FUSION OR CONFUSION?

MICHAEL DENNIS MOORE EXPLORES THE TREND IN FUSION FARE AND WHAT DISTINGUISHES THE GOOD FROM THE BAD

ONCE UPON A TIME, many of the top imaginative chefs applied the word “fusion” when combining elements from different cuisines into new dishes they were creating. Today, the same chefs oft en shudder at its utterance. The reason? Some horrific stuff has been served under the fusion food banner, and most of the more respectable gastronomes simply do not want to be associated with it in any way. In many cases, “confusion” rather than fusion is probably a more accurate word to describe the resulting concoctions. Ken Hom, the enigmatic Chinese-American chef whose popular cookbook East Meets West Cuisine did much to kickstart the fusion food craze, once bemoaned how “a lot of people don’t do it very well”. He added, “The problem is, so many cooks are combining ingredients, techniques, naming dishes in the most convoluted ways. for the sake of trendiness rather than from the heart.” However, in spite of the controversy, there is no denying the popularity of fusion fare throughout the world - particularly Asia - and chefs continue to mix things from different regions. And, as in the past, some of these culinary marriages are remarkably good while others would be better off in a divorce court. To understand the key to success is to understand the fusion process itself and the individual approach of the chefs.

NATURAL FUSION Noah Webster and his dictionary defines fusion as “the union of different things by or as if by melting; blending; coalition”. Applying these concepts to food, a fusion dish is created when a chef mixes elements associated with one ethnic or regional cuisine with the elements from another. The
“elements” can be spices, basic ingredients or methods of cooking. This process is not always down to the clever ideas of an imaginative cook. Fusion dishes, indeed entire cuisines, often occur naturally as a part of cultural evolution caused by human migration. A classic example has occurred on the Malaysian Peninsula where Chinese—who had settled in the area centuries ago—have created a cooking style that is neither solely Malay nor Chinese. The descendants of the settlers are called Peranakans, and the women are known as Nyonyas (often Nonya), with the resulting cuisine described by these names. Nonya dishes are unique and delicious fusions that combine local ingredients and spices with Chinese elements. *Laksa*, a soup of mixed seafood and rice noodles swimming in a spicy coconut milk broth, is just one example of the successful union and readily available at most of Malaysia and Singapore’s food centres. Further treats such as beef *rendang* and fish *amok amok* can be found at Nonya restaurants like Blue Ginger in Singapore. The Nonya cuisine is an example of “natural fusion”, a process that has always occurred, but one that has accelerated in recent years as a result of war, colonisation, economic globalisation, and most of all, international tourism.

A pertinent illustration of the effects of colonisation can be clearly seen in Vietnam. The French are long gone, but baguettes, *pâté* and a host of other items remain, albeit often modified to suit Vietnamese tastes. The results can be splendid, as their continuing presence at most street stalls highlights. To sample upmarket Vietnamese/French creations at their finest, La Dalat Indochine in Bangkok is a must. Housed in a romantically restored villa and operated by a Vietnamese family with strong French ties, the food—particularly its seafood—is outstanding. Although never colonised, Thailand has enthusiastically received ingredients from other cultures. The dearly loved chilli pepper is actually a latecomer as an ingredient to Thai cuisine. Introduced to the Kingdom in the 16th century by the Portuguese,
the hot spice was quickly accepted by the Thais who already enjoyed the pungent flavour of black pepper. Other such ingredients introduced by the Portuguese that are now popular with the people of Thailand include tomatoes, peanuts and corn. A pertinent illustration of the effects of colonisation can be clearly seen in Vietnam. The French are long gone, but baguettes, pâté and a host of other items remain, albeit often modified to suit Vietnamese tastes. The results can be splendid, as their continuing presence at most street stalls highlights. To sample upmarket Vietnamese/French creations at their finest, La Dalat Indochine in Bangkok is a must. Housed in a romantically restored villa and operated by a Vietnamese family with strong French ties, the food - particularly its seafood - is outstanding. Although never colonised, Thailand has enthusiastically received ingredients from other cultures. The dearly loved chilli pepper is actually a latecomer as an ingredient to Thai cuisine. Introduced to the Kingdom in the 16th century by the Portuguese, the hot spice was quickly accepted by the Thais who already enjoyed the pungent flavour of black pepper. Other such ingredients introduced by the Portuguese that are now popular with the people of Thailand include tomatoes, peanuts and corn.
THE CHEF'S ROLE  But these are not examples of what has cast a shadow over fusion cooking. According to Giuseppe Fornillo, Director of Food and Beverage at the Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit in Bangkok, the problems arise when the fusion process isn’t something that has evolved over a period of time. Fornillo points out that a chef who arbitrarily mixes elements from different cuisines without knowing what he or she is doing can be a recipe for disaster. The chef, he emphasises, has to understand the cuisines and the properties of all the ingredients. Without this knowledge or experience, he will be hard put to create successful fusion dishes. Ken Hom wholeheartedly agrees, but adds that the chef must also have a “passion” and “feeling” for what he is doing. A renowned fusion practitioner is Japanese
master chef Nobuyuki Matsuhisa, who recently opened one of his acclaimed NOBU restaurants at the InterContinental Hong Kong. Chef Nobu is known for combining both Japanese and South American flavours, with which he creates fantastic results. At 24, the young chef had gone to Peru where he worked in a kitchen for three years and successfully started weaving Peruvian elements into some of his classic Japanese dishes. However, he is careful not to take things too far. The results, such as the signature Szechuan Rack of Lamb, are sensational - and the good times are only set to continue. The restaurant recently recruited an energetic New Zealander named Samuel Wilkes to revitalise the menu; a chef with both the necessary experience and the passion that Ken Hom considers so important to create successful fusion dishes. “I incorporate local flavours into my cuisine, but the base as Japanese cuisine remains constant,” he explains. “I do not believe in combining too many flavours or ingredients. I strive to create a simple balance with a nice combination - not too complicated.” His signature dishes such as Black Cod with Miso and Lobster with Wasabi Pepper Sauce are perfect examples of this approach - simple yet delicious mergers that excite the taste buds of diners at his restaurants around the world. Jakkrit Phuengsamphan (or “Rom”, to his friends) is the executive chef and part-owner of Bangkok’s Wyndham thai Restaurant and Bar. He is another example of a professional cook with the experience necessary to create successful fusion dishes, having lived and worked for over 10 years in Australia. Predictably, Rom does not like to call what he does “fusion cooking”. “What I do is a reflection of my life experiences,” he declares. “I am not consciously trying to create something different. I like to combine unique ingredients which I have discovered overseas with basic thai flavours.” Rom’s Australian Rack of Lamb with Red Curry Sauce is just one illustration of this and a dish that has proven a hit with both local and foreign diners. In Singapore, fusion restaurants were once all the rage, but many have disappeared in
recent years - and often for good reason. “Fusion has become a bad word in Singapore,” explains Peter Knipp, a Singapore-based food consultant and critic. “People use it as an excuse to mix ridiculous ingredients, charge double the prices and upset a lot of people.” However, this is not always the case, and one Singaporean restaurant has persisted over the years: Doc Cheng’s at Raffles Hotel Singapore. This established favourite features Western cuisine created with an Asian twist, using the region’s cooking techniques,
Western delicacies like *foie gras* and *filet mignon* to villagers from Northeastern Thailand. Or, to look at it another way, try serving *tom yam* soup and *som tom* papaya salad to a group of French peasant farmers. In both instances, most of the food will remain uneaten. This “fear of the unknown” is why local restaurants in Asian tourist centres often succeed when they create Western-style dishes using local elements, or local dishes using imported ingredients. Chef Wilkes’ Tandoori Ocean Trout with Wild Rice Risotto is a good example of the former, and Chef Rom’s popular Rack of Lamb with Red Curry Sauce is an enduring example of the latter. It also explains why newer restaurants like The Apsara in Luang Prabang and Meric at Siem Reap’s Hôtel de la Paix are able to successfully combine local and international elements in their menus. They now have an international clientele with palates ready and eager to taste the well-prepared dishes that are different, but still somewhat similar, to food they have eaten in the past. So, while the expert chefs often try to avoid the culinary “F” word, fusion fare is an undeniable trend that is brewing on the stove, and only set to develop further - both through natural evolution and external influences. Of course, this doesn’t mean that traditional cuisines and classic dishes are about to disappear. When something is done right, there is no reason to change it. What it does mean, however, is that the number of dishes on offer will continue to grow and new styles of preparing the same ingredients will emerge. And, as it has been since man first sat around a fire roasting bits of meat on a stick, deciding what works is up to the people eating the food. Left, The Apsara’s restaurant uses local Lao ingredients in its gourmet menu. Right, Siem Reap’s Meric presents Khmer food with Western flair.
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