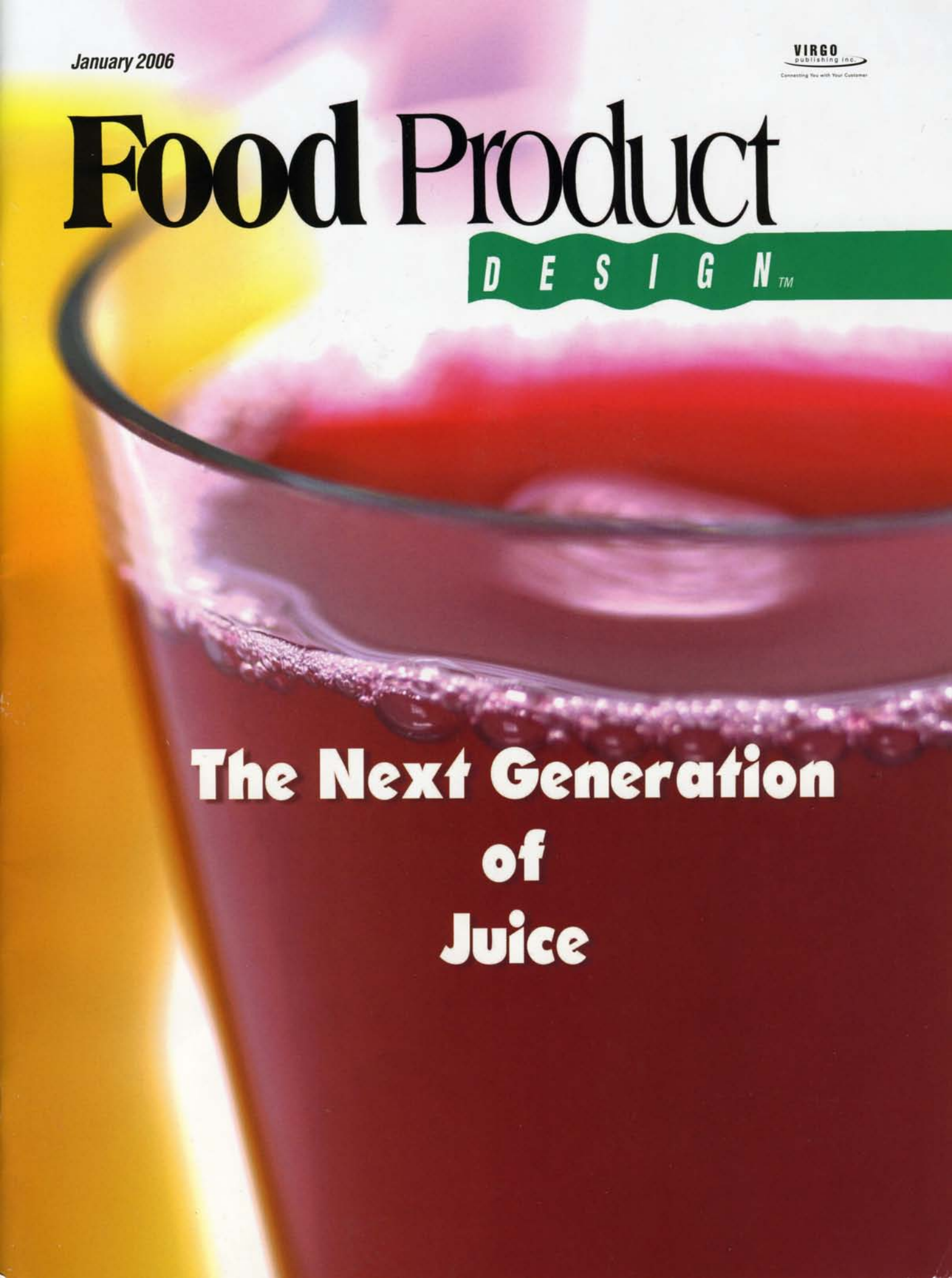


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**The Next Generation
of
Juice**

Encrusting for Healthier Flavor

By Andrew Hunter

There's a culinary revolution afoot at the casual-dining table. Savvy diners are demanding new and exciting flavors without wasting calories on excessive fat and bad carbs. Equally savvy chefs are answering the call with healthier, more-sophisticated ways of delivering flavor.

Encrusting beef, pork, poultry, fish and seafood with an aromatic blend of fresh herbs, toasted nuts, cheese, sea salt and breadcrumbs is one answer that's growing in popularity. The basic premise of a savory crust is to seal in the meat's natural juices while creating an added dimension of color, aroma, texture and flavor.

"Crust is a flashy new word on the American menu," says Jim Lombardy, vice president, culinary services, MiDAS Foods International, Oak Park, MI. "It implies a coating that's loaded with clean, natural flavors without excessive batters and breading."

Notes Bob Okura, vice president, culinary development and corporate executive chef for The Cheesecake Factory, Calabasas Hills, CA: "Crusting implies the item has been sautéed or baked versus deep-fried. Our guests are telling us they want crusted menu choices through the sheer volume of orders."

Anatomy of a crust

"A good crust takes advantage of juices released from the meat," says Lombardi. "It's like an 'in-pan infusion.' The sum of the meat juices and crust is more flavorful than the two parts."

Casual-dining concepts in the past might have hesitated from incorporating crusts on their menus, because crusts have always been a tool of fine-dining chefs and, therefore, perceived as difficult to execute en masse. The opposite is



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actually true. Paolo Lafata, executive chef, The Olive Garden, Orlando, FL, explains the simplicity of the crusting process. "For our Parmesan-crusted tilapia, we mix together breadcrumbs, Parmesan cheese, and salt and pepper," he says. "That's it."

A crust typically contains a percentage of breadcrumbs and dry cheese, which together absorb the water that's released from the meat as it cooks. The breadcrumbs, cheese and water form a slurry or glue that helps the crust adhere to the meat. Combine this slurry with a nut, like almonds, and the result is a crunchy texture that has great appeal. Other ingredients now active in the R&D flavor pantry include exotic sea salts, fresh herbs, citrus zest and mushroom powders. Each makes a unique contribution to the flavor, aroma and color of a crust without added fat.

"Applying a crust at some point in the preparation enhances the appearance of the meat," says Okura. "It's one more layer of visual enticement, and adds another layer of flavor and texture." For example, the Dijon-mustard-crust-ed chicken and crusted chicken Romano from The Cheesecake Factory. "A perfectly sautéed chicken breast is moist and juicy, but a crust enhances the chicken by building interest and extending the guest experience," he says.

Nutty nutrition

Consumers and nutritionists have a litany of requests they want to see better incorporated onto menus, including healthier fats, more fiber, less sodium and cholesterol, and definitely no *trans* fats. At the same time, the public is charging agile culinary professionals with creating a world of new and unique flavors.

Pulling nuts from the pantry shelf

is a wise choice to help meet these product-development challenges. In addition to meeting or exceeding most of the mentioned health considerations, nuts are bursting with flavor, they retain their crunch in the presence of moisture and, at the right temperature, brown in approximately the same amount of time it takes a typical cut of meat or fish fillet to cook.

A recent study commissioned by the Almond Board of California, Modesto, found that almonds are seen as the healthiest of nuts overall. Consumers associate the fat in almonds as "good, heart-healthy fat," and also recognize them as an excellent source of protein. Consumers think a menu item

cost of 13%, almonds have the high-impact potential to improve the food cost of an entire menu item while driving sales.

One example of an almond-crust-ed menu item is the beef tenderloin with an almond-bread crust and a Port-prune sauce created by Adrian Hoffman, group chef, Lark Creek Restaurant Group, San Francisco. He needed a nut that would lend a crunchy texture to the beef while accenting the rich flavor of the beef, port and prunes. Other examples include the almond-crust-ed halibut with sesame-garlic *ailoi* and wasabi cocktail sauce from Michael Weeks, Dragonfish, Seattle, and the chicken tenders encrusted with corn



Photo: The Hazelnut Council

with almonds is worth more money, and taste is their primary reason for purchase. Almonds contain enough glutamic acid, a flavor-enhancing amino acid, to provide an *umami* effect.

A group of surveyed operators say they can charge an additional \$0.80 for an entrée that incorporates \$0.10 of almonds, and these preferences might extend to the retail market. With a food

Some encrusted dishes have crust on one side, while others completely cover the item. A baked fish fillet with a crunchy hazelnut crust can serve as a more-healthy alternative to battered-and-fried versions.

flakes and crushed almonds at the Tin Can Tavern & Grille, St. Louis.

Layering flavors

Chefs who rely on one component, like the sauce, for example, to act as the primary flavor driver of a menu item are struggling to remain competitive in the evolving marketplace. "Our goal is to layer several simple flavors together to create complex flavors," says Paul Fleming, of P.F. Chang's

op complex flavors. "The crust is simple, but the quality of the ingredients is essential," he says. "The Parmesan cheese we use is rich and nutty, and the olive oil drizzled over the fish as a finishing flavor is intense. The vegetables, angel hair pasta and garlic-butter sauce finish the preparation."

Susan Dederen, senior director of culinary, la Madeleine French Bakery and Restaurant, Dallas, says that a combination of sautéing and baking or roast-

building complex flavors is universal. And savory crusts are central to all three.

Training on the line

Casual-dining chefs agree that while training is critical to the successful cooking of crusted menu items, it's no more critical than training other items on the menu. "The first crusted dish might have been a challenge, but our cooks are good at it now. Using a combination of cooking techniques — with sauté and baking — was the key to success," says Okura.

"At first we were concerned about the burn rate of the pecans, because the trout is sautéed," says Christine Gardener, director of marketing, Rockfish Seafood Grill. "But we adjusted down the flame, and the quality has been great."

When initially developing crusts, select preparation parameters might need adjusting. "We learned a lot at the beginning of the development process about time and temperature," says Dederen. "The right amount of clarified butter in a preheated pan works best." And while she paid special attention to the timing and sequencing of the dish, "we realized that the procedure wasn't that hard and that we shouldn't over-complicate it for our cooks."

Translating fresh

Crusting and breading, while similar in some respects, illustrate the Culinology® concept quite well. Crusting is an art while breading has been perfected to a science. The primary difference is the inclusion of flour at different stages of the breading process, which adds strength and durability. Crusts don't typically include flour, which means they have less structure and are more fragile. Breading

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fame and founder of Paul Lee's Chinese Kitchen, Scottsdale, AZ. "The layering of flavor happens at several points in the cooking process, and crusts play an important role."

Paul Lee's sesame-crusted chicken is crusted with seasoned sesame seeds and flour, quick-fried and coated with a spicy sweet and sour sauce. The sauce is traditional, but with an added dimension of fresh aromatics, including ginger and garlic. The chicken is finished with stir-fried vegetables, which add color, texture and a caramelized or smoky foundation from the wok. "We import a unique sesame seed that's toasted and salted. At first, we just used them in the crust, but our guests demanded that a dish of them also be served on the side," says Fleming.

Lafata emphasizes that complex preparations aren't necessary to devel-

ing is critical to the success of their herb-crusted pork tenderloin, which is served with a Dijon *demi-glace*. "The crust is made with fresh rosemary, garlic and orange peel, which are roughly chopped and mixed with breadcrumbs and Parmesan cheese. We roll the whole tenderloin in the rosemary mixture, sear it in clarified butter and then slow-roast the pork in a low oven." She notes that the rosemary and garlic form the overriding flavor. The crust delivers a golden crunch, but the inside stays very tender, providing a nice contrast. The spices build during the cooking process and infuse throughout meat.

While the flavors in the Sesame Crusted Chicken, Parmesan Crusted Tilapia, and Herb Crusted Pork Tenderloin concepts each originate from different parts of the globe, the concept of

companies have perfected the rigors of freeze/thaw cycles, reheating and long hold times. But it seems water loss and the change in the meat's cell structure during the freeze/thaw cycle is still a roadblock in the more-delicate art of manufacturing crusts.

Most fine-dining chefs develop their own crusts in-house in order to present the freshest-possible products to their customers. As Okura notes, "a product with a manufactured crust would have to be frozen." In white-tablecloth markets, frozen is often out of the question.

Lafata adds, "We crust the fish by hand every day in every restaurant, and we rely on the natural juices of the tilapia to make the crust stick during baking."

In some restaurants, entrées are encrusted to order. "At Rockfish, our fresh philosophy mandates that we crust our shrimp and trout to order," says Gardener, referring to the popular coconut-crust shrimp served with a wasabi dipping sauce and the new "sizzling" pecan trout.

However, fine-dining concepts frequently trickle-down into more-casual formats and the retail sector, and good opportunities exist for manufacturing crusts in the near future.

For example, Fleming discusses a coconut-almond prawn concept the Paul Lee's team is working on: "We wanted a product that had a lighter mouthfeel than a typical battered shrimp. We also wanted the almond and toasted coconut to really be the hero flavors." The marinade is made with coconut milk, chili paste, soy sauce and corn starch, which infuses the shrimp with a spicy coconut flavor. The shrimp are dredged in a crust of roasted and salted almonds, coconut and bread-crumbs before frying. Fleming contin-

ues: "The marinade is thick enough to hold onto the crust while they're being fried. And since they're fried from frozen, we think they have good manufacturing possibilities."

Kraft was a visionary of retail-crust concepts by introducing Shake 'N Bake® in 1965. Seasoned flour is the primary ingredient, but the concept of

By combining the healthful appeal of lean turkey with an almond-based crust, designers can appeal to consumers' seemingly disparate desire for foods that display healthful, yet indulgent, characteristics.



Photo: National Turkey Federation

relying on chicken's natural juices to adhere the crust, and baking not frying for a crispy coating, helped whet the public's appetite for crusts.

Manufacturers who are working on new encrusted concepts might find good success through retail channels as long as they deliver a product that maintains its crust through distribution and final preparation in the home. In most instances, manufacturers will want to formulate encrusted products that work well when cooked from frozen, since crusts typically deteriorate quickly in the refrigerator.

As encrusted concepts move through the food chain, eventually making their way into the freezer section of the local supermarket, restaurant

groups can extend their brand into retail by following the lead of chains like T.G.I. Friday's (Main Street Restaurant Group, Phoenix), which has several signature menu items in the freezer case.

Since the savvy diners fueling the menu revolution are also cost-conscious, R&D is working to create a white-tablecloth dining experience at casual-dining prices. Perhaps savory crusts will do more than quench the thirst for great flavor with better nutrition on our menus. These encrusted concepts have already begun to trickle-down into retail products. Perhaps the crusts will change the face of casual dining and the freezer case as we know it for years to come. ■