offerings to suit local custom.

Some of those customs are obvious. Petrie says offering sweet tea—brewed, with sugar added while the tea is still hot—is part of the “cost of admission” to Southern markets, and if you’re serving breakfast, grits have to be available, too.

Beverly Lynch, vice president of food and beverage for 480-unit **Golden Corral**, says the biggest regional difference she sees at her buffet chain is the choice of fish and seafood.

“We require a baked and a fried seafood or fish every day on the menu,” she says.

But whereas catfish fried in a cornmeal batter would be the fish of choice in the home market of Raleigh, N.C., and elsewhere in the **South**, other markets prefer tempura-battered whitefish, while spicy fried tilapia would be the fish of choice elsewhere.

Some tastes, like providing more fried foods in the Midwest and South, and more salads in the West, might be just what operators expect. Others come as surprises.

“Catfish is popular in every region of the United States,” says Bill King, corporate chef of **McCormick & Schmick’s**, a 74-unit seafood chain based in Portland, Ore. He uses domestic farm-raised catfish.

“We can sell as much catfish in Boston as we will in Birmingham,” he says. “It’s mild, it’s relatively firm—people love the combination of a fish that’s got a firm texture but a very mild flavor. And from a pragmatic standpoint, it’s inexpensive, so for anyone that might be looking for a value, catfish is going to work. It’s always going to be one of our lower-priced items.”

McCormick & Schmick’s was founded on the notion of offering seafood that changed based on what was at its peak, with a fresh list that changed twice daily.

“So there was always this foundation of a menu that was based on flexibility,” King says. As the chain expanded off the West Coast, however, a menu of core items emerged that were popular everywhere—items such as salmon stuffed with Dungeness crab, Oregon bay shrimp and Brie; Parmesan-

crusted fish; rare-seared ahi tuna; cashew-crusted fish with hot Jamaican-rum butter; and cedar plank salmon.

Those items now make up about 60 percent to 70 percent of the menu. For the rest of the menu, King's local chefs are charged with determining what's good and appeals to local tastes.

"In New England it's a no-brainer," King says, referring to cod, lobster and New England clam chowder. "The usual suspects are always going to be the deal there."

Tropical flavors will be on the menus in Florida, he adds, while more fried items will be available in the Gulf of Mexico area.

Then there are items that are on the core menu but that vary nonetheless based on regional tastes, such as crab cakes.

"Crab cakes are core items for us, but we do them three or four different ways," King says.

On the West Coast they're made from Dungeness crabs, but they're made from blue crabs in the East. In New England they're simply crab with just enough mayonnaise to hold them together, and then a little bread-crumbs coating is added before they're deep-fried. In the Chesapeake Bay area, the cakes are flavored with Old Bay seasoning and then griddled.

In the Midwest, Great Lakes fish such as walleye, lake trout and whitefish find their way onto the menu, "and every once in awhile you get a smelt run, but that's fairly obscure and infrequent," King adds. So instead to provide local flavor they source cheese and produce from nearby.



In Toronto, where Indian food is popular, the soon-to-open unit of Wolfgang Puck Bistro plans to serve a tandoori-style chicken with a flat bread made from the restaurant's pizza dough and a salad dressed with cucumber-mint raita and fresh parsley.

Oceanaire Seafood Room was founded in the Midwest, in Minneapolis, and just opened its 16th unit, in Cincinnati, but the chain has restaurants as far-flung as Miami and San Diego, and each chef is expected to source his or her seafood locally.

"We're a chef-driven restaurant chain concept," says Wade Wiestling, Oceanaire's vice president of culinary development.

Each unit has its own executive chef, who executes the half of the menu that is consistent from one restaurant to the next—including retro classics such as oysters Rockefeller and clams casino—and also develops the rest of the menu based on local tastes, regional and seasonal availability, and the chef's own background.

Wiestling says the chefs all buy Copper River salmon, since it is in season in the moment, but each one will treat it differently. So the fish might be served with mango salsa in Florida, and cooked with a cedar plank in Seattle.

But each chef also develops relationships with local purveyors that then can be used by all 16 chefs.



Mimi's Café developed its fried pickles appetizer at the behest of its staff members in Texas. The dish is now also offered in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and every unit east of the Mississippi.

The relative dearth of local seafood there is both a blessing and a curse, King says.

"When it comes to regionalizing seafood, the Midwest doesn't have a lot to work with, but there's an upside to that, too: We have the freedom to draw from all over the country, so [Midwestern units] tend to be more regionally eclectic," he says.

It also means guests are more open to preparations from throughout the system—so New England clam chowder, Florida grouper with mango salsa and cedar plank salmon could all be on menus there.

"They're just kind of starved for seafood," King says, "so some of our best restaurants operate in the Midwest."

Pointing again to Miami, Wiestling says the chef there “was able to line us up with some great vendors working out of Marathon, down in the Florida Keys, that can supply a dozen or so of our stores with sushi-grade black grouper.”

Recent moratoria on fishing that particular species has limited availability, but as a general rule, the chefs share their relationships, Wiestling says.

“A purveyor will send out its bid sheet. All the chefs get it. It’s up to the chef to order it and decide what to do with it,” says Wiestling, who is responsible for making sure that the chefs stay within the parameters of the restaurant, especially with regard to cost and product quality.

Oceanaire chief executive Terry Ryan points out that prompt payment to vendors also is important in developing those relationships.

“The faster you pay a seafood vendor, the better chance that you’re getting his top-of-the-catch,” he says. “So try to maintain the reputation of paying vendors within seven to 10 days.”

He uses his restaurant’s name as a verb when explaining how his chefs adapt dishes.

“They Oceanaire them,” Ryan says. “Which is to say it has a certain price-value relationship, a certain quality, freshness, size and portion that fits what Oceanaire does.”

To help executive chefs understand how to do that, Ryan says they are usually hired to work at an existing unit for six months or more before getting a restaurant of their own.

Changes to the menu depend both on the chef and the community. For example, the new Cincinnati chef has a background in Asian cooking, so that will inform his food. But he can also feel free to use more classical French techniques than might be acceptable in parts of the West Coast. Ryan says the influence of Cincinnati restaurateur Jean-Robert de Cavel, who has several French restaurants in the area, has made local diners more familiar with that cuisine than might otherwise be expected.



Oceanaire Seafood Room’s executive chefs have the freedom to change as much as half of the menu to reflect local tastes and product availability.

Marla Sferra-Pieton, director of franchise marketing for Quaker Steak & Lube, based in Sharon, Pa., which has 30 restaurants in 12 states ranging from Wisconsin to Florida, says regional offerings, which are added as special inserts, are important in keeping the units competitive.

“The franchisee ... chooses items that would be considered a ‘regional taste’ in that area,” she says. “They submit the item description and photo to our support center for approval.

“The owner knows his region the best. We leave it up to them to acknowledge a must-have for their menu.”

In Charleston, W.Va., that includes unexpected items like a sirloin steak Philly pizza.

Some of the regional items have made it to the standard menu, SferraPieton says, including Cajun blue cheese chips, boneless wings and broccoli, and a sesame chicken rice bowl.

That happened at Mimi’s Café, too, where country-fried steak and fried-chicken salad, both of which started as regional menus, are now available systemwide.

The fried-chicken salad is made of batter-fried chicken strips that are cut into bite-sized pieces and added to a salad served with ranch dressing and Buffalo sauce. Regional items have long contributed to national menus, even at larger chains—the Egg McMuffin was famously introduced to **McDonald’s** by a franchisee.

But these days the world’s largest burger chain is focusing on consistency, according to Danya Proud, head of media relations at the chain’s Oak Brook, Ill., headquarters. Although the chain once offered lobster rolls in the summer at its Maine locations and a wide array of other local specialties elsewhere, “because we know that as much as everyone loves the Big Mac and fries,” some places have specific needs, Proud says, that began to change back in 2003 when customer feedback indicated that their priority was consistency.

So green chile is still available on burgers in the Southwest, and several



Quaker Steak & Lube's Cajun blue cheese chips started as a regional menu item, but are now a standard menu item at the chain's 30 restaurants.

markets offer sausage/egg/cheese bagels as well as the more universal McMuffins and biscuits. But many of the regional distinctions have gone the way of the McLean Deluxe.

Regional distinction continues apace at the two-unit Wolfgang Puck Bistro, which is adding two more units this summer—one in Toronto and one north of Los Angeles in Westlake **Village**, Calif.

Vice president of culinary development Andrew Hunter says the menus at the bistros change with the seasons, but there are also regional distinctions that combine local tastes with the bistro's "core competencies"—namely a rotisserie, pizza and using the two together.

For example, in Toronto, where Indian food is popular, the bistro will serve a tandoori-style chicken—scored to absorb the marinade and to develop good char—marinated in spices, yogurt, butter and lemon and then cooked in the rotisserie. That will be served with a flat bread made from the pizza dough, along with a small butter lettuce salad with yellow

onions dressed in a cucumber-mint raita and fresh parsley.

"We tried to take the components of a tandoori plate and build it in the style that makes sense to serve in a Wolfgang Puck restaurant," Hunter says.

In Charlotte, N.C., he says they lucked out by finding a recipe for a sweet apple-cabbage slaw with celery seed dressing that highlights their barbecue pork loin.

"It's something that a lot of people's grandmothers made, not something that's necessarily on everybody else's menu," he says. "It's signature [to the area] but unique enough that people were pleased to see it on Wolfgang's menu."