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Simply Saucy

By Allison Rittman, Contributing Editor

Sauces are the cornerstone of cooking, serving as a base for numerous creations. Typically, they are not used alone, but serve to enhance, balance or complement other foods. Sauces add visual as well as culinary depth to a variety of dishes.

It is no coincidence that the first chapter in Escoffier's timeless *The Complete Guide to Modern Cookery* is devoted to sauces, since sauces are building blocks of flavor. Sauces can add more than just great flavor. They can also provide texture, mouthfeel, aroma and color. Sauces must also change with the times and trends. In the last few decades, they have evolved from extremely elaborate and decadent preparations to more refined, simplistic and healthier versions.

Sauces are classified in numerous ways but, classically, have been distinguished by their function. Antonin Carême, a 19th century French chef, is credited with developing a systematic classification of sauces. They are divided into two groups, mother sauces and derivative sauces. A "mother" or "grand" sauce is defined by being a base sauce to which various ingredients can be added to create an endless number of derivative or "small" sauces.

The four mother sauces are: Espagnole, a brown sauce; Béchamel, a white sauce; Velouté, a white stock-based sauce; and Tomato sauce. Emulsified sauces sometimes are classified as a fifth group. Hollandaise sauce and mayonnaise are two examples. There also are "simple" or "independent" sauces, prepared independently from the foods with which they ultimately will be paired. A few examples include infused oils, salsas, chutneys and relishes. From the base mother sauces, a limitless number of small sauces can be derived. By adding mushrooms, shallots, white wine and tomato concassé to sauce Espagnole, the small sauce Chasseur is formed. Adding butter, grated Gruyère, and Parmesan to Béchamel sauce creates the small sauce, Mornay. This classification system also illustrates how important the quality of the mother sauce is to the quality of all the final sauces. Starting with a well-made mother sauce is essential to creating top-notch small or derivative sauces.

Making different and unique sauces can be as simple as adding new ingredients to create a completely new flavor profile, changing the texture or consistency of the sauce or additions, or using various cooking techniques. Changing the texture of a sauce is as easy as pureeing a sauce, using additional ingredients or straining the sauce through a fine sieve. The addition of textural elements such as minced shallots, chopped gherkins or a small amount of cream changes the sauce's mouthfeel.

Altering basic cooking techniques changes the flavor profile, the texture and the color of the final sauce. By adding roasted vegetables to a brown sauce, a rich, caramelized flavor is developed with slow-cooked, tender pieces of vegetables. The same sauce with blanched vegetables added will have more "bite" in the vegetable pieces, adding a textural distinction. By adding a puree of smoked vegetables and straining the sauce, this same base sauce can be completely changed to have a unique silky mouthfeel, with complex and smoky flavor notes.

Tomato sauce is a very versatile sauce. Sauces can be cooked or uncooked; smooth as a puree or full of particulates; flavored with meats, herbs, or vegetables; or cooked slowly or quickly. Any combination results in an endless number of unique tomato sauces. A simple, fresh tomato basil sauce cooked briefly to marry flavors retains a bright, vibrant color and can be contrasted with a hearty, rich Bolognese sauce loaded with meat, red wine and herbs, then slowly cooked for hours. The method and ingredients used depend on the desired final result.

Into the Thick of It

Another method to change the personality of a sauce is to change the thickening agent. There are many ways to thicken a sauce, and by changing the thickener in a sauce, a new viscosity, mouthfeel or flavor can be developed. A liaison is an ingredient used to thicken liquids to form a sauce. Some thickeners (e.g. vegetable purees, starch) work by dispersing solids or insoluble liquids to prevent the free movement of the water-based medium, increasing viscosity. Others (e.g.

gums, egg yolks) form an emulsion, which is the suspension of one liquid in another.

There are a wide variety of thickeners available. Vegetable purees, starches, gums, gelatins and egg yolks are good examples of common thickeners used in sauces. Vegetable purees may contain adequate levels of starch that act as a thickener, or they may act as an emulsifier. Starches are very cost effective thickeners, but do not impart the flavors a vegetable puree might. Flour is a common sauce thickener, and typically is made into a roux before being added to the sauce. A roux consists of equal parts of flour and a fat (e.g. vegetable oil, lard, butter), which is cooked to develop flavor. The roux then can be whisked into a hot sauce to provide thickening power as the sauce cooks. Beurre manie is another flour thickener, similar to a roux, but not cooked. Equal parts of butter and flour are blended together, and a small amount of the beurre manie is whisked into the sauce at the end of cooking to provide increased viscosity.

Other common starches include cornstarch, arrowroot and potato starch. These refined starches should be mixed into a paste with cold water and then whisked into a sauce in order to prevent lumping. Cornstarch and potato starch should be used as last-minute thickeners and do not have strong thickening power when exposed to long cooking times. Arrowroot also is a last-minute thickener, but can withstand longer exposure to high temperatures. Gums function to control water flow by increasing viscosity or by forming gels. There are numerous gelling agents available, and a few used in foods include: gum Arabic, guar, carrageenan and xanthan. They typically are odorless, colorless and tasteless. Gelatin is a water-soluble protein that is found naturally in meats and fish. When these are cooked, gelatin is released, and a juice is created. Concentrating the juice gives the mixture a syrupy consistency. These types of reduction sauces are some of the most basic sauces. When prepared properly, they tend to be flavorful, clean and healthier than starch or cream-thickened sauces. Egg yolks are yet another thickening agent and provide the base for emulsified sauces. They also are used in conjunction with cream to thicken sauces and add a rich, creamy texture. However, they must be tempered when added to hot sauces and never boiled, as this can curdle the egg yolks and ruin the sauce's texture.

Obviously, sauces are not simply defined and can be used in many ways. Sauces are a cornerstone of cooking and can turn a simple pasta, vegetable or fish fillet dish into something unique, innovative and bursting with flavor. By using quality ingredients to create a solid base of mother sauces, the possibilities for creating distinctive and exceptional sauces are endless. Bon Appetit!

Sidebar: Plus: A Tip on Colors

The presentation of an appetizing dish depends a lot on the attractive use of color. Colored sauces add visual excitement and can enhance the perception of freshness. Because they can be customized so easily, restaurateurs rely on them to add the finishing touch to many dishes. Below is a variety of sauces that help dishes stand out.

Red

- Pico de gallo -- a Mexican tradition with tomatoes, onion, cilantro and chilies
- 5-minute tomato sauce -- the trick is to use the best ingredients possible
- Bolognese sauce -- a tasty meat sauce created in the region of Bologna, Italy, it is suited for almost any pasta, or can be layered between fresh lasagna sheets
- Thai red curry -- a perfect blend of spices and aromatics
- Roasted red pepper -- a cream sauce with roasted red peppers and cracked black pepper

Pink

- Vodka tomato sauce -- quick and simple to make, yet elegant enough for a dinner party
- Smoked salmon cream sauce -- delicate and creamy, the overall pink and white combination also is very attractive
- Tomato cream sauce -- this quick and easy sauce goes very well with many types of pasta

White

- Alfredo sauce -- rich and creamy, this sauce is heavenly over cooked pasta; cooks can add lightly sautéed shrimps to finished dish
- Bechamel sauce -- a basic white sauce
- Creamy dill sauce -- cream and dill complemented with shallots and coriander
- White bean ragout -- traditionally served with roasted herbed lamb

Brown

- Demi-glace -- a rich, savory veal reduction
- Brown mushroom sauce -- a blend of demi-glace and sautéed mushrooms with butter and shallots and a touch of white wine
- Browned butter sauce -- tasty on vegetables or cheese-filled pastas

- Sun dried tomato pesto -- a blend of sun-dried tomatoes, olive oil and basil, with a touch of Parmesan, garlic and cracked black pepper
- Port wine -- a reduction of port and demi-glace, with a touch of vinegar

Gold

- Blender Hollandaise -- an easy method for making a creamy Hollandaise to top eggs or vegetables
- Creamed corn -- a blend of cream and corn with touch of fresh basil and cracked black pepper
- Saffron cream sauce -- cream, onion and garlic mounded with saffron butter
- Tarragon mustard cream -- a blend of cream, tarragon and whole grain mustard
- Thai yellow curry -- a delicious blend of spices and chilies

Green

- Basil pesto -- a quick, easy sauce featuring fresh basil--used to top any pasta
- Salsa verde -- a green chile-based sauce to top grilled seafood, meats or cold chicken dishes
- Wasabi mayonnaise -- a blend of mayonnaise and wasabi
- Thai green curry -- a delicious version with green herbs

Multicolor

- Puttanesca sauce -- a traditional pasta sauce that is easily made
- Piccata sauce -- a simple, piquant sauce suited for chicken, veal or whitefish
- Lemon basil butter sauce -- great on chicken or seafood, and it can be varied in many ways
- Eggplant tomato sauce -- adding a little onion, chopped pancetta and sautéed eggplant to a plain tomato sauce adds excitement to any short, chunky pasta, or gnocchi
- Apricot tomato relish -- excellent with pork roast

--Charlie Baggs, Contributing Editor