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Fusion

Fusion cuisine probably needs a quick explanation. Food is as political a subject as many more seemingly controversial subjects. We like to think of it as a nurturing part of our day, one hopefully that we can enjoy as we partake in it. But food often plays an extraordinary role in shaping history. The growing British demand and desire for tea led to the Opium Wars in China with huge historical repercussions. The belief that nutmeg would ward off, or even cure the plague, led, in a very roundabout way, to the claiming of Manhattan for the British (read the wonderful *Nathaniel's Nutmeg* by Giles Milton). Historically, food has been a very regional product due to the difficulties of moving it around in a fresh and edible state. But in recent years, travel, freight and refrigeration have improved immensely, and we are now able to sample things from exotic locations.

Whilst chefs in the Western World have happily been using dried herbs and spices from around the globe for centuries they haven't, historically, been able to get fresh ingredients. Something like green papaya for example is a new import to Europe from Asia, unlike dried saffron, ground ginger or black cardamom. Spices therefore have always been considered a traditional ingredient, and when used in a dish of whichever provenance (let's say a traditional English ginger loaf) the dish remains a classic. The minute we add something like Lebanese pomegranate molasses to it — it becomes something else — a Fusion version of a classic. When we add dates to it, it manages to remain classic since we've had dates in our repertoire for many years. Add tamarind paste to it - Fusion. Yet dates, pomegranate molasses and tamarind all come from the same areas of the world. Fusion has become a culinary label that the nervous chef or diner feels repelled by. Needlessly.

Fusion food takes, as its starting point, the belief that any ingredient, from any part of the world, has the potential to be cooked and eaten. Who is there to say, for example, that we must never use a Malaysian ingredient in a traditional Yorkshire dish? Perhaps the dish will benefit. Perhaps it will change it, but surely if it tastes all the better, or even, if it tastes intriguingly different, then that can be a positive thing. And if it doesn't work, then best to forget it - but what harm has been done in the pursuit of the new? I must point out that Worcestershire sauce, which is a very traditional British condiment, has tamarind in it - which is a very Middle Eastern and Asian ingredient. Yet we don't consider the sauce a Fusion dish.



Without Fusion, the Italians wouldn't be serving polenta. Corn and maize are from the New World as it was once called — the Americas. Thai's wouldn't have chillies or peanuts — more staples from the New World. Thailand also wouldn't have coriander, which is a Mediterranean herb. The Spanish couldn't serve their delicious grilled toast rubbed with garlic, olive oil and tomatoes (tomatoes are from the New World) and the Brits have Peru to thank for the potato and India and China for their tea. In New Zealand we think of feijoa and tamarillo (tree tomatoes) as being part of our lives - but they are both South American. And where would a pavlova be in the Antipodes without a slathering of fresh passionfruit pulp (South American) or some sliced kiwifruit (Chinese). If we trace back all of the classic ingredients from each cuisine — we'd be very surprised at what we'd find.

Without this infusion of ingredients into our culinary lives, many cuisines would be all the less flavoursome. And it's with this in mind that Fusion Cuisine allows the introduction of foreign ingredients into our everyday lives, to enrich and stimulate us. Fusion Cuisine refuses to adhere to politically or geographically drawn borders, created generations ago by men in robes or suits, that state that you must never mix Herb A from the North with Protein B from a region in the South. That is culinary xenophobia. Fusion Cuisine can create the most stimulating meal you'll ever eat. It's fun and it's playful, but it is as difficult to get right as any other cuisine. Because in its present form it's relatively new — and we have few historical references to draw on, unlike the better known classics, but it's evolving and gaining momentum. It's simply one of many Cuisines, and it happily sits amongst them like a magpie, borrowing from them all.

