

# FLAVOR

## & THE MENU

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FLAVOR TRENDS, STRATEGIES *and* SOLUTIONS  
for Menu Development



At Vie near Chicago, pickles extend the shelf life of local produce and support chef Paul Virant's respect for seasonality and tradition.

# SWEET *and* SOUR POWER

House-made, locally sourced or proprietary, signature pickles pack a peck of flavor

BY ROBIN SCHEMP

Would a burger at San Francisco's Zuni Café be the same without the chartreuse zucchini pickles? Could a meal at New York City's Momofuku be as memorable without the standard kimchi accompaniment? Would the pork-belly sandwich at the wildly popular Cochon Butcher in New Orleans be as unctuous without those quick-pickled cucumbers?

Perhaps it is the advancement of locavorism, the desire to extend seasonal produce, a need to return to the roots of our nation's multi-ethnic foodways, the gastropub movement, the explosion of pig-centric cuisine and charcuterie — for whatever reason, pickles are enchanting upscale chefs. And they have great potential to help multi-unit operations stand out with signature flavors.

The big secret: House recipes and exceptional jarred pickles bring big flavor, extended seasonality, signature style and crisp vibrancy to the table and take very little extra effort or cost to serve.

## PICKLES TICKLE THE APPETITE

Once relegated to the role of condiment or overlooked accompaniment, pickles have evolved in sophisticated,

composed dishes, providing pep, snap and that critical sweet-acid contrast to rich, heavy flavors. While pickling was once a pre-refrigeration necessity for preserving

summer's produce, the technique has gone far beyond the standard salt- or acid-based wet solution; now, items are brined, acidified, fermented, flavored or sweetened, and chefs add aromatics, herbs, fruit, juices and fancy vinegars to impart their personal stamps.

It wasn't so long ago that most well-bred dinner tables in and out of the home were graced with an assortment of sweet and sour pickles,

set on the table in bowls, a relish tray

or even as part of a salad. And it is no secret why the quintessential back-bar jar of pickled eggs enticed. The salty-sweet tartness of pickled products prime the palate, and the crispy crunch arouses appetite.

Chefs and bartenders are making the most of this pickle power. At The Crow Bar and Kitchen in Corona del Mar Calif., chef/partner Scott Brandon offers a pot of pickles to start. His bar snack is loaded with an ever-changing

**CULINARY CUE:**  
Send out servers with updated relish trays filled with a variety of colorful, petite pickles, setting the stage and whetting the appetite while guests review the menu.

# GLOBAL Pickle Points

David Chang and his famous New York City Momofuku outlets deserve a lot of the credit for elevating the status of the modern pickle while also shining a light on pickling and fermenting ideas from other points of the globe. Chang's house-pickle plates often come with a dozen green-market farm options, both customary and novel. Drawing on his training and palate, Chang incorporates salty (soy daikon), spicy (kimchi), sour (pickled Kirbys), sweet (salt-and-sugar beets) and even umami (shiitake mushrooms) to complement nearly every dish, from bo ssam to sweetbreads. He also riffs textures, pairing soft, pickled greens with chicken wings or lining up crisp turnips beside his foie gras. Chang is a reminder that there's a wealth of pickle ideas around the globe:



Preserved lemons are an easy way to add a zesty Moroccan touch meat dishes.

**Continental and Eastern European** cuisine would be bland without pickles, relishes and krauts.

**Britain's** ploughman's lunches would suffer without Branston pickles, piccalilli or other sweet-savory touches.

**France** needs cornichon with its pâté.

**Russian** cuisine depends on its wide variety of pickles, such as lecho, pickled peppers, or cucumbers in currant juice to compose winter "salads."

**Scandinavian** culinary traditions, including the smorgasbord, require dilly vegetables and a wide variety of pickled fish.

Spicy **Indian** pickles are often made from fruits like lime, mango, green tomato or gooseberry and are considered digestion boosters as well as flavor enhancers.

Intense with spices, **South Asian** sun pickles are traditionally fermented in the sun with a citrus-salt cure.

Tsukemono and oshinko are vital to the **Japanese** table; these salty, soy- or miso-based assortments of sweet-savory pickled produce, such as plums, cabbage, carrots, cucumbers and daikon radish, add dimension to everything from plain rice dishes to soups and even tea or dessert.

Spicy garlic- and chile-infused kimchi, featuring fermented cabbage, cucumber or daikon, is a staple of **Korean** cuisine.

**Vietnamese** ca rot — quick sweet-and-sour, pickled, shredded carrots, radishes and cucumbers — cut the fat of pâté, pork or head cheese in a classic banh mi and is also great served as a palate cleanser, side or appetizer.

Vinegary pickled pequeno peppers, cooling sweet gherkins and fruit relishes like mango amchar enhance or tone down the spiciness of **West Indian** and **Caribbean** dishes.

Preserved lemons add salty zing to **Moroccan** and **Tunisian** fare.

Pickling turnips or cucumbers with beet juice, turmeric or red cabbage brings authenticity to **Mediterranean** and **Middle Eastern** maza, mezze or mains, adding sharpness, texture and color.

**Italian** antipasti (both classic and inventive) wouldn't be as peppy without pepperoncini or beautiful house-preserved giardiniera.

## CULINARY CUE:

Try high-impact colors, like sweet 'n sour Emerald Green Rat-Tail Radishes and pickled Profusely Pink Watermelon Radishes; the effect is "preppy radishes on acid."

array of vegetables — beans, baby purple carrots, Romesco cauliflower and pearl onions — all picked and pickled at local farms. Asparagus, beans and onions also do double duty in cocktails at The Crow.

## RELISHING THE HARVEST

Both garden-variety and exotic, heirloom, short-season produce are ripe for pickling, extending their season on the plate and allowing chefs to serve local products at a price that reflects the

abundance and low transportation costs. Progressive chefs are pickling plums and pretty purple cauliflower, colorful rainbow chard, fragrant fennel and all manner of mushrooms, melons and alliums when they are most plentiful.

At Barbara Lynch Gruppo properties in Boston, each operation's chef takes advantage of Plum Produce, a shop that gathers goods from Lynch's favorite farmers for use in her eateries and for retail. Each Gruppo chef is acutely aware that both classic and inventive pickles — from early spring garlic scapes to frost-touched heirloom roots — complement much of Lynch's

cuisine style and provide a sense of endless summer on every dish.

Her flagship No. 9 Park pairs “Pekin” Duck with winter-spiced sweet-and-sour watermelon pickles. At her more casual B&G Oyster, the lobster roll would be naked without the house-made bread-and-butters.

Likewise, her Butcher Shop’s beloved antipasti would be hum-drum without a profusion of pickled seasonal vegetables. In fact, Barbara Lynch Gruppo’s restaurants are associated so closely with pickles that the signature versions are jarred and sold at retail.

**PICKLES AND THE PUB**

As restaurant formats and styles scale back, gastropubs, casual trattoria or tavern-style counterparts are proliferating. One element of these less-formal eateries, where necessity has always been the mother of invention, is preserving. Putting pickles and pub fare together is an age-old culinary tradition, and chefs are learning old ways and experimenting with new methods to create interesting pickled products to accompany their rich meat-and-cheese platters.

At The Linkery in San Diego, pickles are integral to a menu of traditional and new-style charcuterie. Here, a house-pickled pastured chicken egg or a spicy jalapeño gets things started. Next, grass-fed bresaola, Berkshire mortadella and other house-cured meats are served aside colorful house-pickled vegetables.

At the Bluebird Tavern in Burlington, Vt., the menu emphasizes sustainable food raised by local farmers. With sources that change frequently to honor subtle shifts in the local harvest, pickles capture and extend these fleeting ingredients at their best, while also showcasing chef Aaron Josinsky’s simple but original gastropub cuisines.

Pickles as homey as mustard cukes and as diverse as chanterelles can be ordered on their own in a classic pub-style pickle pot and



LAURIE PROFFITT PHOTOGRAPHY FOR PROVINCE

also show up with dishes like potted salmon and the inventive fluke crudo with “tasty jade” cucumber and pork cracklin’.

At Province in Chicago, tiny gherkins balance the rich Cuban pork in these bocadillo bites.

**CULINARY CUE:**  
Onions are always abundant; vary sizes and colors and pre-grill them for a grilled four-allium relish.

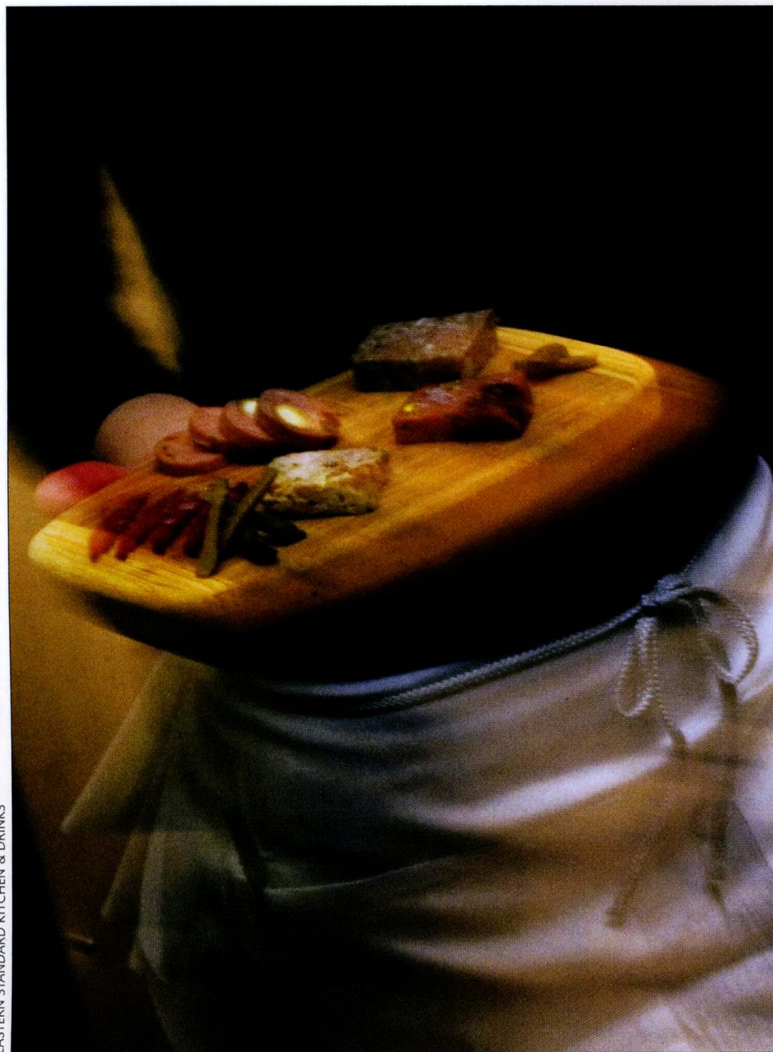
**GETTING PICKLED AT THE BAR**

Pickles also fit in with more-sophisticated bar culture. After all, pickled and preserved olives and onions have always found a home behind the bar, and cocktails are a terrific place to play

with pickles without making wholesale changes to your menu or concept.

As the culinary approach to mixology becomes more widespread, better garnishes are required; a proper, artfully mixed Gibson needs something more than a jarred onion to finish. For instance, at New York’s swanky music club, Le Poisson Rouge, the Ramp Gibson sports a house-pickled ramp in place of the onion.

**CULINARY CUE:**  
Pick up on the flavors of wine and wine cocktails with saba-pickled varietal grapes



EASTERN STANDARD KITCHEN & DRINKS

Pickles and informal fare go hand in hand, as the charcuterie board at Boston's Eastern Standard Kitchen & Drinks shows.

In an effort to tone down the sweet and dial up the savory in libations, pickles as common as half-sours and as regionally diverse as dilly beans or spicy okra are migrating to signature drinks. Bar chefs are adding heat with spicy, house-pickled peppers, balancing sweet and sour with Indian pickled cherries, representing seasonality with lightly acidulated white asparagus spears and showing quirky flair with whole pickled quail eggs.

Lancaster, Pa.'s aptly named Pickle Bar has a whole menu of pickle-garnished and infused cocktails. The Hot 'n Dirty Dill combines vodka, Tabasco sauce and a splash of house-made habanero-garlic pickle juice and is garnished with cucumber and a house-made garlic pickle.

**CULINARY CUES:**

For a crispy-tender touch, fry pickled Vidalia onions until crispy before tucking them into a grass-fed bacon burger with smoked tomato ketchup or a house-cured bacon-and-turkey club

**BREAD AND BUTTER**

Another outcome of the current pickle craze is the way chefs are turning sandwiches into works of art, adorning their creations with the perfect pickle.

Tom Colicchio's famous sandwich chain, 'wichcraft, has a list of pickles that grows continuously; his famed pork-and-pickles open-faced sandwich, layered with bread-and-butters, puts New Yorkers in a twitter when on special.

Under the Cochon umbrella in New Orleans, chefs Donald Link, Stephen Stryjewski and Warren Stephens incorporate every style of house pickles into a large portion of the menu as well as selling them by the jar at the Cochon Butcher and sWine Bar.

Pickles are not only part of their native Louisiana heritage but also a part of the diverse cultures (French, Italian, German and African) that make up New Orleans' primary cuisine style.

These chefs show why the pig and the pickle are so closely associated: Their zingy bite provides crunchy contrast to toothsome pork; the spice and acidity cut right through the sweet richness of smoked, grilled, succulent meat. The Cochon Muffaletta features pickled local peppers and olives, and the much-lauded, house-made hot dog is elevated by butcher's relish or barrel-fermented kraut.

At Umami Burger in Los Angeles, specialties are made to hit all the basic flavors; without pickles, they might be lost on the road to sweet, sour, salty, bitter and umami. The house pickle relish is made with umami-rich kombu seaweed. The turkey burger is served with a sweet-tart apple relish.

Hot and cold sandwiches with house-prepped or artisan-made pickles, relishes and condiments mean more opportunity for inventiveness and prove that from a bar-snack starter to burger topper or elaborate pork accompaniment, pickles pack major up-selling power. ☺

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