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THE ART OF
TIM BURTON
CARSON
KRESSLEY'S
L.A. FAVORITES
300 SUPER
DINING

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In a culinary community that has gone global, an exotic prawn from the Tasmanian coast or rare berry from the Amazon can be delivered to any kitchen in 24 hours. In L.A., success often hinges on showcasing ingredients that have yet to appear on any menus down the street, but in an age of instant connectivity, staying a step ahead of the competition is considerably tougher than it used to be. Here, we examine some hot ingredients that are about to go viral.

Although it has been imported to America since late 2007, jamón ibérico remains an exclusive superhot ingredient. Italians may believe their beloved prosciutto di Parma—cured in open barns in the scenic hills of Emilia-Romagna—is as good as ham gets, but Spaniards beg to differ. Although their jamón serrano, trendy a decade ago, is outstanding in its own right, jamón ibérico is the Penélope Cruz (that is to say, the finest) of Spanish hams. Derived from a special breed of pigs that feed almost exclusively on acorns, it offers a melt-in-your-mouth texture and unique, earthy flavor profile.

Fig & Olive, the sleek celebration of Mediterranean cuisines that just arrived on Melrose Place from New York, offers two degustation plates of jamón ibérico. Despite his passion for the ingredient, owner Laurent Halasz remains diplomatic. "Comparing it to prosciutto di Parma is like comparing apples and oranges.... Each have their own unique amazing taste and texture." He reports that the traditional way to serve this treasured ham in Spain is with pan con tomate (toasted bread and crushed tomatoes) or with Manchego cheese.

Nobody in L.A. can speak more authoritatively on Spanish ingredients than celebrity chef José Andrés, who, unlike the French-born Halasz, doesn't even pretend to be impartial. "Jamón ibérico is the best ham in the world," he states. "I'm not being nationalistic ... it's just a fact." He insists the nutty, sweet and rich aromas of this ham are simply without comparison, declaring, "You are ruined for other hams!" At **The Bazaar by José Andrés** at the SLS Hotel, it is offered alongside a wide variety of Spanish hams and sausages, served Catalan-style with bread and tomatoes.

Domestic jamón ibérico-style products, generally much less expensive, are gradually making their way into respected restau-

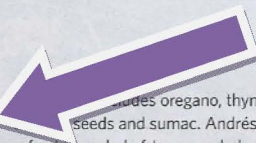
rant kitchens. Chef Joseph Gillard of **Napa Valley Grille** swears by highly acclaimed La Quercia prosciutto from Iowa, an artisanal product that influential food writer Jeffrey Steingarten called the best he's ever tasted, domestic or imported. The company's so-called Acorn Edition is produced from free-range acorn-fed pigs, a la ibérico. "We believe this is as good, if not better, than ibérico, and it gives us the opportunity to keep our products as sustainable as possible," says the ecoconscious Gillard.

Last year, *The Washington Post* declared black garlic the next "it" ingredient in American kitchens after it caused a stir at Charlie Trotter's in Chicago and at Manhattan's renowned Le Bernardin. The fermented garlic product was developed in South Korea and is distributed domestically by a single supplier in northern California. Although the essence of fresh garlic is present, its taste is complex, with a pungency replaced by sweetness and a hint of licorice.

At the Bazaar, Andrés uses black garlic to provide an extra dimension to barramundi, or adds it to a sherry vinaigrette he applies to soft shell crab. "It's so sweet and rich ... so simple, but it adds so much," he says. "I use it in all my restaurants, especially with seafood."

At **Chaya** in Venice, black garlic enhances a dish of seared scallops and marinated shimeji mushrooms. "I enjoy cooking with black garlic," says longtime executive chef Shigefumi Tachibe, who admires its soft texture. "It does not have the intense flavor that traditional garlic has, yet there is still a very mild hint of garlic flavor and richness," he says.

Another bit of exotica popping up on menus these days is zaatar, a Middle Eastern blend of spices. An aromatic signature of the Arab culinary world, zaatar is blended differently by every spice monger,



... blends oregano, thyme, salt, seeds and sumac. Andrés creates a refreshing salad of Japanese baby peaches on a bed of Greek yogurt, drizzled with olive oil and finished with zaatar, saffron and citrus. "Zaatar is like a plane ticket to the Middle East.... When you smell it, it transports you there!" he insists.

At **Cleo**, the contemporary Middle Eastern bistro at the Redbury boutique hotel in Hollywood, the menu reflects the nuanced fragrances of a Casablanca bazaar while making its cuisine relevant to a hip L.A. crowd. In addition to house-made flatbreads dusted with the spice mix, a dish of zaatar-seasoned grilled tuna is plated with olive tapenade, tahini and Calabrian chilies. Across the street, at the reinvented **Delphine** at the W Hollywood, chef Sascha Lyon offers a crispy flatbread with braised lamb, piquillo peppers, garlic confit, feta cheese, yogurt and zaatar. And at **Mezze**, taking over the rarefied space previously occupied by Sona, chef Micah Wexler applies the spice blend to wood-oven-roasted chicken.

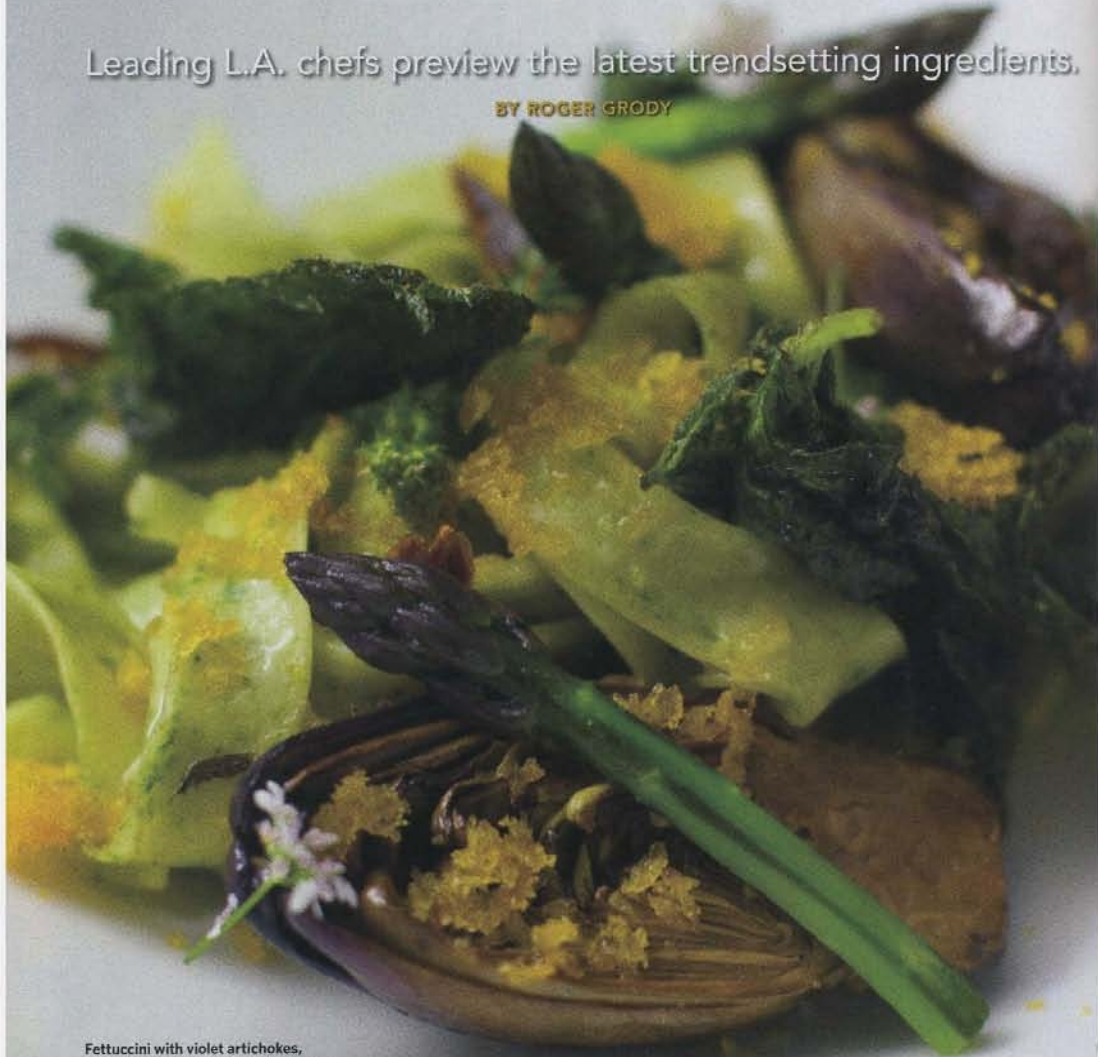
Chef David Myers' culinary curiosity never rests, and his three establishments in Tokyo provide endless opportunities to experiment with Japanese ingredients such as sudachi, a green Japanese citrus fruit, or mozuku, superthin ribbons of seaweed. Unfortunately, with duck confit and entrecôte ruling the menu at his Melrose Avenue French brasserie, **Comme Ça**, Myers has few opportunities to show off such exotic ingredients. But that doesn't stop him from gently nudging customers beyond their comfort zones.

Myers serves beef bone marrow with oxtail jam, a pairing of two unexpectedly trendy ingredients. Bone marrow, previously considered a minor distraction on a plate of osso buco, is rapidly heading mainstream. At **Pizzeria Mozza**, slathering it on crostini

HOT IN THE KITCHEN

Leading L.A. chefs preview the latest trendsetting ingredients.

BY ROGER GRODY



Fettuccini with violet artichokes, spring onion, and au courant bottarga and stinging nettles, offered at La Seine on Restaurant Row