

Noodling AROUND ASIA



Building on pasta's appeal, savvy operators are adding plenty of Asian-inspired noodle dishes to menus, creating best-sellers in the process



BY CHEF ROBERT DANHI

Did Asian noodles precede Italy's pasta? It's an interesting question for historians, but what matters in culinary circles is that, after years of Italian pasta dominance, Asian noodles are penetrating restaurant concepts in all areas of the industry.

Obviously, one can find Asian noodles on leading chain menus like P.F. Chang's China Bistro and its younger sibling Pei Wei Asian Diner. But when it comes to Asian noodle influences showing up in non-Asian operations, California Pizza Kitchen (CPK) emerged as an early leader. In 1985, Rick Rosenfield and Larry Flax launched a brick-oven-pizza concept with some pioneering dishes like Thai Linguini. Twenty years later, the dish is still one of CPK's top three sellers. Other Asian noodle dishes were added over the years, like the Kung Pao Spaghetti that's been on the menu for at least 15 years.

Brian Sullivan, vice president of menu development for CPK, explains that as his customers became more flavor savvy, they were ready to make the leap into more authentic preparations and ingredients. Two years ago they introduced Shanghai Garlic Noodles, the first item on the menu to use authentic, fresh Asian noodles.

A WORLDWIDE NOODLE PLATFORM

Other innovators, such as Noodles & Company, are proving that a noodle platform can take customers around the world, from Tuscany to Bangkok, to Tokyo and back home to Wisconsin. Noodles & Company Executive Chef Ross Kamens keeps the menu fresh by dedicating part of the year to travel, and Asia is a constant source of inspiration.

"This is what I do as a chef; I take some time off every year and go somewhere and completely immerse myself in the culture," he explains, describing how he might travel to tea houses in Nepal to see traditional dumpling-making or experience how masalas are ground with a stone in India. What's important is "experiencing the real deal and trying to experience food and culture simultaneously as an education," he says.

Ethnic restaurants closer to home also inspire his work. "I used to come down to a restaurant in Boulder, Colo., when I had a cold and devour a spicy coconut-



LEE KUM KEE

LEFT: More Americans are ready to branch out beyond wheat noodles and into rice, soba and udon.

TOP: Pad Thai is poised to be the next great pasta dish on mixed menus.

curry broth with tomatoes, mushrooms and onions. It was just so savory and exotic, and it reminded me of my time in Thailand," he says. "We were able to take that experience and create the Thai curry soup that is one of the best dishes on our menu at Noodles & Company."

Kamens sees this culmination of global experiences as one of the keys to Noodles & Company's signature approach to flavor, allowing it to bring new flavors "to the masses and at affordable prices."

Given his success, and CPK's 20-year track record of best-selling Asian-influenced noodle dishes, it's time for more multi-units to dip into the Asian noodle bowl.

QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶ The variety and versatility of Asian noodles
- ▶ Leading operators and R&D innovations bringing Asian noodle influences mainstream
- ▶ How, why and where to add new noodle dishes to any menu



WING HING FOODS



NOODLES KNOW-HOW

TYPE	PRIMARY INGREDIENTS	CHARACTERISTICS	COOKING TECHNIQUE
WHEAT NOODLES Fresh, dried, cooked-frozen, shelf-stable	Wheat flour, water, egg, salt	Various thicknesses	Boiled in water
UDON NOODLES Fresh, dried, cooked-frozen, shelf-stable	Wheat flour, water, salt	Very thick noodles that have a bounce	Boiled in water
SOMEN NOODLES	Wheat flour, water, salt	Thinner wheat-based noodles, similar to spaghetti	Boiled in water
SOBA NOODLES	Buckwheat flour, water, wheat flour with the occasional addition of yam or green tea	Delicate to handle, cook very quickly	Boiled in water
CELLOPHANE , also known as bean thread noodles, glass noodles	Mung bean starch, water	Resilient, transparent	Rehydrated in boiling water
SWEET POTATO NOODLES Cellophane or glass noodles	Sweet potato starch, water	Very bouncy and a bit thicker than bean thread noodles, a shade darker in color	Rehydrated in boiling water
RICE STICKS Vermicelli, also known as bee hoon, sticks, bun	Rice flour, water, salt	Various sizes: 1/32- to 1 1/16-inch diameter	Soaked and stir-fried; boiled
RICE NOODLES	Rice flour, water, salt	Various thicknesses and widths	Soaked and stir-fried; boiled
FRESH RICE NOODLES	Rice flour, water, salt, oil	Sheets or strips, up to 1-inch wide	Soaked in hot water, stir-fried



CALIFORNIA PIZZA KITCHEN

THE LEARNING CURVE

Americans love Italian pasta, a majority of which is made of wheat-based dough. But now that our flavor horizons have expanded, we're ready to branch out with our noodle options. Hop over to Asia, where wheat, rice, buckwheat, mung beans, sweet potatoes and tubers are used to create myriad textures and flavors.

Emilio Morales, Pei Wei Asian Diner's executive chef, says, "The versatility of noodles creates much of

Consumers' growing acceptance of Asian noodles gives chefs license to experiment with this versatile ingredient.



PRIMARY DISHES	REGIONS
Stir-fries, salads	Most of Asia
In broths or with dipping sauce	Japan
In broths or with dipping sauce	Japan
In broths or with dipping sauce	Japan
Salads, stir-fries, spring-roll fillings, deep-fried or in broths	China, Southeast Asia
Stir-fries	Korea
Stir-fries, spring-roll fillings, or added, deep-fried, to hot broths	China, Southeast Asia
Stir-fries or in hot broths	China, Southeast Asia
Stir-fries or in hot broths	China, Southeast Asia

their allure in the menu R&D world. They're a blank canvas ready to be flavored with colors, textures, temperature contrasts and cultural input."

Asian noodles' range and versatility have prompted Pei Wei to incorporate more than six types of noodles onto its menu. But just as Asian noodles open a world of new flavor possibilities, they also present some kitchen training challenges.

"They are not just another type of pasta," notes Morales, estimating that more than 95 percent of Pei Wei's employees have never worked in an Asian food restaurant. "Educating them is my biggest challenge and where I spend much of my time. The most challenging thing is the 'make it or break it' points of

California Pizza Kitchen's Thai Curry Noodles are a natural and more authentic extension of its Thai Linguini, which has been on the menu since 1985.



noodles. Undercooking noodles can turn them into an inedible, elastic, gooey mass."

Although the same noodle may be used in several menu items, Morales has developed different cooking procedures to achieve the best results. He explains, "Every recipe has specific times to follow, and we weigh everything out; that ensures consistency."

He points to his three-stage cooking process for soba noodles as an example: "For the soba noodles, we undercook them slightly ahead of service. This allows us to reheat them in water; then we reduce the heat and add the sauce, so the flavor absorbs internally into the noodles."

And then there are equipment matters to consider. CPK took the plunge into wok cooking in order to implement lettuce wraps and, once the wok investment was made, looked to ways to expand both its noodle dishes and wok offerings. Two noodle dishes were next in line: Shanghai Garlic Noodles and Thai Curry Noodles.

To facilitate wok cooking, CPK had a custom burner created for its stoves, then installed wok rings and brought in woks for every location [see "Building a Multicultural Kitchen" in this issue for more]. Pei Wei also uses full-powered wok lines.



SIX WAYS TO USE YOUR NOODLES

- 1 Rice sticks make a cool noodle salad to accompany grilled seafood or meat. Add julienne cucumber, carrots, green papaya, loads of mint and cilantro, and dress with a mixture of Thai sweet chile sauce, lime juice, fish sauce and water.
- 2 Thick egg noodles can be deep fried into a wild nest and used as a garnish for coconut curry, where the noodles will soften as they soak up the sauce.
- 3 Bean-thread noodles offer varied texture as a coating when cut up with scissors into about 1-inch lengths. Lightly batter some butterflied shrimp and coat them in the noodles before frying for a dramatic puffed shrimp. Serve with a spicy dipping sauce.
- 4 Soba noodles have the best texture and cleanest taste when cooked and then quickly rinsed in hot water followed by cold water. These firm noodles can be lined up and folded into neat bundles. Place in a chilled bowl and top with a cool sauce made of dashi (Japanese stock), soy sauce, grated ginger, wasabi, a chiffonade of shiso leaves and some mirin. Serve with a thin slice of grilled salmon for a light first course.
- 5 Udon noodles can be made slightly crispy if tossed lightly in cornstarch before stir-frying. This way they hold up and get slightly brown as the stir-fry sauce evaporates.
- 6 Thin egg noodles can be boiled and added to a bowl of rendered pork fat with cracklings, dark soy sauce, light soy sauce, chopped green onions, sliced red chiles and a squeeze of lime juice. Top with some sliced Chinese-style roasted pork and wilted greens for a one-bowl meal.

Asian noodles make a wild nest or a fancy garnish, and they soak up plenty of flavors, too.



NATIONAL PORK BOARD

and frozen udon. He works very closely with the purchasing team to ensure a constant supply of the exact same noodles, and cautions that Asian noodles cannot be interchanged nor undergo any supply changes without causing major disruptions to the testing and execution plans.

Texture, Morales finds, is of the utmost importance, and Pei Wei's noodles are cooked carefully to ensure their resilient texture is retained to give customers a new and exciting textural experience that differs from an Italian wheat pasta.

"We are not trying to imitate what a Japanese grandmother makes," Morales says. "We want to make something our competitors do not have on their menu and give our customers an adventure in a bowl."

FILLING THOSE WOKS

When it comes to suppliers, Los Angeles-based Wing Hing Foods emerges as a common thread among all of these chains, but there are no easy standards for when to use dry, fresh or frozen. Although Morales uses dried soba noodles, he opts for fresh egg noodles

AUTHENTICITY AND ADAPTABILITY

In the balance between replicating a noodle dish a Japanese mother might make and finding ways to introduce new culinary experiences to customers,



ASIAN NOODLES ON THE MENU

Smart operators have known about Asian noodle appeal for years. Here's a look at some menu hit-makers:

BANGKOK CURRY: A generous portion of snap peas, carrots, red peppers, onions and mushrooms balanced with a half portion of rice noodles in yellow curry. Served on napa cabbage with black sesame — Noodles & Company

DOUBLE PAN-FRIED NOODLES: Semi-crisp egg noodles stir-fried with vegetables; available with beef, pork, chicken, shrimp or combination — P.F. Chang's China Bistro

SHANGHAI GARLIC NOODLES: Chinese noodles, wok-stirred in a garlic-ginger sauce with snow peas, shiitake mushrooms, mild onions, red and yellow peppers, baby broccoli and scallions; also available with chicken or shrimp — California Pizza Kitchen

SOBA-MISO BOWL: Red miso sauce, spinach, shiitake mushrooms, cabbage, ginger, garlic, scallions and buckwheat noodles — Pei Wei Asian Diner

THAI CHICKEN PASTA: Linguini tossed with sautéed chicken, julienne carrots, green onions, roasted peanuts and a spicy-hot peanut sauce, topped with fresh bean sprouts — The Cheesecake Factory

ASIAN CHICKEN SALAD: Asian-seasoned chicken breast, grilled and sliced atop a bed of crispy mixed greens, fresh cilantro, cucumbers, authentic chow mein noodles and Mandarin oranges. Tossed with sesame-ginger dressing and topped with sesame seeds — Bennigan's Grill & Tavern

CHAP CHAE: Sweet soy glass noodles with spinach, mushrooms, onions and carrots — O'Naturals

Ginger-soy-glazed fresh udon noodles form the base of Noodles & Company's Japanese Pan Noodles.



NOODLES & COMPANY

adaptations sometimes win out over authenticity. When Singapore Spring Rolls were added to the CPK menu, Sullivan notes, they began with a rice noodle inside. Over time, however, Sullivan and his team found that spaghetti possessed a better texture and also made the CPK version unique.

"Although we took some of the authenticity away, it gave it the CPK twist," Sullivan says.

As these and other emerging flavor-forward chains go out on a limb, experience success and smartly build on that success by adding new dishes, it's only a matter of time before Pad Thai becomes as widespread as spaghetti and meatballs on mainstream menus. ☺

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