A close-up photograph of a plate of food. In the foreground, there are several skewers of grilled, browned meat, likely lamb or beef, arranged vertically. The skewers are surrounded by a fresh salad consisting of sliced cucumbers, cherry tomatoes, red onions, and green leafy vegetables. The background is softly blurred, showing more of the plate and possibly a dining setting.

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Hispanic Foods Go Mainstream

Building a bridge to a wider consumer base

BY JAN FIALKOW

Hispanic foods live in a dual universe; they're still representative of the cultures from which they sprang but they're also gaining considerable traction within mainstream culture. While items such as mofongo (the fried plantain dish emblematic of Puerto Rico) and ropa vieja (the shredded beef dish associated with Cuba) may still be classified as ethnic foods in communities without large Puerto Rican or Cuban populations, empanadas, burritos, tacos, salsas and guacamoles have all but lost their ethnic identification.

Guacamole, says Kristyn Lawson, vice president of sales, Yucatan Foods, Los Angeles, CA, "is like pizza or spaghetti — it's no longer an ethnic food. It's become very American, very mainstream. People love it as a dip and a condiment."

Travel and television cooking programs are broadening the mainstream palate. And since Hispanics are the fastest growing demographic in the country, the likelihood of living near a significant Hispanic population is exposing an increasing number of mainstream consumers to the foods of their neighbors' cultures.

"I have five grandchildren," says Edgar Soto, president, Cibao Meat Products, Inc., Bronx, NY. "One has an Irish parent, one has a Dominican parent, one has a Mexican parent. They're taking their family's Hispanic cuisines into the kitchen. A fusion is going on. If they like a dish, they'll cook it."

When flavors are inviting and quality high, many consumers are willing to try something outside their comfort zones. "A consumer is a consumer," states Jorge Aguilar, deli manager, Select Store Brands, Haliburton International Food, Ontario, CA. "Quality sells to everyone no matter what their heritage is. The next time you go to a Mexican restaurant, look around and see who's sitting at the tables. You'll see a great many non-Hispanic customers. Everyone wants to eat high-quality food. Because of this, Select Store Brands has a proprietary fire-roasting technology that gives vegeta-



PHOTO COURTESY OF HALIBURTON INTERNATIONAL FOOD

bles, shrimp and fruits a flavor you just can't find anywhere else. It looks better and tastes better. We encourage our non-Hispanic customers by putting a twist on the ordinary."

Guacamole and Salsa

These two Hispanic mainstays have lost their ethnic identity to the extent that salsa is now the most popular condiment in the U.S. and guacamole has undergone flavor extensions rivaled only by hummus, another ethnic food that has gone mainstream.

Yucatan has gone so far as to combine guacamole and hummus, perhaps the ultimate in fusing two ethnic cuisines to create something new. "Our guacamole hummus really speaks to the mainstreaming of Hispanic foods," notes Lawson. "All that avo-

cado goodness is blended 50/50 with hummus so it's lower calorie, lower fat and higher protein than traditional guacamole, and has all of the essential nutrients and minerals of the avocado."

Using traditional foods in non-traditional ways helps increase penetration in non-Hispanic populations. "Guacamole is so popular now — it's everywhere," reports Lawson. "It transcends its ethnic beginnings. It's very popular as a sandwich condiment, especially with turkey or added to your favorite egg dish. Our resealable cups allow the consumer to use it as a condiment — and not just as a dip — every day.

"Yucatan prides itself on value-added guacamole products and top-of-class innovation," she notes. "About six months ago we

changed to a PET cup. It provides the ultimate in recyclability and is crystal clear, so you can see the beautiful color of the guacamole. It's very visually appealing and drives a lot of new grab-and-go business. We've also launched some new flavors — spicy and ranch. Spicy is flavored with garlic and jalapeño and the ranch with a delicious buttermilk seasoning. Our flavors are available in 8- and 16-ounce sizes."

Yucatan sees guacamole sales expanding beyond pre-pack. In that vein, it's introduced fresh-in-store guacamole programs for the service deli. "Guacamole can be displayed behind the glass and sold by the pound," says Lawson, who notes the average retail is \$6.99 per pound. "In-store fresh guacamole can also be cupped in store and sold as a grab-and-go item. We sell a variety of guacamole components to create the perfect in-store fresh blend."

Shelf life is an important consideration for behind-the-glass guacamole. According to Lawson, "Our pre-packaged guacamole in the tub can have over 45 days of shelf life. The made-fresh, in-store guacamole has a shorter shelf life. If a deli cups it in store with no headspace for oxygen, it should have a shelf life of up to five days. Conditions for bulk, behind-the-glass fresh guacamole vary too much to be able to predict the shelf life."

According to Aguilar, "The deli case is overcrowded with the same old thing — fried chicken, pasta salad and macaroni and cheese. At Select Store Brands, we want to refresh the senses with color and flavor. With our vast experience working with America's leading restaurants, we have the insights to know what stays and looks best behind the glass. One of our most popular products is our salsa line. We have unique salsa flavors because we fire-roast our vegetables and fruits. Customers are usually shopping for a red or green salsa, but we offer many more options such as fire-roasted chilies, fire-roasted fruit salsas and fire-roasted corn and black beans that are great with chips and a good marinade for meats."

"For our salsa line, we have a variety of serving options depending on the space allowed inside of the deli case," adds Aguilar. "We have clear plastic trays, molcajete bowls [chunky style] and retail cups."

The Multi-Talented Tortilla

The ubiquitous tortilla is the base of many Mexican food items, but it also can be used in other Hispanic cuisines and in non-Hispanic dishes. According to Robin Tobor, director of marketing, Mission Foodservice, Irving, TX, "The versatility of tortillas has pushed Mexican foods and ingredients into mainstream cuisine beginning with sandwich wraps,

breakfast burritos/wraps, and most recently, snack-sized wraps and street-style tacos.

"Mission's complete line of 100 percent whole grain corn and flour tortilla products are the perfect ingredient for a variety of ethnic cuisines and fit all menu day parts and menu opportunities beyond traditional Mexican applications," Tobor continues. "We offer a variety of heat-pressed and stretched-style flour tortillas, pre-fried chips, taco shells and pre-cut unfried chips and strips that are made for traditional Mexican applications, but are also ideal for sandwich-style wraps, appetizers/small plates and popular breakfast applications. Our line of artisan-style tortillas, whole-wheat and multigrain tortillas and our flavored wraps are great bread replacements for classic items like sandwiches, quesadillas and deli-style pinwheels.

"We're very excited about this year's launch of two new deli-specific products — the 12x14-inch rectangular flatbreads and deli wraps," Tobor adds. "The flatbreads are perfect for making pinwheels and a variety of thin crust pizzas, and our deli wraps are retail-packaged 10-inch diameter products that are available in seven delicious varieties: Cheddar cheese & jalapeño, seven grain, spinach herb, sun-dried tomato basil, 100

percent whole grain and traditional flour."

Hispanic Cheeses

Queso Campesino, Denver, CO, is a minority-owned company that began some 14 years ago. At that time, says Cindy Jensen, sales and marketing, the company made large, bulk Mexican cheeses that were sold in Mexican supermarkets. When the company decided to make smaller format cheeses — what it refers to as random weight 1-pound packages — for mainstream markets, the decision was made to sell the cheese in the deli department because the dairy department wasn't equipped to weigh the packages.

All the company's cheeses are made from 100 percent whole milk, which makes them both more authentic and pricier than other Mexican cheeses on the market. For food-service, using Queso Campesino cheeses in prepared foods can justify a higher ring, says Jensen.

"Mexican food has grown by leaps and bounds in the 'Anglo' world," Jensen relates. "It's in magazines and on television. These folks go to mainstream markets, not Mexican markets to buy cheeses so they can make Mexican meals at homes. Mexican

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cuisine is being absorbed by the mainstream culture. To make authentic dishes, you need authentic ingredients.”

Hispanic Meats

In the realm of sausages and salamis, each country in the Americas has its own traditions. First generation immigrants tend to stick with the familiar, but second generation and beyond are generally eager to try new items. “Our primary consumers have traditionally been Caribbean Hispanics, mostly Dominican and Puerto Rican,” says Cibao’s Soto. “Since we’ve been expanding our promotions, we’ve increased our reach to include many South American cultures.

“We’re creating items these folks enjoyed in their native country. For example, the Dominican Republic cannot export meat to the United States, so we’ve recreated some of their favorites.” Soto continues. “We have products we label as being Puerto Rican-style or Dominican-style to target those groups. This is especially true with sausages. Each different ethnic group has its own recipe for chorizo and longaniza.”

Although Cibao has promoted heavily to Hispanics in the past, the company has expanded its outreach to mainstream con-

sumers. “The key is sampling. Get a product into the mouths of people who don’t know what it is. Mainstream consumers are looking for food that is highly seasoned but not spicy — not hot. Many of them think all Hispanic foods are Mexican spicy. Mexicans are a large ethnic group and they’re entrenched in Texas, California and Chicago. There are many other cuisines — such as Argentinean and Colombian — that are not spicy. They’re just well-seasoned,” he adds.

Reaching Out

Bringing Hispanic foods to a non-Hispanic audience requires the deli to be proactive. Sampling is the No. 1 method to introduce a product to someone who is unfamiliar with it or has never tried anything like it. It’s also important to provide consumers with usage ideas — both traditional and contemporary recipes.

Soto says Cibao offer recipes in English and Spanish on its website and provides them as handouts at demos.

Select Store Brands’ Aguilar notes, “We invest a lot of marketing efforts and it seems to help with the customers. We provide marketing tools for promoting the flavors, heat level and cost in the form of labels, signs and

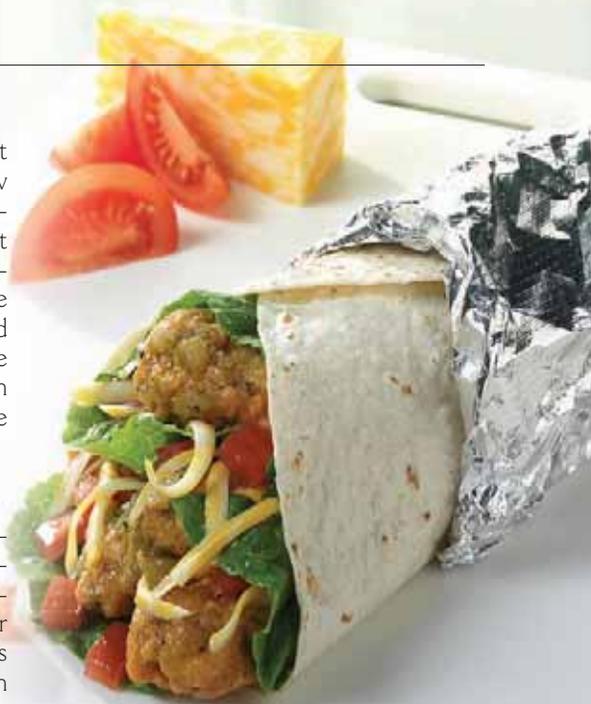


PHOTO COURTESY OF MISSION FOODS

posters. Demonstration and sampling areas are always available.”

“At Mission,” relates Tobor, “we offer several recipe-based programs that were developed with the intent to inspire operators and help them take advantage of our full line of products as well as mainstream menu and consumer trends. We also have a monthly recipe program called *5 Fresh Ideas* that features our products in unique recipe applications, each month’s theme being based on a trend, flavor profile or ethnic cuisine. We understand the importance of keeping up on food, menu, flavor, consumer and general foodservice trends so we feel confident any recipe we develop or program we launch helps our operator customer better appeal to the dynamic palate and wants of their customers.”

According to Jensen, Yucatan “offers little cards to go with the cheeses. They give the name, the pronunciation and usage ideas for each cheese we make. We also have recipe pads of Mexican dishes in English and they tell which cheese to use in which recipe. The recipes are only in English because people of Mexican descent know how to use the cheeses. Retailers can also get our small paperback book of recipes by Doña Margarita, a Mexican event planner. This food is transcending its ethnic roots and moving out into other communities.”

So where is this category heading? According to Soto, “We’re in New York, so I can comment only on East Coast trends, but I see more delis getting into prepared foods and that includes more rice dishes, more plantains, more highly seasoned chicken dishes.”

DB

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