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Broaden your appreciation of food—and of the rich diversity of international cultures—by indulging in ethnic cuisines.

by Gigi Ragland

The next time you sit down to a meal, take a good look at the foods on your plate. Is the chicken rubbed with Caribbean spices, or maybe rolled in Japanese panko crumbs? Perhaps you are about to tuck into a spicy Tex-Mex burrito or a bowl of Italian spaghetti? American meals have become a delicious compilation of unique dishes from around the world—so much so that some of these dishes have become as commonplace as, well, apple pie.

Over the centuries, waves of immigrants from Europe, Asia and the Americas have profoundly influenced what we eat, introducing dishes of their ancestors in their new country. Not only do we enjoy the benefit of new tastes and flavors, but the exposure to different cuisines offers the chance to learn new food combinations and preparation techniques, as well as an opportunity to connect with our ethnic roots.

“Food is often deeply ingrained in culture,” says

Annika Stensson, director of research communications for the National Restaurant Association (NRA). “You may not be able to visit all the places around the globe from where your family originated, but sharing a meal of those cuisines right here at home is an accessible way to connect with your ancestry.”

Enjoy the familiar

The NRA’s 2015 “Global Palates: Ethnic Cuisines and Flavors in America” study found that Italian, Mexican and Chinese are the best-known ethnic cuisines in the United States. Italian, in particular, is the most familiar and popular. The vibrant flavors of Italy—tomatoes, fresh herbs, garden greens and vegetables—can be easily grown in gardens, and there is good accessibility in grocery stores to cheeses, meats, poultry and fish, other popular Italian ingredients.

The fact that the American palate has easily adapted to Italian cuisine comes as no surprise to Elise Wiggins, executive chef of the acclaimed Panzano restaurant in Denver. Wiggins embraces the Slow Food Movement started in Italy to preserve traditional and regional





Gochujang Beef Tacos with Kimchi Salsa

By Cathlyn Choi

This dish adds Korean flair to an all-time favorite Mexican dish.

Yield: 2 servings (2 tacos per serving)

½ pound ground beef, 90% lean
1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon cumin
½ tablespoon sea salt
½ tablespoon chili paste*
1 teaspoon sesame oil
4 taco shells
¼ head iceberg lettuce, shredded
4 tablespoons light sour cream
1 avocado, diced
2 tablespoons shredded cheddar cheese

KIMCHI SALSA

1 large tomato, diced
2 cups chopped napa cabbage
½ cup finely chopped cilantro
1 teaspoon sesame oil
1 teaspoon fresh lime juice

1. In a medium skillet over medium-high heat, cook ground beef with olive oil, 3–5 minutes. Add cumin, salt, chili paste and sesame oil; stir-fry 5 minutes.
2. Combine all kimchi salsa ingredients in a bowl; mix well.
3. Warm the taco shells in oven for a few minutes. Fill shells with cooked beef, lettuce, sour cream, avocado, kimchi salsa and cheese.

PER SERVING: 658 cal; 33g prot; 44g fat; 37g carb (8g sugars); 2098mg sodium; 10g fiber

*Make a traditional Korean gochujang chili paste by mixing 1 tablespoon Sriracha sauce with ½ tablespoon miso paste and 1 tablespoon ketchup.

Kimchi has been part of the Korean diet since the seventh century. During months of harvest, vegetables—mostly cabbage—were set aside to ferment in a special “pickling” process. This preparation offered a food source for people during the long, cold winters. Kimchi is now served as a core food found on just about every Korean family’s table, as well as in Korean restaurants. Today, there are more than 200 variations made with different seasonings and vegetable additions.

cuisine. Her backyard garden even includes a row of heirloom Italian broccoli that she is cultivating for the restaurant. But as often happens, she acknowledges, as Americans embrace an ethnic cuisine, they tend to put their own spin on it. “Spaghettini (pasta) is one of the things that is authentically classic Italian—it’s just that they don’t eat it with meatballs.”

Wiggins inspires her customers to learn more about genuine Italian cuisine by offering classes on different techniques and dishes at the restaurant. “I can offer classes on how to make tiramisu, breads, seafood, etc., but the best-selling class is always pasta-making,” she says. Taking a cooking class is a great way to learn about a culture and prepare a favorite dish to share the cuisine you enjoy so much with others.

Exploring the exotic

More than ever, Americans are willing to venture beyond the more familiar ethnic cuisines. Research from the “Global Palates” study shows that two-thirds of Americans eat a wider variety of ethnic cuisines than they did just five years ago. But there are still many types of cuisines in the study that are not so well-known, including Ethiopian, Brazilian/Argentinian and Korean. Cathlyn Choi, also known as the “Korean Food Ambassador,” is working to shake that up.

When she first moved to the United States in 2000, she was surprised to learn that “most people didn’t have a clue as to what Korean food was,” she says. With the help of her husband, she started an educational Korean cooking show that is now on PBS.

“Cathlyn’s Korean Kitchen” became an instant hit. “There were a lot of talented Korean chefs, but none of



them could cook, speak English *and* be comfortable in front of the camera,” Choi says. “Cathlyn’s Korean Kitchen’ was the first Korean cooking show on TV in English in the United States, so it got popular very fast.” Choi also performs cooking demonstrations at various cultural and food festivals throughout the year, including Let’s Move, a campaign first lady Michelle Obama initiated to prevent diabetes and obesity in children.

Because most Americans aren’t familiar with Korean food, Choi suggests dining at a Korean barbecue restaurant. All entrees are served with various side dishes—mainly lightly sautéed, seasoned or pickled vegetables; beans; some type of soup; leafy greens; and dipping sauces—which provide a broad exposure to Korean cuisine. (Bonus: Refills are free, Choi says.)

Choi likes to introduce Korean food by combining certain ingredients into meals that people are already familiar with—for example, tacos, hamburgers or spaghetti. One of her favorites is kimchi, a fermented cabbage dish that is the staple food of Koreans. “It’s considered one of the healthiest foods in the world, with all-natural probiotics, vitamins and minerals,” she says.

As a nation nicknamed “the melting pot,” America provides a fascinating illustration of how infusing foods from other cultures into our culinary experiences radically influences our own culture. A fusion of flavors can be happily discovered throughout the country, taking root in our communities and kitchens in a variety of delectable dishes—and making us richer for it.

Gigi Ragland specializes in travel, sustainable topics, adventure and food writing.

Tomato and Watermelon Bruschetta

By Elise Wiggins

A topping of sweet watermelon and heirloom tomatoes enhances the traditional, savory taste of bruschetta.

Serves 8

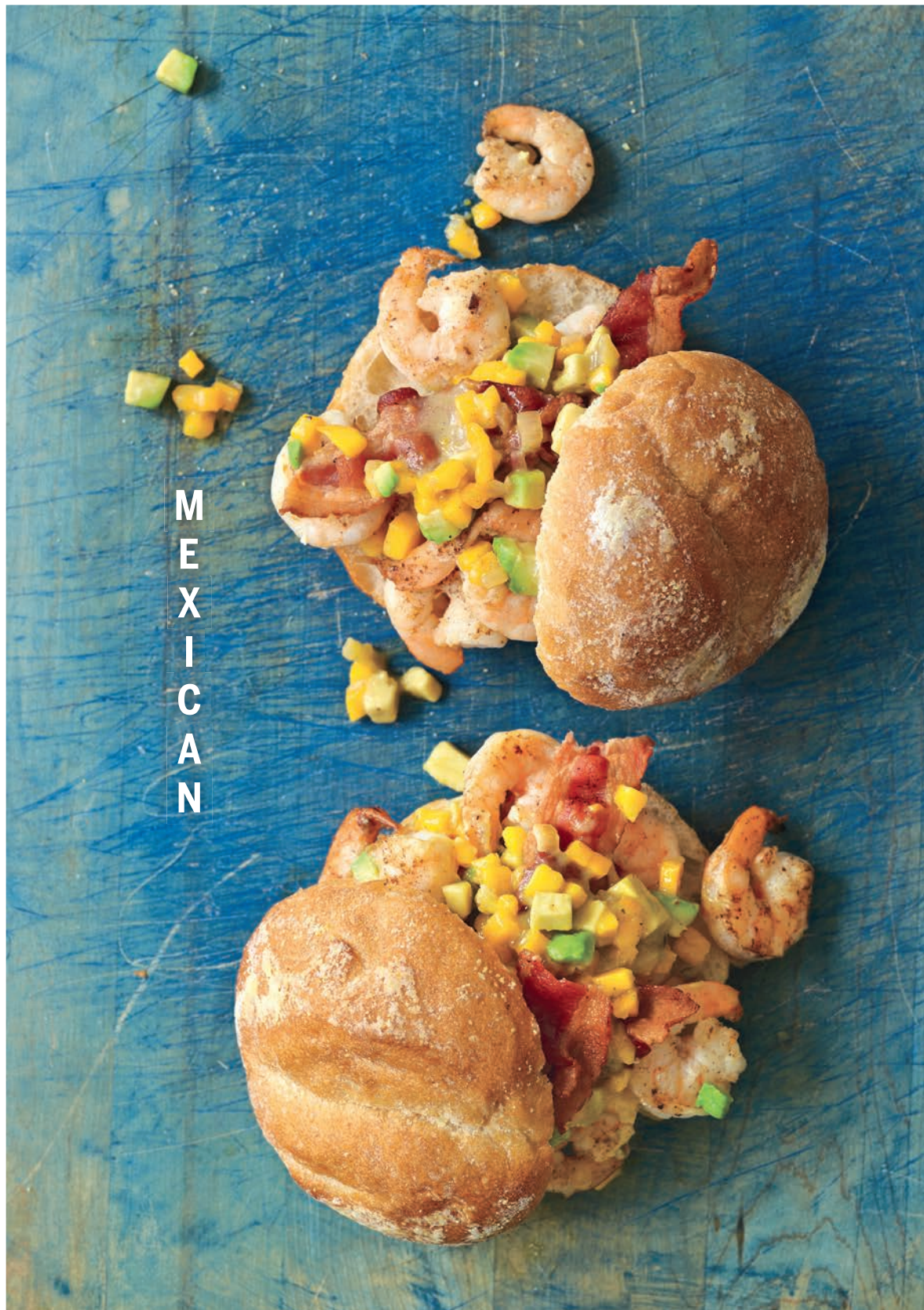
4 cloves garlic, minced
4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling
1 baguette; sliced into ½-inch slices, about 24 pieces
Sea salt and pepper, to taste
2 pounds heirloom tomatoes; seeds removed, diced
1 baby seedless watermelon, diced into ¼-inch pieces
¼ cup kalamata olives, sliced into slivers
1 cup mascarpone cheese
Zest of 1 orange
4 tablespoons sliced fresh basil leaves

1. Heat a grill to high heat. You can also use a skillet over high heat on your stovetop.
2. Combine olive oil and garlic in a small bowl. Brush mixture on bread slices (called “crostini” in Italian); season with salt and pepper. Place bread oil-side down on grill for 30–60 seconds to make char marks. Remove and set on a wire rack to cool.
3. Gently combine tomatoes, watermelon and olives. Spread mascarpone cheese on each crostini. Top with tomato mixture. Garnish each crostini with pinch of orange zest and a few slices of basil; drizzle with olive oil.

PER SERVING: 317 cal; 7g prot; 14g fat; 42g carb (12g sugars); 402mg sodium; 3g fiber

This favorite **antipasto** (appetizer), found on almost every Italian restaurant menu, has ancient roots. Thousands of years ago, the Romans tested the quality of freshly pressed olive oil by swiping it with “fire-toasted bread.” The term in Italian for the method was *bruscare*, “to roast over coals.” Over time bruscare evolved into a poor man’s snack and eventually into what we now enjoy as “bruschetta,” a slice of Italian grilled bread slathered with olive oil and topped with tomatoes, herbs and garlic.





Shrimp, Mango and Avocado Salsa Rolls

By Pati Jinich

Pati Jinich is host of "Pati's Mexican Table," a national TV series on PBS that makes traditional Mexican cooking accessible to everyone. According to Jinich, real Mexican cuisine isn't what people tend to think (i.e., Tex-Mex). "What Mexicans eat in their homes are very easy, freshly made-from-scratch meals with a lot of grains, beans, vegetables and fruits," she says, adding that *tortas*—sandwiches—are

extremely popular in Mexico, right up there with tacos and enchiladas. "We serve them for lunch or dinner, or for snacks," she adds.

Following is a favorite *torta* recipe by Pati, featured in her new cookbook *Mexican Today: New and Rediscovered Recipes for Contemporary Kitchens* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

Makes 6 rolls

12 bacon slices
 ¼ cup finely chopped shallots
 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon sherry vinegar
 ½ teaspoon honey
 ½ teaspoon Dijon mustard
 1 teaspoon kosher or sea salt, divided
 Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
 2 large ripe avocados, halved, pitted, flesh scooped out, diced
 2 large ripe mangoes, peeled, sliced off the pits, diced
 1 tablespoon olive oil
 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
 1½ pounds fresh or thawed frozen medium shrimp, shells and tails removed
 6 hot dog buns or soft rolls

1. Heat a large skillet over medium heat. Add bacon and cook 3–4 minutes per side, until browned and crisp. Transfer bacon to a paper-towel-lined plate, leaving fat in the skillet; set aside.
2. Return pan with fat to medium heat. Add shallots and garlic; cook about 2 minutes, until fragrant, tender and just beginning to brown. Scrape garlic and shallots into a medium heatproof bowl, along with the fat. Don't wash the pan; just set aside.
3. Vinaigrette: Add vinegar, honey, mustard, and ½ teaspoon salt and pepper to taste to bowl with garlic and shallots. Whisk or mix with a fork until well emulsified. Add avocados and mangoes; toss together, and set aside.
4. Heat oil and butter over high heat in skillet you used for the bacon until oil is hot but not smoking and butter has begun to foam. Add shrimp, without crowding the pan (cook in two batches if necessary). Season with ½ teaspoon salt and pepper to taste, and cook, flipping shrimp over once, until seared and browned, about 2 minutes. Transfer to a bowl.
5. On each bun or roll, arrange a layer of cooked shrimp. Top with avocado and mango mix, and crown each with a few bacon slices.

How I came to know—and love—ethnic food

Do you recall the first time you tried a new food or dish? Remember that hesitation or surprise you sensed when tasting an unknown flavor or texture?

My land-locked, Midwestern upbringing included some form of meat and potatoes at every meal. Salt and pepper were our “spices.” The word “herb” was somebody’s name, not something you added to flavor a dish. We were raised in cattle and wheat country, where proximity to your food source and environment determined your daily diet. Dining out at an Italian restaurant to eat spaghetti and meatballs or lasagna was a special event. But the most exotic dining experience of all was eating at a Chinese restaurant, where each dish came with a bowl of white rice.

As children, we would ask, “Where are the potatoes?” “And what are we supposed to do with the two skinny sticks?” It became an eating adventure. There were so many sauces to try, and we were expected to share each dish family-style. Chinese food was an educational and entertaining introduction to new flavors that opened our eyes to a bigger world beyond the Midwest.

After the Vietnam War, hundreds of refugees were welcomed into our state, sponsored by parishioners of many churches. Gradually, Vietnamese restaurants popped up. We couldn’t pronounce the names of dishes on the menus, and we had never tried ingredient combinations with lemongrass, ginger, limes, Thai basil, mint or cilantro. But the food was exotic and incredibly fresh. Best of all, it was our chance to visit a foreign country in the middle of cow country U.S.A.

These experiences opened me up to a world of new flavors and delicious foods from around the world. And that continues to inspire me to seek a global palate of new tastes in whatever city, town or country I travel to.

—Gigi Ragland

Around the World With the Tomato

One ingredient—many taste adventures.

DISH	ORIGIN	DESCRIPTION
TABBOULEH	Middle East: Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine	A vegetarian side dish with chopped tomatoes, minced herbs (such as parsley and mint), red onions, couscous, lemon and olive oil.
GAZPACHO	Spain: Andalusia region	A cold soup made from chopped, pureed raw tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and onions, plus garlic, olive oil, wine vinegar, water and salt.
CHICKEN TIKKA MASALA	India/Pakistan/ Bangladesh infusion, with British additions	A main dish of roasted chicken chunks, served with a spicy tomato cream sauce. The tomato “gravy” is the British enhancement to this traditional chicken dish.
SALSA PICANTE	Mexico	A dip made from fresh tomatoes, onions, jalapenos, garlic, cilantro and lime juice.
GREEK SALAD	Greece	A salad of chopped or sliced tomatoes, green bell peppers, cucumbers, red onion, kalamata olives and crumbled feta cheese, then drizzled with lemon juice and olive oil.
TOMATO SAUCE	Italy	A traditional sauce used over pasta. An all-day cooking process that begins with crushed tomatoes and tomato paste, with additions of spices, herbs, vegetables and possibly meat.
SOFRITO	Caribbean: Puerto Rico, Cuba, Dominican Republic	A sauce used to flavor rice, meat and bean dishes. Made with red tomatoes and tomatillos, with a variety of red, green, yellow and orange bell peppers, then blended with onions, garlic and cilantro.