

JOHN PORTER

Future is hot and spicy

With a new year looming, it's a good time to start thinking about how to keep customers coming back for more in 2015. As you review your pub's menu repertoire, you might want to double check how confident the team would be if they were asked to knock out a New Orleans Po'boy one lunchtime? Come to that, would they feel able to whip up a Boston Meatloaf at short notice?

Both dishes crop up on a list of American foods that are being seen more on restaurant menus on this side of the pond, compiled by foodservice data specialist Horizons. In its latest Menurama survey of pub and restaurant menus, Horizons concludes that American dishes are now even more popular than British.

Of course, from a pub food perspective, this has to be taken with a hefty pinch of hand-harvested, mineral-rich authentic sea salt. The American dishes category includes the burger, which has been a mainstay of British menus for some time. Horizons also categorises Italian food as Britain's most popular style overall. That's only confusing until you count the number of pizza restaurants and takeaways in a typical town centre.

Whatever their culinary roots may be, burgers and pizzas have probably been around long enough to be considered as naturalised British food. In their place is a new wave of imported dishes that are stirring up consumers' palates.

As mentioned a few issues ago, other American classics such as hot dogs and pulled pork have been growing strongly on menus for a while. Beyond US cuisine, Horizons has also identified Mexican dishes such as burritos and fajitas, as well as more Oriental and Middle



Eastern flavours, appearing on menus. There are a number of reasons for this:

- The continued boom in casual dining has created serious competition amongst restaurant brands. The fight for the best sites and a share of consumer spend means that more new menu ideas than ever are being introduced.
- While the economic recovery is still fragile in some areas, the evidence is that consumers are generally spending a bit more and willing to experiment. Diners who are cautious when money's tight are more likely to try something unusual when they're confident about cash.
- As a nation, we prefer spicier flavours than we used to. Analysis of everything from ready meals to menu trends shows that our palate preference is getting hotter, with ingredients such as chilli, cayenne pepper and hot sauce, and spicy food styles such as jerk, Cajun and Mexican, on the up. For pubs, of course, this has the added advantage of encouraging customers to enjoy a cold beer with their spicy meal.
- Sharing platters, tapas-style small plates and hand-held food are increasingly popular, and many imported dishes work well in these formats.

As ever, no one is suggesting that imported dishes will replace traditional pub food favourites.

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However, offering something different alongside the best sellers broadens a menu's appeal. So just in case you get asked, it might be worth knowing what some of the up-and-coming imported dishes involve. Remember, you don't need to be 100% authentic; the trick is staying true to the spirit of the original while adapting it to British tastes.

- **New Orleans Po'boy:** a spicy prawn sandwich served in a fresh French baguette. Season the prawns liberally with garlic, cayenne pepper and any other spices you fancy, fry it all up and serve it in the baguette while the mix is still sizzling.
- **Boston Meatloaf:** popularised by US Boston Market restaurant chain, this is a mix of spiced and seasoned beef mince, cooked in a loaf shape and topped late in the cooking process with barbecue sauce to give it a spicy glaze.
- **Philly Cheese Steak:** an upmarket take on the classic cheeseburger, made with thinly sliced strips of fried steak, topped with melted cheese and served in a sandwich, with additional fillings including onion, mushrooms, sauces and seasonings according to taste.



- **Macaroni cheese:** Mac 'n' Cheese is being seen on more British menus, driven in part by the fact that it's very straightforward to customise. Along with the popular addition of pulled pork, Horizons has spotted variations such as Crayfish Mac 'n' Cheese and Fennel Sausage Mac 'n' Cheese. By adding a few well-chosen ingredients, you can create a dish unique to your pub's menu.



- **Fajita:** moving south of the border to Mexico, the fajita is a great sharing dish for pubs. Serve up strips of fried chicken with dishes of fresh peppers, onions and other veg, and invite groups of customers to assemble their own fajita by filling up a tortilla flatbread and adding toppings such as barbecue sauce, guacamole and sour cream.
- **Burrito:** also made with tortillas, Burritos features strips of meat, veg including refried beans, sauces and spices, and topped with cheeses before being oven baked to order.

With a little bit of online recipe research and a few practical menu development sessions in the kitchen, these dishes and many others can be adapted and customised to boost your food offer's appeal, as well as giving the pub a point of difference in an ever more competitive market. Time to spice things up! 🌶️