

Q&A Almonds

with
CHEF LISA BREFERE

On the menu: Exploring where almonds fit into foodservice

Foodservice professionals are fomenting something of a revolution in almond innovation, with the effects playing out on menus everywhere from fine dining to fast casual. And the reason is clear: Almonds are multifunctional, in-demand foods that capture diners' attention as much as they do chefs' imaginations. As Chef Lisa Brefere, CEC, AAC, CEO – partner, Gigachef (Purchase, NY) says, “I’m a culinarian by trade, so using almonds in new and creative ways is something I find fascinating.”

We sat down with Brefere to find out why, and to learn more about the almond menu items that have her so fascinated.

Q How practical or easy are almonds to work with in foodservice?

CHEF BREFERE | Almonds are a mainstream ingredient. They come in a bunch of forms: chopped, sliced, slivered, milks and meals and butters. They're accessible from everywhere and can help chefs create varied flavor and texture across all of their menu dayparts.

Q Once thought of as a garnish, how is this view changing on menus?

CHEF BREFERE | You do still see almonds in those applications—sprinkled in salads, on fish, over vegetables. But we're seeing almonds in so many more places now, and in so many more forms. Dishes like fried avocado balls with an almond crust, pesto sauce with almonds, sandwich spreads, even cocktails showcase the versatility of almond forms across menu applications and dayparts.

You're also seeing almonds playing a great role in plant-based menu applications. When creating dishes like vegetable curries, crusts, grain bowls and soups, I find that almonds add richness, texture, a nutty flavor and a variety of nutritional components to these menu items.

Q What dayparts and menu categories are hotbeds of almond innovation?

CHEF BREFERE | Breakfast items are a huge avenue for almonds. Operators who do breakfast love using almonds in their chia puddings and flaxseed puddings, house-made granolas and overnight oats, where crunchy almonds and almond milk are at the forefront. You see almonds in smoothies—powerful health drinks with almond butter, almond milk, even whole almonds.

Almonds can be used in dressings, dips, sauces and soups, and as fillings. Add almonds when you're making a white bean spread that you're going to put on a vegan sandwich, or when you're doing a macerated zucchini roll with almonds and spinach as the stuffing. We've always seen almonds in desserts, but now you're starting to see other forms like almond milk in desserts like crème brûlée and panna cotta.

Q With 80% of the world's almonds grown in California, how do they fit into global cuisines?

CHEF BREFERE | Definitely. Almonds are a global food. One of the fun things I find about working with almonds is that they don't limit you. There are so many cuisines that use almonds in different and clever ways, so you're not limited on your menu.

I love curries and moles, and you can thicken these sauces with almond flour, milk or butter, which makes them very creamy. I also see almonds going into spreads, like hummus for sandwiches.

For almond inspiration, look to everything from classic French and German pastries to Italian biscuits to Moroccan lamb with couscous and almonds, Indian curries and Middle Eastern spiced rice with almond sauce. They go around the world and back.

Q Do you think almonds' versatile forms, like milk, butter or flour, give an edge in menu development?

CHEF BREFERE | Yes. In the past, we were taught that you had to see the almond on the dish. But when you use ingredients like almond flour, milk and butter, they can be the base for entire dishes. These almond forms can add crunchiness or creaminess to sauces, they can help bind breadings and coatings, they thicken and add texture to soups and dips and sauces. It's a different, inventive way of using almonds, and it's the way the industry's going. If you're not using almond ingredients behind the scenes like this, you're probably losing out.

Q As Gluten-Free menus gain popularity, how do almonds help foodservice operators create more menu options?

CHEF BREFERE | Nutritionally, people are all about checking boxes: Did they get the right amount of good fats? Are their choices "clean"? This is opposed to 20 years ago when it was all about "no" and "low": low fat, low carb, low salt—low flavor. Now consumers look for ingredients that bring positives and that's another box that almonds check.

Gluten-free is a big trend that's continuing to grow. If I'm making a dish that used to have gluten, I can add a little almond flour with a little rice flour and I've got a breading that can go on a fish, or a filling for stuffed vegetables, or a great gluten-free thickening agent.

And don't forget vegans and vegetarians: If foodservice operators don't think that pleasing these customers is something they should keep in mind, they're going to lose out. So thicken sauces and purees with almond flour and meal instead of dairy cream or butter. It's adding beautiful flavor and all the nutritional value consumers want.

Q With people snacking more than ever, where can almonds play a role in foodservice snack development?

CHEF BREFERE | For operations that make their own, protein bars that contain almonds and other clean ingredients are becoming huge. You can use dried fruits, almonds, almond milk and butter with different kinds of seeds. These are a great way for foodservice outlets to stand out with their own snacks.

And then there are snack mixes, granola mixes and spiced nut mixes—all of these could use almonds and almond ingredients. Just think of all the almond clusters and barks you see at places like Costco.

There are snacks, and then there are appetizers that you see on menus. And almonds can elevate these items too: fritters, mini tacos, white-gazpacho dips, octopus with almond Romanesco, and sweetbreads with almond crust.