

TOP 10 TRENDS FOR 2016

Hot Harissa

With the search on for the next Sriracha, this fiery, complex chile paste is primed and ready

By Katie Ayoub

Thanks to the trail blazed by Sriracha, a growing number of chefs are eager to introduce a more layered, intriguing element of heat. And there's certainly a lot of room for hot sauces with many of today's consumers clamoring for bold flavors. As diners continue their exploration in this category, Buffalo sauce gives way to chipotle, chipotle paves the way for habanero and jalapeño, and Sriracha opens the door for harissa, bursting with regal color, depth of character and culinary pedigree.

Harissa is a Tunisian chile paste made with oil, chiles, coriander, cumin, garlic, lemon and sometimes caraway or rose water. The Guardian recently described it as "Sriracha with a savory backbone." Chefs are exploring its versatility. Whether rubbed into chicken thighs as a marinade, drizzled over roasted vegetables or simply added to ketchup, harissa adds a jolt of heat with an undertow of bright citrus and aromatic spice. At Revolutionario, a taqueria in south Los Angeles known for its North African tacos, diners can choose from red, green or habanero harissa. At Hunky Dory in Houston, hearth-grilled eggplant is served over a rocket salad with harissa dressing and fried eggplant croutons.

"Harissa is the poster child for next-gen Sriracha sauces, all redolent of diverse and flavorful terroir and cuisines: peri peri, adobo, gochujang. Harissa is high in flavor, not just spice, and a little goes a long way toward enlivening a dish, whether directly applied, mixed into a dressing, butter or other calming base, folded into a purée or just served as a dip or side." - Robin Schempp

Apart from flavor and heat, harissa brings a culinary upgrade to the table. "In many ways, harissa satisfies a longstanding American love affair with hot sauce; it's part of the same trend that put Tabasco and Sriracha on the map," says India Mandelkern, strategist for The Culinary Edge. But don't regard harissa as a passing fad. Hip places like San Francisco's Michelin-studded Aziza or New York's cool and casual Cafe Mogador have



Moroccan Stacked Dip from Brick House Tavern + Tap includes white bean purée, harissa, yogurt, oven-roasted tomatoes, smashed avocados, smoked cheddar and chopped olives served with grilled naan.

brought the spicy dip into the modern American pantry. “Harissa’s subtle color, texture, and flavor variations across cultures give it a special air of authenticity. Unlike your standard bottled hot sauce, harissa tastes exotic yet pastoral, sophisticated yet handmade,” says Mandelkern.

Whether housemade or brought in, harissa’s exoticism translates to premium perception. “Where some other popular ethnic condiments are manufactured, harissa can be made in house,” says Daniel Campbell, R&D chef with

Food IQ. “Even if you’re unable to make the paste back of house, a purchased harissa can be used to develop easy, unique, speed-scratch items. Try adding it to mayonnaise, soups, marinara sauces or chili.”

Flavorful Heat

by Rob Corliss

Flavorful heat is the long-term trend, and Sriracha has paved the way for the next stars. Harissa may very well be the next to catch on. There continues to be a growing fascination with heat, as consumer craving for bold flavors expands.

Create adaptations of harissa, specific to your brand, by experimenting with chile varieties, toasting of spices and ingredient ratios. Try drizzling melted butter and harissa over popcorn or use when roasting mixed nuts.

Easy Applications:

- Whipped into butter
- Infused in cheese
- Used in powdered or dried forms
- Rubbed on proteins and vegetables
- Mixed into dips, sauces and spreads

Driven by Versatility

Harissa is, of course, a natural fit with Mediterranean fare, like lamb, fish, tagine, eggplant, tomatoes and olives. But its potential lies in its broad versatility. “Harissa can start in traditional dishes, then expand outside its comfort zone by being paired with nonthreatening items like burgers,” says Suzy Badaracco, president of Culinary Tides. “Harissa already has a roadmap—simply follow on the coattails of Sriracha and you can’t go wrong.” At the Mediterranean Exploration Company in Portland, Ore., harissa shows up often. And although harissa fits in naturally here because of the Mediterranean theme, the dishes could easily live on broader menus. The Moorish Chicken Kebab stars harissa, fried garlic and olive salt. Fried anchovies get a hit of green harissa (made green with the addition of green bell pepper, spinach and/or parsley), onion, hazelnuts and baharat. And at the bar, a housemade harissa bitters graces a rotating list of cocktails. Further showcasing its versatility, at Timna in New York, a Moroccan michelada sports lager with harissa, preserved lemon peel, fresh lemon juice and smoked paprika salt.



At The Dutch in Miami Beach, harissa paste is a key element in the rub for the BBQ Harissa Lamb Shoulder, served with pita and raita.

Harissa is undoubtedly part of the larger umbrella trend of flavor-forward heat. “What is unique about harissa is that it’s breaking out of the heavy Asian influence in foodservice, and is rising above the rut Middle Eastern food seems to have fallen into despite years of interest waxing and waning,” says Maeve Webster, president of Webster Consulting. Its versatility will drive harissa’s growth in foodservice, where chefs can feature it as a condiment on its own or used as a component for signature flavor, like harissa ketchup and harissa-glazed hamburgers.

Underwood Bar & Bistro in Graton, Calif., serves harissa french fries with cilantro, scallions and lime. “It will be interesting to see if harissa can keep up its ascendancy in the face of so much Asian influence and the continued growth of gochujang, but given Americans’ seemingly insatiable desire for hot and spicy flavors, there seems to be room for everyone at the hot table.”

“Harissa’s trinity of cumin, coriander and caraway adds a layer of complexity that Sriracha never had. It is a lovely mixture, where fresh garlic, dried chiles and spices come together in a versatile olive-oil-rich concoction. Like Sriracha, this sauce has the potential to cross cultural barriers and be used across the global cuisine landscape.” - Robert Danhi

5 Harissa Hits

by Kathy Casey

Harissa can play in all menu categories, bringing a bright complexity to all manner of items:

- Toss warm, oven-roasted olives with harissa.
- Serve harissa-glazed chicken wings with a Greek yogurt-herb dip.
- Make a citrus drizzle with harissa and toss with arugula and thinly shaved onions to top a sandwich or use as a finishing sauce for salads.
- Drizzle a harissa-lime-honey blend over fresh melon for a unique flavor presentation.
- Mix harissa into caramel or chocolate sauce, adding a savory element to a dessert-menu inclusion.

Menu Potential



Hearth-grilled eggplant is served over couscous and rocket salad with harissa dressing and fried eggplant croutons at Hunky Dory in Houston.

Some chefs have taken notice of harissa's star power, working it into LTOs and R&D efforts. At the popular produce-forward concept Tender Greens, harissa-rubbed pork loin dresses up an otherwise conventional sandwich. "Whisked into salad dressing or dolloped on avocado toast, harissa is equally appropriate for day or night. These days, it's almost impossible to break the rules," says Mandelkern. A recent LTO at Champps Kitchen + Bar saw a Grilled Harissa Meatloaf, made with turkey, basil, harissa, sun-dried tomatoes and onion, then topped with a rosemary-mushroom gravy. Sable in Chicago features lamb pops with a cumin glaze, harissa and spiced cashews.

At Oleana, in Cambridge, Mass., known for its eastern Mediterranean menu, Chef/Owner Ana Sortun makes her own harissa and also sources it from an artisanal producer. Her recipe features sun-dried tomato, ras el hanout, dried chiles, olive oil, lemon and garlic. She whips it into goat cheese, serving it over braised or grilled lamb. She also stirs harissa into the batter of her chickpea pancakes, and finishes a carrot soup with a swirl, adding both spice and body. Sortun also drizzles it over fried

Brussels sprouts or chickpea fries. "Harissa has a deeper, more complex flavor than Sriracha," she says. "It's not just about heat and vinegar." She advises that if a commercial product is used, it should be cut with water and vinegar. "If not, it's just too spicy," she says.

Bob Okura, The Cheesecake Factory's vice president of culinary development and corporate executive chef, thinks he may have tried harissa on the menu a bit too early in its trend cycle. A few years ago, he ran a Moroccan Chicken with Garlic Couscous, where the chicken was both marinated and glazed with harissa. "Our guests who tried it loved the dish and said it was one of the most flavorful chicken dishes that they'd ever had," he says. "They were also happy because they perceived it as a slightly healthier option on our menu. But my feeling is that we may have been a little ahead of our time with this one." Okura is now renewing R&D efforts around harissa, and he hopes to find the right application for The Cheesecake Factory's Grand Lux Café menu.

At Brick House Tavern + Tap, with 21 units, diners can find a Moroccan Stacked Dip starring white bean purée, harissa, yogurt, oven-roasted tomatoes, smashed avocado, smoked cheddar and chopped olives, served with grilled naan. "This is our version of a seven-layer dip," says Tim Griffin, director of culinary innovation for Ignite Restaurant Group, the Houston-based parent company of Brick House. He says the harissa in this application acts like salsa. "It's really a North African salsa—that's a good way to describe it to our guests," he says. He currently sources a refrigerated product that's on the milder side, but with deep flavor, including caraway.

“When looking at developing recipes around harissa, it’s great to think of it as a substitute for pesto,” says Griffin. Consider it in a marinara sauce for a Moroccan-style pizza sauce or as an add-in to mayonnaise for a flatbread sandwich. “Right now, we’re doing some R&D with it, adding it to roast chicken,” he says. “It really perks up the dish with a bit of heat and flavor.”

Griffin emphasizes how important it is today to offer guests a bit of adventure. “Our consumers like to try new things,” he says. “They crave that, and harissa offers something unique but not too exotic. It’s perfect for us.”

“Harissa provides a punch of heat while delivering a bold, well-rounded flavor system. It’s a versatile, chef-driven condiment that can be made signature by altering chiles and spices. You can use a variety of chiles like guajillo, New Mexico chile, or even an earthy ancho or pasilla chile. The chiles, combined with other spices such as caraway, coriander and cumin, and blended with olive oil, garlic, salt and grilled lemon, make a full-flavored condiment for sandwiches, dips, marinades or even a spice medium for hot wings. You can also use it to make a flavored oil that can be used as a finishing drizzle.” - Charlie Baggs

“Hot and spicy condiments such as harissa chile paste target Millennials looking for new flavor adventures. Add a swirl to ever-popular hummus for a smoky-sweet Middle Eastern appetizer with authentic menu appeal. Combine spicy harissa with mayo or ketchup for a signature condiment for burgers, grilled chicken sandwiches and flatbread wraps, or menu as a fiery-hot dipping sauce for fries and crispy appetizers.” - Gail Cunningham