

Spirited Rise in Sauce Ingredients

CONSUMER DEMAND for artisanal foods and beverages has skyrocketed in recent years and includes an unprecedented interest in craft spirits. Craft spirits account for one in seven new global spirits launches in 2016, up from 1 in 20 in 2011. Between 2011 and 2015, craft spirit launches increased by 265%. This demand at the bar has translated into demand for spirits incorporated into main courses and other dining options.

Chefs, long accustomed to using wine in cooking, are borrowing a page from mixologists, adding spirits to numerous formulations, especially sauces and marinades. Spirits offer great versatility and add interest and nuanced flavors to formulations, whether in preparation stages such as with marinades or finished stages, as with sauces.

The influential Millennial generation is helping drive the trend for more interesting flavors, and 75% of millennials in the US believe craft alcohol brands are a higher quality than big brands. This generation also has the spending power and believe craft spirits are worth paying more. That can readily translate to the use of spirit-based flavors as practical and worthwhile for creative research chefs crafting foods and ingredients for retail offering.

While there are many spirits to work with, bourbon, “moonshine,” and tequila have most recently captured the imagination of food developers. These



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East Meets West: Baby back ribs glazed in a sweet Moonshine BBQ sauce, topped with the bright citrus of fresh orange segments, crunchy toasted peanuts and a mint Sake Vinegar pesto.

spirits are among the leading trends in ideations and finished products.

Bourbon leads the spirit trend with its notes of vanilla, spice, and other nuances from the oak barrels it is traditionally aged in. As a base layer for sauces and marinades, bourbon is a highly adaptive ingredient. Uses have included application in barbecue (especially sauces), as well as Southern and Southwestern cuisines.

Bourbon’s sweetness works well with smoky and spicy notes, and it can be used with a variety of sauces on smoked meats. According to research group Mintel Inc.’s “Menu Insights,” 191 dishes with bourbon as an ingredient were

launched in the first quarter of 2014, and 33 of those dishes paired “bourbon barbecue” with a protein.

The most successful of these savory items combines the richness of the bourbon with acidity coming from vinegar, citrus, tamarind, or similar ingredients. Bourbon also pairs nicely with Latin ingredients, particularly chipotle peppers, jalapeño peppers and other chili peppers.

Bourbon also is particularly adaptable outside of savory formulations. Used in sweet pastry items, confections, and nut applications—including as ice creams, custards, pie fillings, slow-cooked fruits, preserves, and glazed

nuts—bourbon will enhance sweetness and fruity notes. Bourbon especially accents vanilla.

Growing side-by-side with increasingly popular Latin cuisine flavors, tequilas—especially high-end tequilas—have enjoyed a strong increase in sales. Tequila not only works well accompanying Hispanic cuisine, it works well as a flavor element in a number of condiments and dishes, including salsas, and as a natural pairing with green chili, green or red jalapeño peppers and tomatillo-based verde salsas.

With a flavor component representative of nopale cactus, pepper, and spice also adds unique flavor to white sauces, soups, glazes, and marinades. Tequila showed a strong sales leap in 2013, with a case volume increase of 6.6% and a dollar growth percent increase of 7.9%, according to DISCUS figures.

Manufacturers can substitute tequila for rum in barbecue sauces and marinades, as tequila pairs nicely with seafood, chicken, pork, and red meat. Once the alcohol is flashed off, formulation developers can use tequila in a modern chimichurri and in a piquant pepper sauce to give it a twist with a deeper and more interesting flavor.

One unusual trend in spirits has been the revival of “moonshine” or “white whiskey.” Referring to unaged distilled spirits made with corn mash rather than an illicitly made, backwoods brew that could double as paint thinner, moonshine has moved from outlaw to fashionable and has been gaining popularity ever since many states loosened distillery laws in 2008. In fact, several large spirit makers, including Brown-Forman Corp.’s Jack Daniel’s Distillery and Suntory Holdings Ltd.’s Jim Beam Distillery, have introduced un-aged whiskeys re-

cently, further solidifying the moonshine trend.

Consumer interest in artisanal spirits extended rapidly to moonshine, especially with the spirit’s allure of the illicit and enduring hand-crafted history. In culinary use, moonshine white whiskey can add a distinctive flavor to finished products that run from tangy and savory to sweet. It works well in marinades, dressings, sauces, soups, stocks, and demi-glazes.

While most commercially available moonshine is of similar proof as aged whiskey—about 80 to 100 proof—some come in particularly high proofs of 120 to 150, making them even more flammable than usual. Care should be taken in reducing them or culinologists may opt for purchased moonshine reductions.

The manufacturer’s cooking process determines how much spirit to use. Depending on cooking methods and heat exchange systems, manufacturers can best decide whether to add the spirit at the beginning, middle, or end of the cooking process. Alcohol evaporates at a lower temperature than water, burning off 173°F, thus pasteurizing can affect the alcoholic content if the system isn’t closed to prevent it escaping as vapor.

Formulators are mimicking what is happening in restaurants around the country, using spirits in traditional cooking methods, such as brining, braising, reducing, curing, glazing, and in batter applications. The amount of spirits needed for flavor greatly varies by the product, while the percentage of alcohol needed is determined by cost, sugars, and how the protein will react to the amount of alcohol in a meal kit. Flashing off the alcohol is discouraged, as this is how most of the flavor is lost.

Prior to release, product developers and manufacturers need to know how the different spirits react to heat and lose flavor. Developers can either build on top of the spirit flavor, deglaze to build flavor into the bottom notes, or freshen in the end. If too much spirit is used, the item will become “top heavy” flavorwise. The spirit’s flavor will also need to stay through the targeted shelflife as well as through the intended cooking process post-purchase. This means it should have the ability to withstand high heat cooking or intended preparation method. By using a covered kettle for production, manufacturers can cook off the alcohol without losing too much of the volatile compounds and flavor.

Today’s technology allows culinary and research and development teams to come together to provide retail and foodservice customers with current trends and a dining experience similar to those achieved at fine restaurants. The rise of spirits as an ingredient shows no sign of slowing, and developers have just hit the tip of the “cocktail.” With flavor trends continuing to lean towards bright, smoky, and spicy global flavors, spirits are an excellent ingredient to compliment flavor and develop depth of character in food. **PF**

Maggie Harvey is new product development manager for Mizkan America, working in the company’s R&D lab and kitchen. Her expertise is in research and product development in the areas of vinegars, wines, reductions (wine, spirit, vinegar), sauces, beverages and condiments. She and her team can carry culinary creations from initial development through testing and into commercialization.

Dave Sackett is executive director of sales and marketing for the Food Ingredients Division of Mizkan America.

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www.mizkan.com*