

A photograph of three ripe yellow tomatoes with green stems, arranged in a horizontal line on a dark, weathered wooden surface. The lighting is dramatic, casting long shadows to the right of the tomatoes. The background is a dark, textured wood.

FRESH

CULINARY
CONCEPTS

By Carolee Noury

PHOTOS: GABRIELLE CARBONE; (OPPOSITE) BEN ALSOP

Blue Hill yogurt is fresh and delicious.



Local food trends are changing, and the meetings and events industry is eating it up.

EACH YEAR brings fascinating changes to the culinary world, and the past year offered plenty. As we kick off 2016, some delightful themes are apparent. Healthy options that don't sacrifice taste are on the rise. Part of this is a tightening focus on crafting meals that stimulate all the senses. Even if you've never heard of the science of neurogastronomy, you may have experienced it. Chefs are serving up dishes with a directed effort to make dining experiences vibrant and memorable.

We continue to eat plenty of ice cream. Care to guess how many pounds of ice cream per person are sold in the U.S. each year? (See Trend No. 2 for the answer.) And we're looking for unusual flavors more than ever. Would you consider bacon ice cream? Corn? Basil? Or how about turnip yogurt? You can find them if you know where to look. Meanwhile, other indulgences are losing ground. Soda sales, for example, have continued to drop. Speaking of drink trends, the beloved party punchbowl

is back, and not just for house parties. Bars and caterers are utilizing this artistic, playful medium to scoop up mouthwatering beverages.

Whether you look to nature for your health remedies or not, turmeric is worth checking out. The long established natural medicine has made its way into the (bright yellow) spotlight. The list of known benefits seems to grow longer each day.

TREND NO. 1

Neurogastronomy: Full-Bodied Entrees

If the number five comes to mind when you consider how many senses humans have, you're not alone. It's a common belief dating to Aristotle's time. While scientists haven't come to a consensus on how many we have, 1,000 is a magic number when it comes to smell. It's estimated we have about that many odor receptors. Common cold symptoms serving as evidence, smell has an important role in how things taste. But how do our other senses—however many there are—impact the way we respond to food?

Neurogastronomy, a branch of neurology pioneered by Gordon Shepherd, professor of Neurobiology at Yale School of Medicine, focuses on the way the brain combines information from all our senses to determine flavor. To simplify the science, much more than taste and smell influence our relationship with food. Visual cues (like color), tactile cues (texture, temperature), even the sound food makes when chewed all have an impact. Culture can also play a role in what foods we select and how much we enjoy them. Many get past an initial resistance to the bitter quality of popular drinks like coffee and beer and foods like Brussels sprouts and pickles.

The most successful chefs learn what meals people really respond to and what preparations result in the most positive responses. Some chefs follow the science and incorporate its principles into their offerings and how they are served. This can include the dishes, silverware, wall colors, background noise/music, lighting and even whether napkins are cloth or paper. For others, like Scott Anderson, executive chef and co-owner of elements in Princeton, much of the process is second nature, gleaned from hours and hours of direct experience, rather than literature. "When it comes to eating, the actual sound of the food isn't as critical as when it's cooking," he says. At elements, where the kitchen is open and near to the dining area, those noises are also

A photograph showing a woman on the left and a man on the right, both wearing dark blue long-sleeved shirts and blue jeans. The woman is wearing a colorful plaid headband and is eating a large ice cream cone. The man is wearing a tan baseball cap and is also eating an ice cream cone. They are standing in front of a white-framed glass door or window. The number '35' is visible on the door frame. The background shows an outdoor setting with trees and a building.

Princeton's The Bent Spoon delights gourmands with unusual ice cream flavors (pictured here and at right).

part of the package. "The sound of sizzling fajitas is a big part of the experience of eating them," Anderson says. "It's fun. But when it comes to cooking, the sound of the food can tell you if the heat is too high or too low."

There's a fine line between understanding the concept of neurogastronomy and over-relying on it. "There are definitely plenty of related things we do," Anderson adds. "Things that

come naturally after you've been doing this for a while, like keeping a lid on a dish to retain the maximum aroma when it's served. But you can get caught up worrying about things like what happens when you serve dessert on a certain color plate. There's a balance, I think. We like to use natural materials for our dishes, things like wood, sticks and river stones. And that definitely makes a difference to our guests."

PHOTOS: GUY AMBROSIO;
(OPPOSITE) GABRIELLE CARBONE



“I think it comes down to risk-taking in our lives. We take all kinds of risks every day. Trying an unusual ice cream is a small price to pay for that delicious reward in your mouth.”



TREND NO. 2

Savory Flavors Take the Bacon

According to the International Dairy Foods Association, we average almost 22 pounds of ice cream per person each year in the United States. Savory flavors (meaning not sweet) don't make up a large portion of those sales yet, but they're growing. With flavors like maple bacon, Sriracha and salt and pepper, there's something for every palate.

Princeton's beloved scoop shop The Bent Spoon serves a variety of small-batch artisanal

Water infused with fruit is pleasing to both palate and eye.

ice creams and sorbets. The flavors—made fresh daily—are often inspired by what’s available. One popular local harvest variety is sun gold tomato saffron sorbet. The sweet, bright tomatoes are only available at the quantity needed for about two weeks each summer. Other fast-selling varieties include basil, oyster, lobster, bacon (hot now, but a flavor The Bent Spoon has been serving for years) and shiitake mushrooms, to name a very few of their 550 varieties.

Gabrielle “Gab” Carbone says she and Matt Errico, co-proprietors of The Bent Spoon, were ready for some customer hesitations when they opened their doors in 2004. “At first, parents of young children in particular were likely to urge them to stick with a more standard flavor,” she says. “We have a sampling policy for exactly that reason. People of all ages can dive in and try whatever they want. Our small can include up to two flavors, so even with that size you can have more than one flavor. Now people expect strange from us. Little kids are ordering ricotta ice cream and asking when the basil and corn will be available. I think it comes down to risk-taking in our lives. We take all kinds of risks every day. Trying an unusual ice cream is a small price to pay for that delicious reward in your mouth.”

Carbone has no doubt that savory flavors will be in demand for a long time. The secret? “We don’t create our flavors for their shock value; we make them to taste delicious,” she says.

Want a dish to spark conversation at your next event? Savory twists on the classics are an excellent icebreaker.



TREND NO. 3

Soda Sales Fizzle

For the past 10 years, soda consumption has been on a steady decline. The specific reasons often cited are the high calorie count and the artificial ingredients, particularly synthetic sweeteners. More than ever, people are looking for something to fill the place of the former go-to nonalcoholic beverage on their event menus.

For Andrew Pantano, proprietor and executive chef for Culinary Creations, a café, pastry shop and full-service catering company, this often results in a unique recipe. He estimates that at least 70 percent of his wedding menus now involve “nonalcoholic specialty drinks.” His team has developed an extensive list of options. The most requested have tempting names like Watermelon Cooler, Cucumber Mint Water, Strawberry Basil and Meyer Lemon Purple Passion. Pantano notes that drinks change by season and encourages his clients to take that into account. The specialty drinks have high-quality ingredients and take longer to prepare (than say, twisting open a two liter bottle), so the resulting costs are higher. His team is dedicated to making the drinks memorable for all the right reasons. “We create drinks that coordinate with their colors and themes,” Pantano says. “And even more importantly, can be made with alcohol as well, so the recipe is more versatile.”

Water with a twist (or slice) of something offers an easy, inexpensive alternative. You can use whatever produce is handy: cucumber, strawberries, mint, lemon, blood orange or grapefruit. With the seemingly endless varieties of teas, iced tea is another well-loved option that is no longer rel-



TREND NO. 4

Dust off the Punchbowl



Welcome to the Working Week

One of Thomas' best-selling punches is called Welcome to the Working Week.

INGREDIENTS

- 750 ml. Owney's Original New York City Rum
- 250 ml. fresh lime juice
- 250 ml. simple syrup
- 250 ml. Fiji brand water
- 24 mint leaves
- 500 ml. clementine juice
- 6 segmented clementines

DIRECTIONS

In a large punch bowl, combine rum, lime, syrup, water and clementine juice. Stir until mixed. Add mint and the segmented clementines and allow to sit for 2 hours.

Upon serving, spoon over glasses filled with fresh ice and garnish with a sprig of mint and a clementine wheel.

IN HIS 2010 BOOK *PUNCH*, David Wondrich, a drink correspondent for *Esquire*, writes about the history of the party classic, complete with world-class recipes. Wondrich dates punch to its heyday in the 17th and 18th centuries, though its origins are unclear.

In the past, punch recipes generally consisted of five basic parts:

- » Lemon juice (or other sour)
- » Spice (or tea)
- » Spirits (rum or vodka most often)
- » Sugar (liquid works best)
- » Water (since tasty drinks are easy to knock back, this lessens the danger of over-imbibing)

Today with the many options for spirits, fruit, and added flavors, variations are practically limitless. And who says you need to stick to five? Why not add chunks of fruit—fresh or frozen—or the classic sherbet ring?

Punchbowls certainly aren't just for parties. They are holding court at events and in restaurants and bars. Stephen Thomas, mixologist for Crystal Springs Resort in Hardyston, says the nostalgia is part of the appeal. But more than that, it's the fact that quality, delicious drinks have staying—and recirculating—power. As far as inspiration goes, "They represent my life experiences and memories," says Thomas. And what better container for memories than that sparkling, beloved punchbowl?



Turmeric can be tossed into smoothies, salads, soups, or sautéed with some vegetables. Since curcumin is fat soluble, your body tends to get more of the nutrients when it is ingested with some healthy fat.

egated to the hot months. Like water, it works well with a variety of healthy additions.

If your guests are craving bubbles, a fruit juice spritzer offers crisp refreshment. This drink—generally one part of your favorite juice to three parts seltzer/other carbonated water—can be dressed up with fresh fruit or served as is. It's easy to forget how much healthier than soda it is.

TREND NO. 5

Time for Turmeric

Curcuma longa, better known by its common name turmeric, has been used for its medicinal qualities for over 4,000 years. Recent studies have brought this aromatic, bright orange-yellow herb into the spotlight. Its flavor, with hints of orange and ginger, is warm and peppery with a slight tang. Turmeric is best known for its role in various curries, but it's also frequently used as a natural colorant. The bold yellow color of table mustard is usually due in part to this versatile spice.

Two teaspoons of turmeric provide 17 percent of the Dietary Reference Value (DRV) of manganese and 10 percent the DRV of iron. The University Of Maryland Medical Center lists many additional medical benefits including: fights inflammation; treats digestive ailments; acts as an antioxidant to fight free radicals linked to cancer; and reduces and prevents blood clots.

A 2006 study from Ah-Ng Tony Kong, professor of the Ernest Mario School of Pharmacy at Rutgers University, and colleagues found

that curcumin, the active component of turmeric, in combination with certain vegetables (including broccoli and cabbage) was effective for treating and preventing prostate cancer. In 2013, Sanmukhani et al. found curcumin offered study participants with Major Depressive Disorder similar, but not as effective, relief when compared to those taking fluoxetine, a prescription antidepressant.

Jennifer “Dr. Jen” Phillips, a naturopathic physician in the Cherry Hill area, says she commonly recommends turmeric to patients for the treatment of various inflammations and chronic injuries. “I recommend a high dose encapsulation or a beverage made with turmeric, coconut milk, black pepper and a bit of honey. It is also known as ‘Golden Milk’ and is a popular Ayurvedic therapy,” she says. This drink once brought Phillips a “total recovery” from a painful ankle sprain after two days of drinking it every four hours.

While turmeric is not a suitable substitute for medical care, it's hard to find a reason not to include more of it in your diet. If the supplement doesn't sound good, an online search will offer plenty of options (over 4 million hits at the time this piece was written). Or add it to meals where a little peppery flavor would benefit or where it could be easily hidden. Turmeric can be tossed into smoothies, salads, soups, or sautéed with some vegetables. Since curcumin is fat soluble, your body tends to get more of the nutrients when it is ingested with some healthy fat. Also, studies have found that black pepper increases the amount of curcumin that survives the digestive process, allowing more to pass into the body in its most useful state. 🍷

Turmeric is often touted for its many health benefits.



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