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FOOD

Five Sauces for the Modern Cook

By SAMIN NOSRAT AUG. 2, 2016

Without apology or even a trace of sheepishness, Travis Lett confessed to being a thief.

Of course, the only person this pensive chef ever steals from is himself. At Gjelina, his Los Angeles restaurant with a large, ever-changing menu, “We’re constantly appropriating elements from dishes we’ve done in the past to create new combinations,” he said.

Upon receiving a delivery of squid so fresh it luminesces, he won’t conceive of a whole new way to serve it. Instead he’ll scan the previous night’s menu for the right sauce to repurpose, an enlivening texture or flavor. Soon, last night’s rack of lamb with preserved lemon tapenade becomes today’s grilled squid with green olives and preserved lemons.

There’s a lesson here: To improve your cooking, learn how to make and use sauce like a professional.

Chefs are masters of efficiency in the kitchen: maximum flavor for minimum effort. Shouldn’t that be your motto, too? The right sauce can elevate any dish — improving and balancing flavor, compensating for underseasoning or adding striking visual contrast.

Five basic types of sauces appear over and over again on menus and in cookbooks that feature the kind of vegetable-heavy, flavor-dense food that cooks

and eaters favor today: yogurt sauce, pepper sauce, herb sauce, tahini sauce and pesto. Master each one, and you'll immediately have access to the dozens of variations that descend from them, too.

Think of them as the new mother sauces, an updated version of the five mother sauces of French cuisine — which, after a century of guiding chefs and cooks, deserve a promotion to mother superior status.

Building on the work of the chef Marie-Antoine Carême from the early 19th century, Auguste Escoffier laid out his tidy thinking about sauces in his encyclopedic textbook, “Le Guide Culinaire,” published in 1903: First, master those mother sauces (béchamel, espagnole, velouté, hollandaise and tomate).

Then, gently tinker with any one of them to create an entirely new sauce. Add shallots, chervil, peppercorn and tarragon to hollandaise to get béarnaise for garnishing steak frites. Add grated Gruyère to béchamel to get Mornay, the classic cheese sauce.

For decades, professional cooks faithfully abided by these rules. Then, in the 1960s, Julia Child introduced the mother sauces to home cooks, who suddenly found themselves scurrying around town in search of gelatinous beef bones for making the stock required for sauce espagnole.

But over the last generation, the mother sauces have fallen out of favor with home cooks and professionals alike. They are rich and thick and involve extensive (or at least attentive) cooking time.

“The problem with the classic mother sauces,” according to the chef Michael Solomonov, who cooks modern Israeli food at his restaurant Zahav in Philadelphia, “is that most of them are made with roux. Now, roux is out. Nobody uses it, except when you’re making macaroni and cheese.”

Mr. Lett, of Gjelina, finds that lighter condiments are far more versatile than their richer ancestors, especially with the shifting emphasis toward fresh seasonal ingredients.

"If I'm going to make a lamb reduction out of lamb stock and red wine and tomato and fennel, that can be delicious, and that has a place in the culinary world," Mr. Lett said. "I think it's safe to say that that belongs on a piece of lamb, and a piece of lamb only. However, if I make a mint-pistachio pesto, I can throw that on anything."

The pesto may not be as technically difficult to execute, he said, or require as much forethought. "But these herby sort of bright, aromatic emulsions that we can make quickly and repurpose into other things just fit into the sensibility of how we are cooking."

Then, like Mr. Lett, go on and cook what you're most comfortable cooking: roast chicken, grilled steak or fish, roasted vegetables, a pot of beans or rice. Pair it with a sauce to add vibrant flavor, texture and color. Like an artfully chosen belt or pair of shoes, the right sauce will transform the distinct elements of a dish into a unified statement of taste.

Eventually, you'll start thinking of meat and vegetables as accompaniments to sauce, instead of the other way around.

Learn more about the new mother sauces and find recipe pairings for each here.

Recipes: **Basic Yogurt Sauce** | **Basic Tahini Sauce** | **Basic Pepper Salsa** | **Basic Herb Salsa** | **Basic Pesto Sauce**

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