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STYLE & TRAVEL

Add a Little Spark to Escape a Sandwich Rut

TRICKS OF THE TRADE:

Ratha Chaupoly and Ben Daitz Sandwich-Shop Owners

By CHERYL LU-LIEN TAN

It can be easy to fall into a sandwich rut, using the same boring fixings week after week. There are easy ways to jazz things up a little.

"Ideally, we tend to think of a sandwich as a whole meal," says Ratha Chaupoly, who co-owns Num Pang Sandwich Shop, a Cambodian-influenced chain with five locations in Manhattan, with Ben Daitz.

Mr. Daitz, who has worked in high-end restaurants with chefs including David Bouley, says that when he designs a sandwich, "I think about trying to hit all different textural and flavor points within a dish."

He adds, "When I was in the kitchen designing dishes for fine-dining menus, you always wanted a dish to cover a creamy, smooth texture, some crunch, a little bit of sour, some unctuous protein, fresh vegetables and it's all about the interplay between each other."

The partners like to start with the main ingredient of a sandwich, whether it's a vegetable or a protein, "and then we work backwards," Mr. Daitz says. He loves braised beef, pork or chicken in sandwiches, often adding chili mayonnaise, cucumber, cilantro and pickled carrots.

"Any braised item that will just get better in the refrigerator over a couple of days, that can be pulled off the bone, [and] reheated" is terrific, he says.

The pair like to use unusual treatments of vegetables—roasted cauliflower, for example. "If you told the average American that we're thinking of putting cauliflower in a sandwich and they would say, 'You're crazy,'" Mr. Daitz says. "But it happens to be one of our best-sellers."

To keep the sandwich from being hard to eat, he says, he cuts the cauliflower into 3-inch florets.

Toasted bread is the canvas for the sandwich. While savory or plain breads are most common, Mr. Chaupoly sometimes adds an element



Ben Daitz and Ratha Chaupoly in their Num Pang Sandwich Shop on Broadway in Manhattan, aim for sandwiches that hit different textural and flavor points. Below, grilled pork belly; toppings; a five-spice glazed pork belly sandwich with pickled Asian pears.



of surprise by using a sweet type such as raisin bread in a savory sandwich. "The sweetness of the raisins adds that extra layer of flavor to everything else. I've had it with typical cold cuts or a fried egg; it worked really well," he says.

Pickles are essential when the main ingredient is very rich. Mr. Daitz says pickled peppers, Asian pears, turnips or cucumbers can be a good addition to any sandwich. "They provide a great acidic counterpoint

to the other essential elements to a sandwich and really freshen your mouth as you work your way through."

The pair likes to use fresh herbs such as cilantro or basil for zing. "Put the whole leaves on," Mr. Daitz says. "There's nothing wrong with chopping herbs, but if you're really going for the flavor of basil or cilantro, you're best served leaving the herb intact. It immediately starts to oxidize and lose its essential oils

when you chop it up. When you leave it whole, your teeth mash up the herb and release its flavor in your mouth."

Tarragon, Mr. Daitz says, works well with lobster salad or other seafood, while chervil and basil pair well with Italian meats or ingredients. Dill, he says, works well with "just about everything. We just did a salmon sandwich where we took some dill and folded it into a chili yogurt sauce and added pickled beets

How You Know Them

◆ Opened the first Num Pang Sandwich Shop in Manhattan in 2009.

◆ The duo now have five sandwich shops in New York.

◆ Mr. Daitz is a partner at Brooklyn restaurants Vanderbilt and Red Gravy, and sausage company Brooklyn Bangers.

◆ Mr. Chaupoly, who was born in Cambodia, opened Kampuchea, a now-closed Cambodian restaurant, in Manhattan in 2006.

and ginger to that—a very Jewish-Cambodian hybrid."

A little sprinkling of dry condiments can offer added flavor. "I like chili powder or even adding a little cinnamon to something extremely savory," Mr. Chaupoly says, noting cinnamon works well with turkey and cranberry in a sandwich. "It just adds this aroma to it. Eating is 50% smell and 50% taste."

Mr. Daitz likes fennel pollen, "something you would sprinkle on right before you close the sandwich up and it gives you a fennel flavor in the background." This works well with seafood and more mildly flavored meats, he adds, as "it would get a little lost if the meat was too flavorful."

Sauces and wet condiments such as cranberry chutney can add a new dimension. "We like to make a spread with Thai eggplant (which is crunchy and has a slightly bitter taste) and Chinese eggplant (which has a more delicate flavor), puréed with ginger, soy sauce, garlic, etc. and just spread that on top of roasted cauliflower" in a sandwich, Mr. Chaupoly says.

With a sandwich that has many components, balance is an important consideration.

"If you're going to say that the steak is the main ingredient, you should think of how all the other flavors can add to it," he says. "You don't want the steak to be overwhelmed with another spice or something too sour or too spicy."

Mr. Chaupoly urges thinking outside the box. "Don't be afraid to use different things," he says. "There is literally nothing that can't be put between two pieces of bread and not work out."

For recipes from Ratha Chaupoly and Ben Daitz, go to WSJ.com/Food.