

**Food & Beverage**

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# Unusual spice application can add a pleasant surprise

**A** sorbet made of passion fruit, banana, mango and pineapple probably will taste good, but it won't exactly turn heads.

Tiffany MacIsaac, pastry chef at Birch & Barley in Washington, D.C., made such a sorbet and found that it mostly tasted like passion fruit.

"It had a really nice mouth feel, but the flavor wasn't that balanced," she said.

Wanting to create a dessert people would talk about, MacIsaac took a route many chefs across the country are taking. She began tweaking her more traditional dish with different flavors, creating combinations that surprise guests without scaring them away.

Instead of adding more mango and pineapple, she ran young ginger through her juicer and added that to the sorbet.

The ginger gave it some zip, but she wanted some warmth and heat, so she sprinkled in white and black pepper.

That put heat in the fore-

ground, but she wanted some in the background, too, so she added a healthy dose of cinnamon and a whisper of clove.

"The heat of the pepper is totally different from the heat of ginger, and the cinnamon and small amount of cloves provide a different dimension of warmth," she said.

Chef Maneet Chauhan of Vermilion in Chicago and At Vermilion in New York, makes a roasted cumin ice cream. He adds cardamom both to his blueberry sorbet and his mango flan.

Chickpeas are added to his peanut brittle.

Back at Birch & Barley, MacIsaac's husband, Kyle Bailey, who also is the restaurant's executive chef, spices up his yogurt with the Japanese citrus yuzu and espelette pepper — a type of chile cultivated in France that is enjoying popularity these days among American chefs in independent restaurants.

He uses that yogurt, which he strains overnight to remove excess liquid, to dress raw mackerel.

"When it's raw, mackerel is kind of a creamy fish, with small and tight muscle fibers," Bailey said. The strained yogurt is a similar texture, and the yuzu and espelette give it extra punch.

Saul Montiel, chef de cuisine at Gusto in New York, was looking for something to put in his mushroom risotto that would be surprising, but in a good way.

After a bit of experimentation he ended up adding thyme, Parmesan cheese and blueberries — tastes that he says play off of each other surprisingly well.

At Eastern Standard in Boston, chef Jeremy Sewal cures duck legs in salt, sugar, fennel, coriander and cocoa powder to make duck confit. He marinates tuna loin in garlic, mint, coffee, red wine, cumin and mustard.

His barbecue sauce contains espresso powder.

Also in Boston, at Basho, chef Jack Huang's coconut eel roll is snow crab and cucumber tempura wrapped with eel and topped with coconut.

"Since coconut is a mild flavor, its use in this roll doesn't overpower the other delicate ingredients: snow crab, cucumber and eel. It's important to keep the flavors balanced in order to maintain harmony in each dish," Huang said.

He also uses melon coconut to add texture to a sushi item made with foie gras, Fuji apple, sweet potato and wine teriyaki soy sauce.

Those last three ingredients' sweetness and acidity help balance the richness of the foie gras, he said.

At Morgan's in the Desert

in La Quinta, Calif., chef Jimmy Schmidt uses a number of spices to add depth or surprise to his food. He adds curry spices to his mango crème brûlée. His smoked sea salt, which he sprinkles on grilled sea scallops, is infused with vanilla. Cumin oil is added to his Viognier-fennel emulsion.

At Poste in Washington, D.C., chef Rob Weland makes a strawberry-rhubarb pudding cake with crème fraîche and vanilla — a pretty standard springtime dessert — but he throws a curveball by adding celery that comes from the same family farm as the rhubarb.

In Austin, Texas, at Uchi, pastry chef Philip Speer's flavor combinations include fish sauce with watermelon lime and basil.

He also uses avocado, grapefruit and fennel together, and he adds a surprise to a classic Italian combination of strawberry and black pepper by adding the Japanese herb shiso.

**At Birch & Barley in Washington, D.C., chef Kyle Bailey spices up his yogurt with the Japanese citrus yuzu.**