It’s hard to escape the “better-burger” phenomenon. It started when tastemakers like Bobby Flay, Daniel Boulud, and Danny Meyer lavished their attention on the humble hamburger, elevating America’s favorite sandwich to gourmet status. Hot on their heels, major chains from Hardee’s to McDonald’s, plus fast-casual concepts like Burgerville and Habit Burger, began promoting their own two-fisted patties flaunting premium beef and higher price points to match.

It stands to reason that such highfalutin burgers deserve an equally highfalutin accompaniment, and that’s just what Walter Zuromski, CEC, CCE, president and culinary director, Chef Services Group Inc., Lincoln, RI, and EggSolutions Chef, American Egg Board, Park Ridge, IL, gave the better burgers he designed for a recent development project. “We were making them with a blend of brisket, sirloin, chuck—the best blend of ground meat you can imagine,” he says, noting that run-of-the-mill ketchup wouldn’t measure up for these burgers. “So we came up with beer sauces inspired by the beers you’d drink with your burger. We did a stout and smoked-Cheddar sauce; a roasted-onion and winter ale sauce; a bacon, horseradish and beer sauce—that’s all you need.”

Well, maybe not all: Zuromski does suggest dunking an obligatory side of fries in yet another condiment with cachet: truffle-flavored mayonnaise. Which just goes to show that there’s always something that can be elevated by adding gourmet touches.

Today’s gourmet

Logically, condiments and sauces should be more of a side show than even the side dish itself. But chefs and product developers are showing them as much respect as they do anything else they put on the plate. But the idea that sauces...
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can be sophisticated is hardly new. Eighteenth-century chef Marie-Antoine Carême, an ardent systematist and perhaps the original food snob, established a system of basing sauces on four “mother sauce” recipes—béchamel, espagnole, hollandaise and velouté—that, for years, was the basis of French cuisine, the sine qua non of “gourmet.”

Today’s gourmet courts much wider interpretation, and its freewheeling spirit shines in the sheer range of sauces that suggest panache to contemporary consumers. Notes Sean Craig, senior executive chef, Spicetec Flavors & Seasonings, Omaha, NE: “Gourmet can, and does, equal Carême’s classic mother sauces, but more and more it also refers to more approachable foods and techniques.”

The story for Rachel Zemser, CCS, a food science and industry consultant in Burlingame, CA, is the diversification—even democratization—of the gourmet brand. “Years ago, it used to be somewhat one-dimensional,” she says. “There was fine-dining, like French or Italian, that was gourmet, and then there was home-cooking, like pork chops or hamburgers—and that was definitely not.” With the expansion and influence of popular culinary media, it was only a matter of time before palates started craving alternatives. The upshot, she says, is that “these days, gourmet can mean ethnic, street food, artisanal, homemade, locally grown and organic. Now, everything can go from being ordinary to being gourmet.”

The concept also connotes a “striving for more-authentic flavors,” says Zuromski. “If you make a chimichurri sauce, you really want to duplicate the actual flavor profile of a true chimichurri. You’re not trying to mask it or dumb it down. People are more adventuresome in the flavors they’re looking for.”

All about the ingredients

None of this makes it easier to pin down what those flavors are—or what makes them gourmet. “In the kitchen,” Craig says, “we call it adding love to the dish—spending the time and effort to create an elevated experience.”

How do you turn “love” into flavor, texture, appearance and a workable formulation? Most experts contend that it’s a matter of quality in equaling quality out. “It is necessary to start with high-quality ingredients in order to make a gourmet product,” says Mark Purpura, technical services manager, Advanced Food Systems, Somerset, NJ.

When consumers shell out for a high-end sauce, they expect it to contain “real foods” that they recognize by sight, texture and taste. According to Joe Leslie, industrial marketing manager and Midwest sales manager, Kikkoman Sales USA, Inc., San Francisco, piece integrity is key. “Consumers want to see actual pieces of ginger, garlic or green onion rather than something that was made from a powder,” he says. “Those ingredients generally are harder to get, they’re higher-quality and they’re more expensive, but they add more. A powdered flavor wouldn’t give the same mouthfeel or impression that real pieces would.”

Zuromski points to the rise of “label geeks,” too. “People are looking at labels more,” he says, “and they want to know what’s in the condiment or sauce they’re buying.” Right off the bat, that suggests steering clear of high-fructose corn syrup due to its consumer perception, or partially hydrogenated oils for their unhealthy trans fats. But, with retailers like Whole Foods publishing entire lists of ingredients

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that, despite their utility, find no quarter on store shelves, concerns go well beyond those two embattled ingredients.

For example, Leslie emphasizes the culinary credibility of sauces and condiments formulated sans flavor-enhancer additives like hydrolyzed vegetable protein or MSG. “In Japan, you can’t even call your product soy sauce unless it is completely fermented,” he says. “It can’t have any artificial ingredients or flavor enhancers. We’ve always been in that camp, and luckily for us, that’s the way the market has gone, too.”

As Purpura says, “people often think natural is a prerequisite for gourmet.” But natural ingredients must be functional, too, especially in sauces that demand microwave performance, for instance, or perhaps a 10-month shelf life in a jar. “More functional ingredients are becoming available to help formulators develop and stabilize gourmet types of food,” he says. He notes that, over the last two years, his company has spent “a lot of time developing texture and flavor systems that use native food starches, natural flavors and antioxidants to create clean-label binders, and stabilizer systems for meats and sauces. These ingredients can be used to help improve the stability of traditional gourmet recipes and convert them into formulas that can be produced on an industrial scale. Processors can use these ingredients to make gourmet sauces that would typically need to be served quickly, and to make them freeze/thaw-stable.”

Janet Carver, Culinology team leader, National Starch Food Innovation, Bridgewater, NJ, says her company’s functional native starches “allow food processors to formulate into the product the process tolerance, shelf stability and final consumer preparation and texture that are typically only available with modified food starches or other ingredients that cannot appear on a clean ingredient deck.”

For sauces traditionally made with flour, Carver says her company’s functional wheat flours can provide functionality, texture and opacity with a simple “wheat flour” label declaration. To make a shelf-stable beurre blanc, she says, one of these flours can substitute for the roux that a homemade sauce would contain. “It provides the required stability, plus the viscosity and homestyle appearance of flour,” she says.

Labor of love

High-quality, clean-label ingredients may get all the attention, but, says Craig, “the first ingredient is labor.” A condiment or sauce with culinary integrity is always the
product of careful effort, even if it didn’t spend hours reducing on the stove.

In foodservice, “when there is not a chef or cook onsite, a restaurant can still distinguish itself with gourmet sauces that have been commercialized by manufacturers specifically to emulate a chef’s techniques and flavors, but in larger, more-consistent quantities,” notes Steve Solomon, menu strategist, Mushroom Council, San Jose, CA. By building on a gold standard “developed by chefs for chefs at chains,” he says, these sauces “are made to the highest quality level at the price point needed.”

Retail sauces follow a similar model. In fact, sauce manufacturers have grown adept at hiding their products’ industrial origins. “Some retail items just have that homemade feel,” Craig says. “We leverage our reaction- and compound-flavor technology to bridge that ‘fresh-made in the back of the house’ flavor gap that’s often present in prepared sauces. That means taking the time to develop fire-roasted notes, deep caramelization, pan-seared flavors or a wok-fired character.”

Leslie adds that manufacturers can maximize quality by choosing prudent production processes. “If you’re making the sauce in a way that’s very harsh in its time/temperature combination, that could break down the flavor profile,” he says. “It may taste very ‘gourmet’ going into the cooking system, but if it’s done harshly, coming out it may be completely different as far as color and flavor go. Part of gourmet is taking the time to process correctly and gently.”

**Familiar with a twist**

Apply a gentle process to quality ingredients and you’ve laid the fundamentals of a high-end sauce or condiment—freeing you to play around with flavor profiles. And playful is an apt description for the profiles showing up on specialty shelves. “Some of what constitutes ‘gourmet’ can be summed up as familiarity with a twist,” Solomon says. “Orange is familiar, but combine it with fennel and you have a great sauce for seafood, chicken, pork or meatless items.” He lists other unconventional combos that succeed, including Cabernet and chocolate, ginger and beurre blanc, blackberry and barbecue, and shiitake mushroom and ketchup.

Speaking of ketchup, it’s one of those kitchen classics that comes up for an upgrade every so often. The makeover needn’t be complicated, Zuromski says. “Just do a sundried-tomato ketchup, or a roasted-onion and tomato ketchup,” he says. “That takes it to another level in terms of overall sensory profile.”

Craig’s kitchen has morphed ketchup into a fire-roasted cascabel adobo sauce, while adding a new angle to barbecue with Thai chiles.

The many permutations of barbecue offer fertile ground for elevating a sauce’s status. “It’s all about being authentic to the American region that it comes from,” Zemser says, through a considered choice of smoke, spice or sweet-savory balance.

Mayonnaise is another staple seeing its stock value rise. “There’s a just a barrage of flavored mayonnaises on the market now,” Zuromski says. In its favor is a recognizable ingredient deck with a standard of identity requiring it be made with real egg yolks. “From there, you can build it into a rich, delicious, creamy-textured sauce or condiment that then becomes many different things: tartar sauce, gribiche sauce, sauce Creole, rémoulade, aioli, rouille.”

**Gourmet goes global**

The sandwich trend has goosed demand for fancy mayo, Zuromski adds. He collaborated with a university on the development of a Vietnamese bánh mì with a sauce made from mayonnaise, sriracha, sesame oil and ginger. “That’s

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**MARKET SNAPSHOT**

**Despite Economy, Gourmet Foods Growing**

Even though consumers are still feeling the effects of a tight economy, they manage to find sufficient reason to purchase gourmet products. According to the Sept. 2010 report, “Gourmet, Specialty and Premium Foods, Beverages and Consumer Trends in the U.S., 8th Edition,” from Packaged Facts, Rockville, MD, approximately 20% of consumers seek gourmet products and 30% are willing to pay more for gourmet food products.

Consumers are generally dining out less and cooking more at home. Packaged Facts notes that this presents an opportunity for gourmet food manufacturers to develop appealing, restaurant-quality products that help culinary-aware consumers replicate the restaurant experience at home.

Such efforts have helped total sales of gourmet and/or premium foods and beverages through all U.S. retail channels increase 4% to more than $67 billion in 2009 (compared to sales of $65 billion in 2008). Packaged Facts projects that this market will approach $87 billion within the next five years, ticking a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5% with sales incrementally picking up more steam each year through 2014.

—The Editors
“And that went on a nice, crispy, fresh-baked French roll that we built out with a kimchi-type slaw, a little rice vinegar, thin-sliced jalapeños and pulled pork or chicken.” Not surprisingly, the students—members of a globally oriented generation—loved it.

As the bánh mì mayo illustrates, the European—and particularly French—connotations that “gourmet” once carried have shattered as cuisines throughout the world lay claim to the title. Conveniently for consumers, sauces and condiments are among the most-approachable entry points for exploring a new cuisine. They’re great vehicles for product developers looking to road-test international concepts, too.

“Cuisines from other countries can inspire chefs and food formulators to create new flavor profiles for traditional sauces and condiments,” Carver says. “We are seeing an increase in high-end ethnic sauces at retail, allowing consumers to have a fine-restaurant experience at home. Inspiration is coming from a variety of highly regionalized sources. For example, we see influences coming from Oaxacan cuisine—not just generalized Mexican. The cuisines of Northern and Southern Vietnam are different, too, but both exert an influence. And the growth of high-end street food is driven by regional cuisines. The goal in all cases is to provide an authentic, unique eating experience.”

So keep an eye out for spicy Tunisian harissa, or Indonesian ketjap manis, a soy sauce sweetened with palm sugar. Leslie notes that as recently as 15 years ago, adding such global profiles to mainstream formulations would’ve been called “fusion.” But in truth, he says, “it’s really not fusion at all, because sauces, like any other ingredients, are tools for creating flavor. People are learning how to use them better now.” Stirring black bean sauce into a sandwich spread, pairing fried chicken wings with a Japanese ponzu, or mixing mirin, a sweet, salted sake, into a salad dressing, is just another way of adding compelling flavor. “All provide unique flavor enhancement and balance.”

And that’s what “gourmet” is all about. As Solomon says: “A gourmet sauce doesn’t just add to the dish, it amplifies the dish. If it’s not special, indulgent, different—if it doesn’t help bring a dish to life—it’s not gourmet. And consumers can tell the difference.”

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