

I t's the question that everyone is asking and to which no one seems to know the answer — what is the next restaurant trend that will make it onto retail shelves?

More often than not, trends that appear on the retail shelf do not emanate directly from restaurants, but instead appear in a number of channels or eating circumstances before developing enough momentum to impact the retail market.

In order to fully understand the relationship between restaurant menu trends and retail products, it is important to study the various ways that this transfer between restaurants and retail takes place. For example, there are retail food products that carry the branded names of white tablecloth restaurants or other restaurant venues. These products are often forerunners in their category, and thereby propel trends within the retail market by first appearing there.

On the other hand, many of the trends that gather mass acceptance and appear on the retail shelf do not come directly from trend-setting restaurants. Rather, these unilateral trends appear in various eating venues across the nation and then collectively appear in various forms on the retail shelf. The movement of restaurant foods onto the retail shelf is less of a transfer and more about translation — an interpretation of the nation's eating knowledge and current food interest into viable retail products.

Shining example

One of the only white tablecloth restaurants in the United States to simultaneously exist as a branded product line and a four-star restaurant is Frontera Grill and Topolobampo in Chicago. In fact, Frontera Grill is the

only Mexican cuisine restaurant to have achieved a four star rating in the United States, thanks to the genius of Chef Rick Bayless who opened his visionary venue 18 years ago.

In 1997, Bayless introduced a line of five salsas bearing the Frontera name through the creation of sister food company Frontera Foods. One interesting aspect of Bayless' enterprise is that although Frontera Foods has expanded to total 120 products, including many private label products, the retail branded product line was never intended to directly align with the restaurant's menu items.

"Our retail products were not developed as an extension of the restaurant, but as a separate entity that has synergy with the restaurant. The manufacturing end is so different from the artisan quality that we bring to small batches of food made in our kitchen, and we knew certain techniques can't be translated," says Bayless.

"The idea was to take the flavors of our restaurant and turn them into something that could be accessible to the broader audience that might not ever make it into our restaurant."

The Frontera line has grown from the original five salsas into 15 different salsas, four hot sauces, four cooking

sauses, two ceviche sauses and four rubs. Nonetheless, the focus of Frontera Foods products remains heavily bent toward salsa. The reason for this is twofold. For one, salsa is a condiment with mass consumer acceptance and appeal. But secondly, Bayless has a personal mission to teach consumers to embrace salsa as an ingredient in cooking.

"My passion has always been to offer salsa as an ingredient for use in cooking, not just as a condiment for dipping. Our salsa products all have recipes on the label



Frontera retail products weren't intended as an extension of its namesake restaurant, but they do bring the restaurant's flavors to a wider audience.

encouraging consumers to use salsa in cooking," says Bayless.

The way the salsas transfer from the Frontera Grill restaurant is that Bayless refused to compromise on

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the ingredients used in the packaged retail line. Rather than using ingredients that were pre-cooked and merely combined by a co-packer, Bayless insisted that raw ingredients — such as tomatillos, Roma tomatoes, onion and garlic — be sourced and then roasted at the co-packer to achieve the fire-roasted flavor that is the hallmark of Mexican cuisine that defines Bayless' restaurant. In this way, Frontera Foods salsas are an example of a restaurant food that has propelled the trends by first appearing on the retail shelf.

"The salsas may not be a direct translation from the restaurant, but certain qualities of the retail

Southern bent

Another strategy for translating a restaurant menu item into a retail food product is to consider how a restaurant's unique identity and expertise can be an advantage, and appeal to consumers outside of the bricks and mortar of the dining room. For example, Redbone Alley Restaurants in Florence and Sumter, S.C., have become wildly successful local restaurants with a definitive southern identity due to owner/Chef Dale Barth.

Barth became immersed in the culinary world 23 years ago when he started working in a small restaurant in South Carolina, learning from chefs how to create foods that were

appearance spurred Barth to create retail versions of the rubs demonstrated on the show that carried the Redbone Alley name and represented that Southern flair.

"The introduction of Redbone Alley Rubs taught us that people are willing to try new flavors, especially because they like to watch cooking channels and be introduced to a new way of seasoning," says Barth. "But we also determined that the place to be with a retail product was in sauces, because if you are going to be in the retail market you want to be there in liquid."

Redbone Alley went back to the drawing board using the restaurant as a focus group, and determined that consumers want help in preparing foods at home, and they especially want help in preparing seafood.

"We were told that people want to try new flavors, and people want to be able to cook seafood at home," says Barth. "Plus, I was told that since I was serving seafood in my restaurant, I had the moral authority to tell people how to cook fish. So our Redbone Alley Aiolis were created for this purpose."

Barth chose to introduce Aiolis because there are no other similar products on the market, so Aiolis are an opportunity to crest the trend wave. The retail flavors are among the many that appear on the restaurant's menu, but the five varieties were chosen according to their expected broad appeal: Lemon Peppercorn, Sundried Tomato, Smokey Chipotle, Roasted Garlic and Wasabi.

Redbone Alley Aiolis stay true to the restaurant mantra of using superior ingredients; the products are organic and made from natural ingredients. Barth has done something right with his Aiolis, because the products have already sold into more than 2,000 supermarkets that blanket the South and East Coast, and distribution is expanding rapidly.

"We are introducing a new category into the market, but we have the foresight to sell Redbone

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Initially developed as rubs used in his restaurants, Redbone Alley Chef Dale Barth determined that "the place to be with a retail product was in sauces... you want to be there in liquid." The company now markets a line of Redbone Alley Aioli seafood cooking sauces.

products distinguish these salsas from simply being a commodity. For one, all of the flavors of the salsas are a little outside the mainstream, and appeal as a slightly more gourmet product," says Bayless. "And another important distinction is our use of a wide variety of various chilies in the salsas. This command of the chilies from Mexico is another synergy that the retail products carry over from our restaurant."

decidedly southern in nature. Then, in 1993, Barth opened Redbone Alley Restaurant armed with the vision of using superior indigenous ingredients and foods, believing that the key to success was keeping the food fresh, simple and good.

From that start Barth became a local phenomenon and was asked to appear on a television show in 2002 to provide a live cooking demonstration about how to prepare foods caught in a local hunting contest. The television

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Alley Ailois next to the seafood case. Consumers want to know how to cook fish and these products provide the answer," says Barth.

Trend momentum

And finally, trends that appear on the retail shelf that may have originated in restaurants often manifest in the supermarket after spreading through various food channels simultaneously. John Namy, chef and vice president of culinary development at Pecan Deluxe Inc., Dallas, calls these "food tremors" — the foods that seem to gather momentum in unlikely areas until their presence as an accepted trend that is too large to ignore.

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"The biggest trends that appear on the retail shelf start appearing in many different venues and categories at once, indicating that the consumer is becoming knowledgeable about the new flavor."

— JOHN NAMY, CHEF AND VICE PRESIDENT OF CULINARY DEVELOPMENT, PECAN DELUXE INC.

new flavor on all different levels and all different tiers," says Namy. "For example, four or five years ago Bananas Foster was a polarizing dessert. Then it began appearing in coffee shops and candy stores, in IHOP as Bananas Foster pie or in 7-Eleven as a featured cappuccino flavor. Customers at the convenience store knew the flavor as well as consumers visiting mid-casual dining restaurants. Bananas Foster became a food tremor — meaning consumers were becoming trained and educated in it."

Namy circles the world looking at food trends and studying how they might translate into ice cream products and frozen dessert items. For example, at an ice cream store in St. Thomas,

Virgin Islands, three years ago, he watched customer after customer request cake batter be mixed into the ice cream. Namy came back to his development lab and created a full line of cake and brownie batter ice creams using raw egg flavor, uncooked flour flavor and some culinary creativity. The result has been that cake batter ice creams have become one of the most popular trends in the ice cream case.

"Many times the trends in Europe are the next big trend here. Sticky toffee pudding has been mainstream in Europe for quite some time," says Namy. "Now Bennigan's just introduced a sticky toffee pudding and they are doing a lot of radio promotion for it, so this might be the next big trend to sweep the nation. Indulgent comfort foods of international origin are likely forerunners of new popular foods here."

When looking for food tremors, Namy also considers whether they fit in with current trends. Consumers want convenience, interaction, natural and healthy. Retro re-done is one of the new buzzwords in food trends, and consumers continue seeking indulgence in sophisticated and gourmet foods as well as the latest machination of indulgence as "permission indulgence."

"Ice cream concepts that are akin to a health bar in an ice cream package could be wildly appealing to consumers right now," says Namy. "Taking a mixed berry yogurt ice cream bar and dipping it in a yogurt coating and rolling it in a mixed berry oat crisp would give

consumers the permission to indulge in a product that seems healthy."

And consumers want variety. Taking a familiar concept and adding a new twist that comes from restaurant trends is one way that menu items can be translated. For example, the tropical fruits of Hawaii seem to be popular on restaurant menus right now, particularly mango and pineapple. Namy developed an ice cream prototype that built upon the banana ice cream trend to create roasted banana ice cream with chocolate covered macadamia nuts and a mango chocolate swirl.

"Chocolate and wine is being paired on menus right now, and flights are big — cheese, wine and even beer flights. Consumers want variety, so one idea is a product that offers flights in itself — a dessert flight ice cream bar with a few different fillings, for example," says Namy. "Or a product that offers a variety of chocolate desserts, or a variety of cheesecakes in one. These products would be small tastings that are indulgent, so you don't over-consume."

As for the next big food shift, it is hard to forecast exactly when an up-and-coming trend will take hold of consumers' palates in a way that drives a new trend wave. For now, consumers are still anchored firmly in the embrace of flavors from south of the border.

"Churros are extremely popular in ballparks, theme parks and arenas right now. In Mexico, churros are dipped in chocolate and eaten with coffee or hot chocolate. A new product could combine a buttery brown sugar cinnamon, coffee or cocoa ice cream with an extruded and baked churro piece swirled with a sweet filling or cinnamon caramel," says Namy. "For futuristic products I watch what consumers are eating at the food fairs, the ballparks and the stadiums, as well as food tremors at the international level as indicators of the next trendy retail product. My favorite quote is from Wayne Gretzke: 'I skate to where the puck is going to be, not to where it's been.'" ■