

The next big thing(s)

Moving Flavor Forward

Givaudan's Chef's Council helps flavorists discover new tastes

Chef Barry Lim, executive chef at Singapore's CHEFS!, likes to play with flavors—white cabbage with green papaya, duck confit with sesame oil, blanched banana with coconut milk. Brothers Josep and Jordi Roca of Spain's El Celler de Can Roca (ranked 21st on *Restaurant* magazine's 2006 World's 50 Best Restaurants) seem to abhor conventional cooking, serving up such avant-garde fare as a raw oyster suspended in gelled sparkling wine and chocolate-encased chicken.

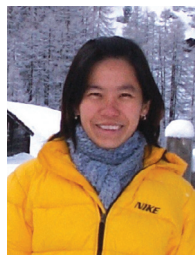
Lim and the Rocas are among a team of eight global chefs who participated in Givaudan's latest Chefs' Council^a at Napa Valley's COPIA (The American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts).^b The multiday event served as an interactive forum for flavor chemists and some of the world's best chefs to meet and exchange new and novel flavor innovations such as cocoa dashi (a curious twist on the traditional Japanese broth) with lemongrass noodles or single-bite *cappelletti* ravioli presented in a spoon with balsamic caramel. You read that right.

Beauty in Simplicity

Givaudan flavorist Lee Hiang Phoon was particularly impressed with the dishes presented by chef Alex Atala of Sao Paulo's DOM, including his pineapple-stuffed chicken, which possessed a pleasant characteristic estery note. "Make the dish the star," says Phoon, who finds that "outrageous complexity" is overrated. She believes that good flavor is about letting the individual elements shine through, not about covering things up. Senior flavorist Deize Andrade was inspired by Atala's mushrooms with tucupi, a sauce consisting of manioc/cassava and vegetables—a fairly traditional dish.



Deize Andrade



Lee Hiang Phoon

Another example Phoon cited was chef Giancarlo Perbellini's (of Perbellini restaurant in Verona, Italy) risotto with fennel. Phoon tasted the risotto without the sauce and found it pleasantly cloying. She declared the dish "well-highlighted and shaded," happily adding that the accompanying sauce had a clear purpose. "Everything you place on a dish should serve a purpose," she said. Meanwhile, Andrade found purpose in Perbellini's coquille with cream, which combined seafood, egg cream, cucumber and a hint of almond, simple elements that built into something far more complex.

Beauty in Complexity

"For me," says savory application manager (France) Sylvain Jouët, "the most interesting dish was the dessert from the Roca brothers in which they worked with a perfumer to create a dessert similar to a perfume."

The scent that inspired the Roca brothers was *Carolina Herrera*, and the gorgeous dish it sparked included raspberry gelatin, passion fruit, vanilla and edible flowers arranged just so to mimic the individual layers of the scent's notes. "This is a very difficult exercise," says Jouët, "and the result was perfect. I think that you must have a very creative mind for this kind of exercise because it's not just a technical approach."

Indeed, the Roca brothers brand their approach to cooking as techno-emotional, connecting with diners on a base emotional level. To illustrate, the brothers served an escargot in a gel that tasted of soil and sea, presenting the food in its natural environment. Here they married leading-edge culinary skill to their affections for their homeland.

^aChef's Council is trademarked by Givaudan;

^bFor a recap of Givaudan's Chefs' Council, visit www.perfumerflavorist.com and click on January Web Exclusives.

If the Rocas have a brother in arms, it must be chef Wylie Dufresne (of New York's wd~50), who often treats his kitchen like a lighthearted laboratory, producing such forward-looking gems as the "carrot-coconut sunny-side up," a pseudo fried egg with a carrot juice yolk that runs when broken and a spongy coconut "egg white" touched with cardamom. When asked why he would concoct such a thing, Dufresne said that he likes eggs, that they hold for him an aura of nostalgia and that he wanted to respond to that somehow in his kitchen. Sometimes even the most novel culinary creations have true emotional underpinnings.

Sources of Inspiration

Givaudan's Chef Council events don't happen every day, so where do flavorists turn to spark their creative energies? Phoon says she finds her inspiration, "when I travel and when I'm cooking for people." For her, the concept is simple, "Loved ones, memories—this is what flavor is about." Andrade agrees that globetrotting is a great resource for the creative flavorist. She finds inspiration through traveling, reading, interacting with other cultures and talking to people. Says Phoon, who has spent time in Switzerland, the United States and Singapore, "The best way to learn [about the people of] another culture is to learn how they cook their food."

"My life is driven by food," says Jouët, which is no understatement. By his estimation, 90% of his friends work with food in some capacity. His wife is a boutique director with Lenôtre. In addition to friends and family, Jouët looks to *Thuribles* magazine for cuisine inspiration. But of course he also gets new ideas by going straight to the source: eating. "[At restaurants] I try everything, even if I don't like the ingredients of the dish—just to try an unusual taste combination such as a rose infusion in a roasted lamb juice."

So after all this input, what flavors is Jouët interested in? "The flavors that excite me at the moment are all spices—tamarind seeds, macadamia nuts, dried flowers, and new combinations of tastes such as chocolate/camembert, foie gras/chocolate, and rose/lamb." Meanwhile, Andrade's current interests are of the sweltering sort. "Presently," she says, "I'm very excited about the fragrant and spicy chilies from Mexico."

From Council to Bench: Creating Successful Flavors

Sometimes all of this brainstorming and experimentation can be a bit overwhelming. How can flavorists translate cutting-edge culinary dishes and global trends analysis into good flavors? What can they take back with them to the office and the lab? Phoon says that a talented flavorist plays with moods, using layering and the element of surprise, in addition to authenticity. In the end, she says, "You have a flavor that can tell the consumer a story."

"Understanding what is going on in the kitchens all over the world was great," says Andrade of the

Chef's Council. For her, the highlights were, "Learning of other cultures and cooking techniques through the guest chefs and through the contact with my colleagues—chefs, flavorists and marketing people."

Andrade considers this collaborative spirit a must in her working process: "From brainstorming to the practical applications," she says, "I'm used to conversing with other flavorists, applications staff, chefs, and marketing and business partners to see what ideas will be of interest for the commercial people. The selected ideas then go to the lab bench for trials intended to check feasibility." But what ideas will flavorists take to the bench?

Flavors: a Look Ahead

"Asian influences will become more and more important," says Andrade, including, "ginger, cardamom, soy sauce, sesame and so on." Phoon sees authenticity being particularly important in this area: "I see people traveling a lot," she says. "They expect Thai to be authentic." Authenticity, she continues, isn't just about using the proper ingredients indigenous to a particular cuisine, but rather about proper blends of those signature ingredients—using them in an authentic way.

Not that food needs to remain faithful to its origins. Phoon believes that fusion can work, if it's nuanced. "Fusion is just a fad if you just let the peaks stand out," she says. But if the right balance can be struck, a flavorist can create a flavor that "has a nationality of its own." As she muses on the concept of fusion, Phoon wonders out loud, "How would salsa taste like if it had Sichuan pepper in it?" Hopefully one day consumers will get to find out.

Health and wellness: The way we eat is of course not just influenced by global culinary fusion, but also by health trends. "The use of seasonings," says Andrade, "will be wider to compensate fat and salt, which will be gradually reduced. Consumers," she continues, "will seek indulgence together with the concept of healthier products, leading to new fusion flavors, which will increase the use of sweet and sour and fruity and meat combinations."



Wylie Dufresne runs his kitchen like a lighthearted laboratory, creating delicious curiosities such as a cannelloni composed entirely of shrimp inside and out, employing what he calls "meat glue," the protein-binding enzyme transglutaminase.

photo courtesy of Jeff Kauck