

South Florida's
Chef Allen Susser
discusses the flavors
that make up his
new cuisine.

Palm Tree Cuisine

Describe the flavors that best represent you and your restaurant.

Simply put, my flavors are influenced by the multitude of cultures that live under palm trees – I call it Palm Tree Cuisine. You can just envision the vast regions of influence this cuisine has – the Caribbean, Latin America, Southeast Asia, India and the tropical Mediterranean. It's easy to imagine the flavors of the people in the tropics; for example, the coconut palm and all that it yields: fresh coconut, coconut milk, coconut oils, as well as hearts of palm.

And with this, we need to talk about the unique and diverse spice box that exists. I view spices, herbs and condiments in the same category. Spices include very aromatic sweet flavors like cardamom, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, and also cumin, black peppercorns, seas of paradise and fennel. I use the whole battery of spices – they really add subtleties, dimension and depth of flavor.

What's interesting is that while these cultures share a lot of the same spices and ingredients, each use them very differently.

To these ingredients, we add the influences of what's available with local resources – fresh fish, seafood, meats, poultry, as well as the type of kitchen available – the importance of kitchen for heat as well as for sustenance. These are the types of influences that I piece together for the grand fusion of Palm Tree Cuisine.

I take these ingredients and influences and tie them in using the cultural aspects; how ingredients are used culturally, and I can more clearly interpret the history and the culture surrounding these cuisines.

Describe your New Era Cuisine concept. How does this differ from fusion cuisine?

New Era Cuisine is really the overall idea of fusion. It's a culinary statement where experimentation and crossing cultures is the rule, rather than the exception. At its basis,



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHEF ALLEN'S RESTAURANT

"When I saw the diversity of Caribbean and Latin American flavors," says Chef Susser, "I realized I had found my real passion."

it encompasses taking the freshest ingredients and using them properly to express flavor. But instead of saying “I’ve got two ingredients; let’s see how I can bang them together,” I find out where they were cooked, how and why they were cooked, and I develop a deep understanding of the culture from which they came. Getting the history on the ingredients and the cuisines gives me a grounding and a basis from which to work.

In regards to fusion, we’ve been following foods around the world for thousands of years. Where does cuisine really begin and where does it end? Do foodstuffs being used for 200 years qualify them as being indigenous, or do they have to be used for

500 years, or 1000 years? Southeast Asians here in southern Florida have introduced a variety of herbs, fruits and vegetables – why not incorporate these ingredients?

At the same time, it’s important to understand which culture is introducing these culinary ingredients and techniques, and for what purpose – that’s the fun of fusion.



Susser’s Zinfandel
Mojo-Grilled Skirt Steak
with Citrus Salsa typifies his
New Era Cuisine concept.

Provide a menu example that incorporates your New Era Cuisine concept.

A good example would be something like my Star Anise and Mandarin-Roasted Grouper with Breadfruit and Crab Moqueca. I take star anise and mandarin orange zest, black peppercorns, coriander and cumin, and I toast these with basil and mint, and serve it with roasted grouper. I then place the grouper on top of the moqueca,

which is a Brazilian stew-like combination of onions, peppers, corn, breadfruit and crab, thickened slightly with coconut milk and cornmeal.

How important are new and bold flavors to today’s diners?

People today love more flavor. First of all, it starts off at home with the what’s-new-for-dinner dilemma. Even in home-cooking, people want new and different flavors. They come to restaurants to experience flavors they wouldn’t have at home. Diners don’t want exotica on a daily basis, but they want comfort with a touch of exotic.

How far beyond food do you go to give your customers the overall experience of your signature flavors?

We’ve been doing a Passport Series for five years now. This has been part of the inspiration of moving into New Era Cuisine. We explore the flavors and cultures of a particular cuisine, though very much in the Chef Allen style. We find the similarities and the unique differences in the cuisine, and portray those. We match foods and wines, and talk about the history and cultures; and we actually bring in artists and people from the regions to talk about the culture.

We have a cultural matching dinner that usually sells out the whole restaurant once a month, but we also find a way to bring in the flavors of that cuisine for the entire month. Then we begin to incorporate these flavors onto our menu on a more permanent basis.

A couple years ago we chose the cuisines of the exotic Mediterranean — flavors of Tunisia, Turkey, Catalan, Corsica and Sicily. And this year's series incorporated all the cultures passionate about mangoes. Mangoes are very widely used in the greater palm tree cuisine, but each culture uses them very differently. Learning different cultural applications of one ingredient like the mango is a lot of fun.

We also have a chef's table, and we make a food and wine pairing and talk about each of components, where the ingredients come from and how the flavors come together.

How do you bring your passion for flavor to the front of the house?

We have meetings, tastings and creative sessions with our waitstaff on an ongoing basis; that's the fun part of it. I really enjoy sharing all of that with my waitstaff and cooks.

We've been very lucky with our staff. It's all about hiring the right people who have a passion for food, and love the industry. But finding them can be a challenge.

How do you balance the flavors of a particular menu item?

I always try to incorporate what I call three-dimensional cooking for depth and layers of flavor. This way it's not just one-dimensional — you get the visual element, the aroma, and then, of course, the flavor.

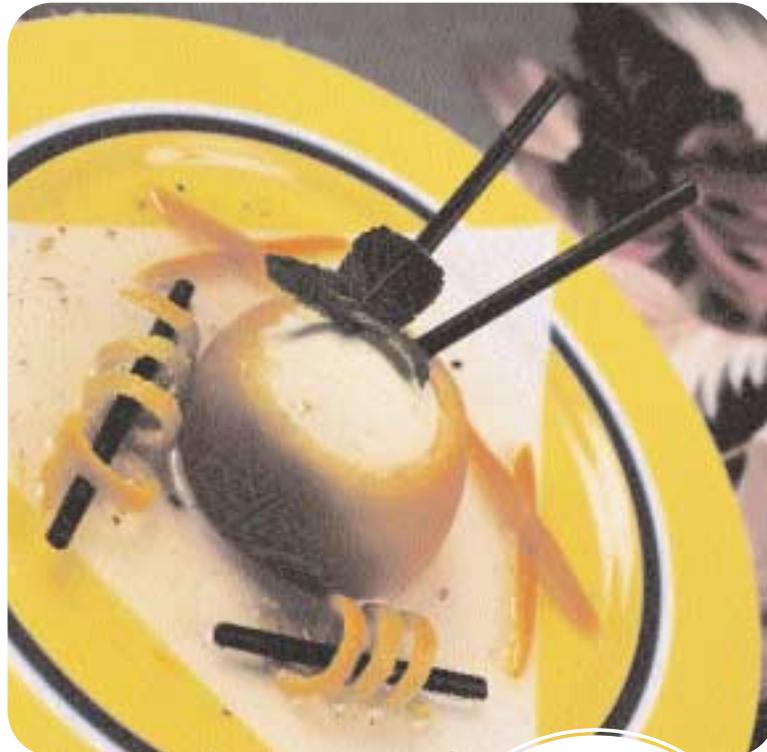
How far is too far with new flavors?

There have been a couple of new creations that haven't really taken off, but luckily I can visualize flavor and spices, the way flavors complement one another and what belongs in the balance. It may be something all chefs have, but my visualization of how flavor profiles come together has always been one of my keen senses.

What is a prominent flavor trend you see in foodservice today? Where do you see the future of flavor going?

I'd have to say Palm Tree Cuisine is what's really hot right now. People love the exotic flavors; it's like a tropical vacation on your palate, with wonderful textures and a balance of complex flavors. And each of the cultures of this cuisine are so interrelated in their ingredients, and passionate about their flavors.

There are so many cultures and diverse flavors in the Caribbean region alone — Portuguese, French, Spanish, Dutch, not to mention the underlying African,



"I always try to incorporate what I call three-dimensional cooking," says Susser, to get the visual element, the aroma, and the flavor.

Mango BBQ Mahi Mahi

The mango barbecue sauce is quite versatile. It can be used for poultry, meat or even seafood as well as other firm-fleshed fish. The sauce can be prepared ahead and kept refrigerated.

Serves 4

3 large plum tomatoes	1 teaspoon ground cumin
1 large ripe mango, peeled and diced	1 teaspoon dry thyme
1 medium onion, diced	1 teaspoon dry oregano
1 teaspoon garlic, minced	2/3 cup orange juice
1 small jalapeño, seeded and diced	1 tablespoon kosher salt
1/3 cup cider vinegar	1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1/2 cup dark brown sugar	4 6-oz. mahi mahi filets
2 tablespoons Dijon mustard	1/2 tablespoon olive oil

TO PREPARE THE MANGO BARBECUE SAUCE: Grill the tomato with the skin on until it is charred. Combine in a medium saucepan the tomato, mango, onion, garlic, jalapeño, vinegar, brown sugar, mustard, cumin, thyme, oregano, orange juice, 2 teaspoons salt and 1/2 teaspoon black pepper. Bring to a simmer over low heat and cook for about 15 minutes until thickened. Transfer to a blender and purée until smooth.

TO BARBECUE THE MAHI MAHI: Preheat the grill until very hot. Season the mahi mahi with salt and pepper and drizzle with olive oil. Be sure the grill is brushed clean and wiped over with an oiled cloth. Place the mahi mahi over direct heat. Grill the first side for about 3 minutes. Turn over and continue to cook the second side over medium heat. Baste the fish with the mango barbecue sauce. When cooked through, remove from the grill and serve with additional barbecue sauce.



Chef Allen's Mango, Banana and Pistachio Strudel with Rum Relish offers tropical sweetness.

Indian and Chinese influences – and each island is really different. The area has a wonderfully rich cultural diversity, and there is so much to draw from. My training is classical French, and I went to Paris and thought French was the cuisine for me.

Then I came to southern Florida, and when I saw the diversity of Caribbean and Latin American flavors, I realized I had found my real passion. This is what really does it for me.

Chef Allen Susser is proprietor of Chef Allen's Restaurant in Miami, which opened in 1986. Chef Susser is also a James Beard award winner, and the author of two cookbooks: *New World Cuisine Cookery* and *The Great Citrus Book*. www.chefallens.com