

# Innovative Food on Display Nrn.com

Nancy Kruse 1 , Bret Thorn | May 24, 2018

*In a monthly series, menu trend analyst Nancy Kruse and NRN senior food editor Bret Thorn debate current trends in the restaurant industry. For this installment, they discuss food innovations at the NRA Show.*

*Kruse Company president Nancy Kruse says the level of innovation at the NRA Show this year was impressive.*

“Your eyes are bigger than your stomach.”

It was one of my least favorite parental I-told-you-so’s, Bret, which my mother intoned without fail whenever I overindulged. I’m hard pressed to imagine what she would make of the riot of overindulgence at this year’s NRA Show. It was as good a show as I’ve ever attended, and I was especially struck by the high levels of innovation that permeated all aspects of the proceedings.

It was chockablock with things I didn’t know I needed. Time & Oak, for example, delivers barrel-aged cocktails without the barrel. Instead, you take this doohickey that looks vaguely like a wooden comb, put it in a bottle of spirits and, voila, within a day or two, you have the subtle flavor of white oak infusing your cocktail. A poster child for the digital-age start-up, Time & Oak launched with a Kickstarter campaign that blew past its \$18,000 goal in a matter of hours to raise more than \$200,000 in 30 days and prove that Millennials truly, madly, deeply love their cocktails.

Then there was Coffee in a Cone, literally coffee or hot chocolate poured into a chocolate-coated wafer cone. A cunning combination that its founders promote as “the world’s most Instagrammable coffee,” it allows the consumer to have her coffee and eat it, too.

And I suspect that you heard my squeals of delight reverberating throughout the Lakeside Center when I discovered Pork Panko. Just when you think there’s nothing else one could possibly do with the pig, these folks grind up the skin into a breadless breadcrumb alternative. Yes, yes, I know it’s gluten-free, protein-packed, carb-free and all that other good stuff. It’s also pure piggy heaven that made my head spin, and I wanted to eat it with a spoon.

On the subject of protein alternatives, the chickpea continues its steady march across American menus. The centerpiece of Middle Eastern cuisines and a breakout star of the past couple of shows, this year brought chickpea broth, a vegan substitute for animal broths or stocks, and spreadable chickpea butter, which is peanut-free, jelly-friendly and kid-approved. There were also lovely, tender green chickpeas from Fresh Nature, which are picked early to maximize their sweetness and flavor in dishes like hummus and falafel.

I could go on for days about the dazzling array of ethnic foods on offer, and I’m looking forward to your takeaways from this international gastronomic smorgasbord. Kudos to the European Taste Experience, a consortium of 12 French companies, for their impeccable timing. Their promotion of classic ingredients like lentils and Bayonne ham coincides with the current, late-blooming interest in French cuisine in this country.

I also liked the Thai pavilion with its dizzying variety of goods, from herbal cures for jetlag to exquisite handmade napkin rings to, believe it or not, tasty Oriental jerky in flavors like Thai chile and Indian curry. But I was stopped in my tracks by Balls, Italian arancini in American-friendly flavors like mac and cheese. Punchy, funky graphics and cheeky promotion made it a standout in the BellaVita Italian pavilion, which also provided a rather more low-key home to Massimo Bottura from Modena, Italy. One of my true culinary heroes, the low-key Bottura boasts three Michelin stars at his restaurant, Osteria Francescana, which has been named the best restaurant in the world. Affable and approachable, Bottura conducted a master class on Sunday afternoon; in his blue jeans and Nikes, he epitomized Italianate cool.

The show has always been a reliable indicator of our changing tastes, and food futurists would be smart to track the subject matter of the Foodamental Studio, the hands-on culinary training sessions staged by the intrepid staff and students of Kendall College. This year’s topics included sorghum, sea vegetables and cannabis. The official Exhibit Guide and Program also provides a good, if qualitative, look at what’s trending. For example, the number of allergy-friendly-product exhibitors tripled, and organic-product booths grew 40 percent, compared with listings in the 2013 show guide. By contrast, the number of garbage cans dropped by 25 percent over the same five-year period, and, no, I’m not sure what to make of that last one, Bret.

Sharp-eyed futurists would also be advised to keep an eye on emerging, socially-oriented products that speak to Millennials’ interest in making the world a better place. Rumi offers superior-quality saffron that reflects the terroir of Afghanistan, where it’s grown. Founded by U.S. military veterans as an enterprise “with a mission to cultivate peace,” the company lives up to its lofty goal: it is the largest private-sector employer of Afghan women, and its farmer network has grown tenfold as its saffron offers a viable alternative to the Taliban-supported opium trade. Similarly, Sweet Street won a FABI Award for its Manifesto Gluten-Free Brownie, made with dark



Honduran chocolate,

which is sourced from a women's cocoa collective and supports their farmers, families and villages.

Speaking of FABI, the food and beverage awards bestowed to the most creative and marketable new products at the show each year, brings me back to the subject of innovation. The showrunners are all about it as they continue to tweak the show to make it more user friendly. The smart, new FABI Awardee Tastings are a case in point, as they brought together this year's winners for an open-house tasting at one place throughout the day on Monday. There are also ongoing website enhancements that facilitate the show experience; it is comprehensive and easy to navigate the whole shebang at a glance, including the directory of hot new products, which is indispensable to my own particular interests.

I promise to hand this off to you in a minute, Bret, but I have to observe that one of the real advantages of visiting Chicago every May is its seemingly unlimited range of ethnic restaurant options. On Sunday night, I paid a visit to the city's only Kurdish restaurant, the lovely The Gundis Kurdish Kitchen. Its Anatolian-Kurdish menu reflects the Turkish origins of one of the owners, and it adds nicely to our understanding of Mediterranean cuisines. There were familiar dishes like hummus and halloumi cheese alongside Kurdish specialties like ezme, a bright, spicy tomato-and-pepper condiment, and sac tawa, which refers to both the cooking vessel and its delicious, accessible stir-fried contents. The term "gundis" translates roughly to villager, and the hospitable staff really did make you feel like one of their own.

The warm hospitality was a great way to end my NRA Show experience this year, and it's a good time to turn the conversation over to you, Bret, as I ask what you saw, heard and learned in Chicago?

### **An array of ingenious items**

*NRN senior food editor Bret Thorn responds to Kruse Company president Nancy Kruse's take on food and beverage innovation at the NRA Show.*

Funny you should mention the ethnic options of Chicago, Nancy. One of the highlights of my trip to the NRA Show was dinner at Mogadishu, a Somali restaurant recommended by my hungry taxi driver, who paused in our conversation to order dinner from there as he anticipated sundown. The show fell during the month of Ramadan this year, when Muslims fast from dawn until dusk. As much as I love Chicago's trendy restaurants (I recommend the Macho Nachos at Little Goat next time you're in town), it's great to get off the beaten path. I asked the staff at Mogadishu, which you might call fast-casual in its service format, what I should get, and they brought me a little-bit-of-everything platter of spiced goat, liver, salmon and vegetables over rice, all heady with cardamom-heavy spice mixtures that tasted kind of like a compromise between Ethiopian and southern Indian palates, although with less chile.

Speaking of spices, on the show floor itself I enjoyed the smoky worm salt on display at the Mexico pavilion. Actually made with the crushed caterpillar, not worm, that feeds on agave cactuses, the custom, I was told, is to sprinkle it on an orange wedge and eat that to prime your palate before sipping mezcal. It's also suitable for rimming margarita glasses.

Not far away, at the Ecuador pavilion, I enjoyed Uvilla, also known as the Peruvian groundcherry or, by the Ecuadorians displaying it, as "Golden Berries." It resembles a gooseberry, but the one I had was slightly less tart and a bit more aromatic. It was being hocked as a superfruit that fueled Incan warriors of yore. Maybe so, but I just thought it tasted good and would be a welcome surprise as a garnish to cocktails, desserts or fruit salads.

Of course, plant-based proteins were in abundance. I, too, enjoyed those charming green chickpeas, but the crowds were gathered at dual FABI winners Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods.

Beyond Meat is made mostly from pea protein, and the company has scored success with its chicken and burger substitutes. At the show, it introduced new sausage, having won the FABI Award for its bratwurst, and debuting at the show a new line of breakfast sausage that ran out every day before I got a chance to try it.

The Impossible Burger is made mostly from wheat protein, but also coconut oil and, most distinctively, heme, a core protein in hemoglobin. Impossible Foods, which manufactures the Impossible Burger, derives heme from plants to keep the product vegan. It does give the meat substitute a sort of bloody quality that has won over people who want to eat less beef but still like how beef tastes. Personally, I don't think it tastes like beef, but it is enjoying widespread appeal, and is now available at meat-centric chains including White Castle and Fatburger.

Also making its debut was Just Scramble. Made by the same people who make egg-free Just Mayo, this product, which is made mostly of mung beans, does, indeed, cook in a pan to form what looks like and has a texture similar to scrambled eggs. To me, it didn't taste like eggs — unsurprisingly, it tasted like mung beans — but if you season it and cook it with enough vegetables, I suppose you could have a nice little egg substitute. Mung beans are mild enough, after all.

Nitro cold brew was everywhere. That, as I'm sure you know, is cold-brew coffee — ground coffee steeped in cold water for 16 hours or more for a sweeter, less bitter drink than the faster, heated variety — that is then infused with nitrogen, like Guinness or other stout beers, to give it a foamy, creamy mouthfeel.

But there were also new variations on the floor. La Colombe was pouring a nitro draft latte, for which kegs were filled with a mixture of cold brew and milk and then charged with nitrous oxide rather than nitrogen.

Nitrous oxide is what chefs use to make the foams that were so popular a few years back, or, in more mundane fashion, to squirt whipped cream onto pies and hot chocolate. The nitrous bonds better with the milk than nitrogen would, giving it an even creamier mouthfeel.

S&D Coffee & Tea used nitrogen on iced tea, which has less of a dramatic, foamy effect than it does on coffee, but it provides for smaller bubbles and a slightly fuller mouthfeel to add a bit more elegance than regular carbonation would.

S&D also offered a trendy, new tea drink they said was invented in Shanghai and is becoming popular in Las Vegas. It's called cheese tea, and it's made by thinning cream cheese to a consistency similar to thick cream or thin yogurt, and then spooning it over flavored iced tea.

I'm not sure the cheese tea trend will catch on but, believe it or not, I think rapeseed oil might.

That's what they call canola oil in Europe, and there's a reason we don't call it that here. But a cold-pressed version was being proffered by Mackintosh of Glendaveny from Aberdeen, Scotland. It has a high smoke point, very little saturated fat, a lot of more healthful fat and a subtle nutty-vegetal flavor. I might have suggested that the Scottish gentleman pack up their wares and go home, but I'd also seen rapeseed elsewhere in Chicago.

I'm sure you remember, Nancy, that Daniel Boulud was inducted into Nation's Restaurant News' MenuMasters Hall of Fame at our celebration on Saturday, and he served a quail ballotine garnished with crudités that were brushed with colza, the French term for rapeseed oil.

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