

PAN-ASIAN



DELVING DEEPER

DEMAND FOR ASIAN DISHES IS ON THE UP – BUT CONSUMERS ARE SWAPPING FAMILIAR FAVOURITES FOR FRESH, REGIONAL FLAVOURS, AS LAUREN FITCHETT REPORTS

Our love affair with Asian cuisine has accelerated – and it shows no sign of slowing. Having grown from a collection of well-known classics into a vast industry packed with choice, food from the east is big business.

A wave of fusion dishes and the continued clamour for street food has introduced more diners to Asian dishes, as social media and global events fuel its popularity. IBISWorld puts the value of Asian restaurants in the UK alone at £4bn in a July 2021 report, and as consumers look to widen their food horizons, there are endless opportunities for caterers. “While

Pan-Asian food has played an important part in the UK dining scene for years, social media is giving real visibility to lesser-known cuisines and dishes within this broad category,” says Rob Owen, executive business development chef at Creed Foodservice.

“Those using platforms like Instagram and TikTok to follow food and drink influencers and food

outlets across the world are becoming educated in the finer details of regional specialities, rather than just the anglicised dishes that we are used to seeing on operators’ menus. Because of this, we’re seeing consumers become more adventurous and looking for options that they may not have necessarily experienced before.”

Indian food is proving it has so much more to offer



TILDA CHINESE PRAWN POTSTICKER DUMPLINGS

The volume of Pan-Asian eateries on the high street is driving contract caterers to sharpen their menus and catch consumers' attention. Baxter-Storey's Fuel agency, launched in 2019, works with street food traders and chefs to bring lunch with a difference to workplaces, and Charlotte Rouse, head of operations, says with its most popular traders in the Asian cuisine category, plans are afoot to grow their numbers.

"Looking at the high street, we are in competition to try and keep customers in rather than going out. There is so much Pan-Asian cuisine on the high street, and that's partly why you are seeing so much on our menus," she says, adding that Japanese katsu curry has for years been one of BaxterStorey's most popular dishes.

"In lockdown, people got into cooking – there wasn't really anything else to do and eating was one of the simple pleasures," she says. "People's standards of food are higher and they are looking for authenticity."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, what we watch on television and see in the news is helping to drive demand. Recent examples include Netflix's Squid Game, which led to spikes in Google searches for Korean food, and the Tokyo Olympics, which saw Waitrose report a surge in popularity for

NEW LOOK



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We expect to see *Filipino food* growing in popularity

Japanese-inspired dishes.

"The impact of the Tokyo Olympic Games on the oriental food scene in the UK is clearly apparent, with Japanese dishes being given more attention than ever before," Owen explains. "The gyoza range we offer is doing incredibly well with contract caterers."

FINDING WHAT'S NEW

In a market that is already so vast, where is there potential for growth? Almost everywhere, it seems. While already popular cuisines such as Chinese and Indian will remain so, the demand for lesser-known, regional dishes will offer new opportunities.

Street food operator The Rice Guys, which was among the first to work with Fuel, serves Chinese dishes created from home kitchen recipes, which it says consumers may or may not be familiar with. Its most popular dish, co-founder and director Andrew Yu says, is Hainanese roast chicken, which is served with rice cooked in chicken broth and spices. It's popular in Malaysia and Singapore.

Regional varieties of Thai and Chinese food, including Cantonese cooking, Shanghai dumplings and Sichuan flavours, are among those growing in demand, Bidfood says. The wholesaler has seen an increase in Korean dishes on menus, including fried chicken and Korean garlic bread, and expects to see growth in flavours from countries including Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam.

But Annette Coggins, head of foodservice at Tilda UK, says consumers' familiarity with Indian Cuisine will not limit its potential for growth. "Indian food is proving it has so much more to offer, taking inspiration from the street vendors across India," she says. "The Indian street food trend is rapidly evolving the market past traditional curries with a burst of flavourful and vibrant healthy dishes, in ways we have never seen them before. Think mini pakoras, roti wraps and flavourful rice bowls."

The global larder is reaching new kitchens, with ingredients such as miso, sriracha and kimchi no longer used only in their original cuisines. There are few better examples than the spicy, pungent Korean kimchi, which is now often spotted weaved into menus, including in toasted cheese sandwiches, quesadillas and even pasta.

Looking ahead, McCormick expects to see earthy flavours taken from the coast becoming more widely used, including seaweed and sea moss. Ricardo Mejía, its corporate chef, Mexico, points to sweet furikake sprinkles, which are made with seaweed, as one way for caterers to add a flourish to dishes. "Pieces of caramel and black pepper enhance the savouriness of nori seaweed

in this sweet take on the umami-loaded Japanese furikake spice blend," he says. "Sprinkled over ice cream or stirred into trail mix, it's a simple way to dial up the wow-factor in desserts."

The acidic, sour ingredients of Filipino cooking, including tamarind, vinegars and fermented products, are also in demand. "In 2022, we expect to see Filipino food growing in popularity, as more and more chefs cooking this cuisine come to the fore and awareness and interest grows in Filipino restaurants," says Owen. "Once this cuisine establishes itself in the mainstream dining scene, this will undoubtedly have an impact on the offering that is expected of contract caterers too."

MAKING IT WORK

With the red tape of post-Covid travel still limiting



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CENTRAL FOODS BAO BUNS SERVED IN A BAMBOO STEAMER



Bao buns remain one of the hottest street food trends

travel, there are more opportunities than ever for caterers to create authentic cultural experiences. In its 2021 trends report, Bidfood found that 52% of UK consumers say they will be open to being more experimental with their food choices than pre-pandemic.

But, as menu options grow, caterers will need to be aware that not everyone will be familiar with more niche items. An understanding of the ingredients, dish and recipe provenance will be key to authenticity, Owen says. "Contract caterers that are looking for dishes that can be made with speed may

be put off by the often vast range of ingredients and spices needed to make oriental dishes authentically, but there are clever shortcuts that can make production cost-effective and convenient," he explains.

"For example, using a selection of Asian stock bases can allow you to cut out several steps for many dishes, reducing the need for having staff trained in these particular cuisines, and speeding up the entire process of production."

The scale of the Pan-Asian food market gives operators plenty of methods of delivery – it offers a chance for theatre, with wok and Teppanyaki

stations an enticing draw, as well as grab-and-go options, such as noodle pots, which can be prepared in advance. Caterers can drive spend by offering additions and toppings, such as dumplings and gyoza.

The emergence of Asian drink options, including the bubble tea of Taiwan and Vietnamese coffee, also brings opportunities. Karen Green, trade marketing manager for Aimia Foods, points to chai, a lightly spiced flavour often used in chai lattes which pairs well with desserts, as an example.

"Us Brits have had a long love affair with Asian food for decades now, but it's only in recent years that consumers have started to discover and trial traditional Asian drinks," she says. "This is now starting to manifest itself in day-to-day behaviour with predictions that Asian-style drinks will continue to grow over the next few years."

THE BAO BOOM

With bustling hawker centres and night markets across Asia, street food is at the heart of its cuisine – and the movement in the UK is still thriving. There are few better-known street food dishes than bao buns, which originated from Chinese cuisines and have become popular worldwide.

"Bao buns remain one of the hottest street food trends," says Gordon Lauder, managing director of Central Foods. "They're versatile, tasty, easy to prepare and they look great – the perfect food for an eye-catching Instagram post, which can rack up likes on social media and help spread the word that you're serving these little beauties."

While bao buns can be a breakfast choice in parts of Asia, they are often served as lunch or on-the-go options in the UK and filled with slow-cooked meats, pickled vegetables and sauces. They can easily be made vegetarian and simple tweaks make them vegan, a key benefit given the ongoing move towards a meat-free diet. "Some venues are serving bao buns as part of a bento box, which is perfect for both take-away or on-site serving, or are simply using them as an alternative to sandwiches or wraps throughout the day," Lauder explains.

With workers returning to offices and organisers optimistic for a summer of events, now is the perfect time for operators to refresh their menus and explore the opportunities Pan-Asian cuisine provides. 🍴



CENTRAL FOODS BAO BUNS SERVED WITH DUCK

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