

NATIONAL CULINARY REVIEW

Leaning Into Levantine Cuisine



American Culinary Federation
The Standard of Excellence for Chefs

MARCH/APRIL 2023



Let's Talk About **TOFU**

This ancient soy product offers many nutritional benefits, a clean label and a blank canvas for culinary exploration // By Jody Shee

The menued tofu of yesteryear landed on the plate alongside bean sprouts and whole-grain bread at vegetarian cafes. Today, consumers and chefs look at the soy category through the modern lens of plant-based proteins.

While it's rare for mainstream restaurant customers to specifically request soy, they do appreciate plant-forward and plant-based fare, says **ACF Chef Jay Ziobrowski, CEC**, corporate R&D chef for Morrison Healthcare, Charlotte, North Carolina, a part of Compass Group North America. His measured soy solution is to include tofu with other ingredients in plant-focused dishes, as in Quinoa Cauliflower Falafel with Tofu.

At David's Restaurant and David's 388 in Portland, Maine, **ACF Chef/Proprietor David Gould Turin, CEC**, notes that about 15% of guests are looking for plant-based alternatives. In his menu development, he thinks in terms of table makers. That is, if a party of six walks in and one has a special dietary concern, he wants to make sure there's something on the menu that



Left: ACF Chef David Gould Turin, CEC, proprietor of David's Restaurant and David's 388 in Portland, Maine. Right: ACF Chef Jay Ziobrowski, CEC, corporate R&D chef for Morrison Healthcare, Charlotte, North Carolina, a part of Compass Group North America.



Above: ACF Chef Scott Turley, CEC, AAC, executive chef and chief culinary officer, Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa. Right: Tofu dishes from Grinnell College.



will make the table, or appease the one who otherwise would not find anything satisfying on the menu. He's careful to include and label menu items that are vegetarian or vegan, or can be made such, along with gluten-free and those containing nuts. Soy is one of his table-maker go-tos. He makes a vegan Bolognese sauce with textured soy protein.

Vegan Moorings

A good one-third of the student body at Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa, is vegan, says **ACF Chef Scott Turley, CEC, AAC**, executive chef and chief culinary officer. Thus, tofu is expected. The school goes through more than 700 pounds of tofu per week, serving 400 to 500 portions per meal period. Among the most popular dishes on offer are Asian Style Garlic Tofu, Tikka Masala Tofu, Spicy Tofu and Tempura-Style Tofu.

Chef Turley achieves the best tofu flavors following a few secrets he's



discovered. One is purchasing fresh, local tofu. He buys extra firm tofu from a small producer about 70 miles away in Iowa

City, Iowa. “I am not a tofu fan, but when you taste fresh tofu versus what’s been packaged for months, it’s like night and day,” he says. “It’s almost artisanal.”

Second, to heighten flavor absorption and to achieve the best texture, Chef Turley fries the tofu before he marinates it for

24 hours. For his Asian Garlic Tofu, he presses the tofu to release moisture, then cubes it and deep fries it to crispy. Then he marinates in a mixture of hoisin sauce, garlic, crushed red pepper flakes and vegetable stock. For service, he heats sunflower oil and adds sesame seeds and the tofu. He garnishes with green onions.



Chef Johnny Curet, CEC, AAC, director of campus dining for Rice University, Houston, Texas.

Pre-fried tofu leftovers freeze well and can later be added to the salad bar as fried tofu. “There’s almost zero waste with tofu,” Chef Turley says.

Tofu Stand-Ins

In his role at Morrison Healthcare, Chef Ziobrowski looks at food as medicine. “I have over 300 special diets I’m looking at and making sure I’m meeting them,” he says. “What you put in your body is what you get out of it. I believe in the power of food.”

With its position in the plant-forward camp, tofu works on the plate in multiple ways. For example, Chef Ziobrowski has developed tofu ribs. Tofu is sliced to look like ribs and then given a hard sear to give it a crust. Add barbecue sauce, and it’s a formidable stand-in for meat ribs. In similar fashion, he also makes Blackened Tofu Steak. He cuts a tofu block into strips, sears to blacken and then roasts, grills or pan fries on the flat top. He fans it out like steak strips or serves whole. This requires firm tofu and blackening seasoning, he adds.

Tofu can play along with many flavor profiles. For example, Chicken Coconut Curry easily becomes Tofu Coconut Curry, says **Chef Johnny Curet, CEC, AAC**, director of campus dining for Rice University, Houston. “If we are serving a Tex-Mex night, our fajitas options might be grilled beef, chicken and tofu.” The grill station has marinated hot grilled tofu, while

The Nutritional Benefits of Soy

Soybeans are the legumes of dietary legend, having been consumed for centuries by some Asian populations. **Mark Messina, Ph.D., M.S.**, executive director of the Soy Nutrition Institute Global (pictured), offers these facts about soy.



Proteins differ in quality, which is determined by their digestibility and composition of amino acids — the building blocks of protein. While plant proteins are generally lower in quality than animal protein, the quality of the protein in tofu is similar to the quality of animal protein.

In addition to being high in quality, soy protein directly lowers blood cholesterol levels. It provides healthful polyunsaturated fat and both omega-6 and omega-3 essential fatty acids.

In Japan, individuals consume about nine grams of soy protein per day, compared to only about one gram among the U.S. population. Traditional Asian soy foods such as tofu are uniquely rich sources of isoflavones, which are naturally occurring plant compounds. Isoflavones are under study for a variety of health benefits, including protection against breast and prostate cancer.

Most food allergic reactions among Americans, about 90%, stem from any of eight allergens; soy is one. However, the prevalence of allergy for these eight foods varies markedly. Surveys indicate that only about three out of every 1,000 U.S. adults are allergic to soy protein.



the create-your-own deli station has seasoned sliced tofu to make a sandwich. Plain tofu is available on the custom salad action station and the salad bar.

Breakfast Breaks

Breakfast is a good place to launch a tofu item. According to the National Restaurant Association's What's Hot 2023 Culinary Forecast survey, veggie-forward breakfasts (as in vegan tofu scramble, breakfast relleno, etc.) rank in the top three breakfast trends.

At the "Eggs for You" station at Grinnell College, students can cook their own eggs, adding in the ingredients they want. The Vegan Tofu Scrambler features a premade batter with tofu, turmeric and spices. Students can add pre-sliced vegetables and scramble it all together. One breakfast wrap option features veggies, bean sprouts and tofu, Chef Turley says.

To make tofu scramble at Morrison Healthcare, Chef Ziobrowski pulses firm tofu in the Robot Coupe, adds oil to the hot pan and sautes such vegetables as spinach, onion, peppers and mushrooms to sweat them, then stirs in the crumbled tofu, soy sauce and curry powder.

But above all, Chef Ziobrowski warns that tofu doesn't sell itself. "It's all about educating your servers and those on the front line for us," he says. "You need someone excited to push it. Training helps."

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