

The fifth element

Why umami is the flavour to savour

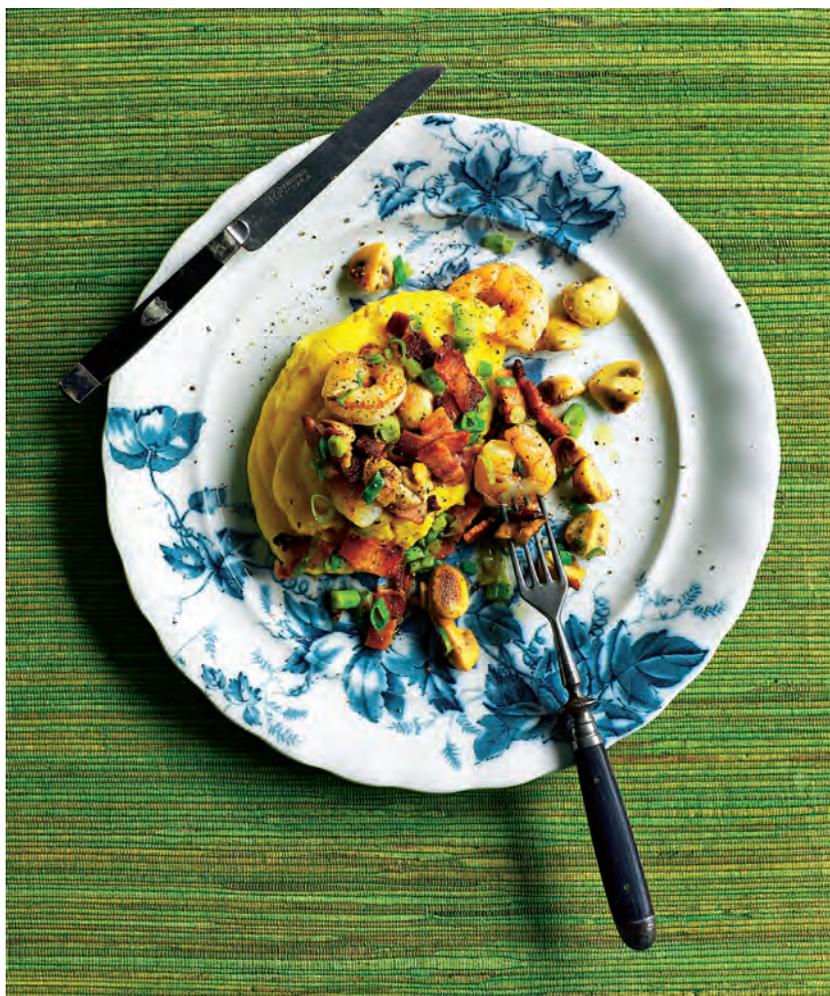
GIZZI ERSKINE



Buzz words: I loathe them. “Umami” counts as one, but I think it’s a culinary term worth taking note of. Its foodie buzz was ramped up in 2000 when scientists at Miami University announced that “umami” was the fifth taste, after identifying specific “umami” taste receptors on our tongues. I describe the taste as “concentrated savoury”. You know the moreish meaty brown “reaction” that sticks to the bottom of a roast chicken tray? That’s umami.

Although it was only recently scientifically recognised, humans have been eating umami ingredients for thousands of years, as it occurs naturally in various foods, including mushrooms, tomatoes and cured meats. The term “umami” was coined by Kikunae Ikeda, a Japanese chemist at the turn of the 20th century. Intrigued as to why dashi, a basic stock, tasted so great, he boiled down an infusion of kombu (kelp, one of dashi’s main ingredients) and found that the resulting crystals consisted of a molecule composed of glutamic acid and sodium-monosodium glutamate. Recognising that humans are hungry for this taste, he produced this in the form of monosodium glutamate (MSG). One way of looking at umami is as a naturally occurring MSG: one of the most divisive culinary substances. In the East, it’s a common kitchen ingredient; in the West it’s derided as a flavour enhancer used in crisps, takeaways and cheap, ready meals.

Whatever your stance on MSG, we all appreciate umami. The shrimp and grits (right) gets its umami kick from the mushrooms, bacon and parmesan; the pissaladière (page 49) from the black olives, anchovies and onions, and in the baby back ribs (page 51) it comes from the miso and roasted pork. Umami is one tasty son of a gun, and I want more of it ■



Brad McDonald’s shrimp and grits

I was bowled over by this signature dish at The Lockhart in Marylebone, London. You can buy the grits online

SERVES: 4

PREPARATION TIME: 25-30 MINUTES

COOKING TIME: 20 MINUTES

750ml milk

1 litre chicken stock

80g butter, plus 1 tbsp for frying

175g fine grits (Arrowhead Mills’ yellow corn grits work best)

50g mature cheddar, grated

50g parmesan, grated

180g smoked streaky bacon, chopped

100g button mushrooms, quartered

450g tiger prawns, peeled and deveined

2 cloves of garlic, crushed

4 spring onions, finely sliced

150ml white wine

A good squeeze of lemon juice

1. Heat the milk, stock and butter in a saucepan, then add the grits and cook for 15 minutes, stirring constantly to avoid lumps. Once smooth, add the grated cheddar and parmesan and season with plenty of salt and pepper. Keep warm; if it starts to thicken, add more stock and butter.

2. Heat a heavy-bottomed frying pan, add the 1 tbsp of butter and bacon, and fry until crispy. Remove the bacon pieces from the pan then fry the mushrooms in the bacon fat.

3. Season the prawns, then add to the pan and fry hard and fast until caramelised on the outside but opaque in the middle.

4. Add the garlic and fry with the prawns and mushrooms for a further minute. Add the fried bacon and spring onions, and toss together. Deglaze the pan with the white wine. Season with lemon, salt and pepper.

5. Top the piping-hot grits with the sauce and serve.

Pissaladière

The slow-cooked caramelised onions inject a concentrated umami flavour, further heightened by the anchovies and olives. Classically, this dish has a dough base, but I prefer it on puff pastry.

SERVES: 4

PREPARATION TIME: 20 MINUTES

COOKING TIME: 1½ HOURS

4 tbsp olive oil, plus extra for drizzling

500g onions, thinly sliced

A few sprigs of thyme

1 sheet of ready-rolled puff pastry

1 egg yolk, for glazing

1 bulb garlic, roasted and mashed in advance

1 x 80g can of anchovy fillets, drained, each cut into three, lengthways

A handful of excellent black olives



1. Heat the oil in a pan, throw in the onions and fry gently for 20-30 minutes until softened and beginning to caramelize. Tip in the thyme and add some salt and pepper. Cover and cook gently for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally and removing the lid for the last 10 minutes to reduce any liquid. When the onions are meltingly soft, remove from the heat and leave to cool a little.

2. Heat the oven to 200C. Lightly oil a shallow baking tray. Roll out the pastry to 40 x 25cm and trim to a neat rectangle. Use a sharp knife to score a border 1cm from the edge, and then score the edges in a zig-zag pattern. Glaze the border edge with egg yolk then carefully place on the tray and pop in the fridge.

3. Spread the mashed garlic and the onion mixture over the pastry, then arrange the anchovies on top in a criss-cross pattern. Stud each anchovy window with an olive, then bake for 25-30 minutes until golden. Serve warm, cold or reheated, and cut into squares.



TOP TIPS

When scoring, make sure you don't cut the whole way through the pastry

GIZZI'S
GADGETS

I CAN'T LIVE
WITHOUT

LAURA SANTTINI
UMAMI RUSH



£3.50

If you want to add even more umami to your food, use one of these grinders

On the bottle

Dazzling pinots, made for the long haul



Plum miso baby back ribs

Miso is rammed full of umami, which, combined with the natural juices that caramelize around the edges of the pork ribs when roasted, gives this dish a real kick.

SERVES: 2

PREPARATION TIME: 10 MINUTES

COOKING TIME: 3 HOURS

MARINATING TIME: 2 HOURS

150g white miso paste

100g caster sugar

100g Japanese plum wine

50g mirin

2 "planks" of really meaty baby back ribs

4-5 umeboshi (salted, fermented plums), very finely chopped. You can buy these from Japanese supermarkets

4 spring onions, green parts only, very thinly sliced

2 tbsp of black and white sesame seeds, toasted

1. Melt the miso paste, caster sugar, plum wine and mirin in a pan, then leave to cool. Rub the ribs with half the marinade mixture, place in a roasting dish and cover with foil. Leave to marinate in the fridge for 2 hours.

2. Heat the oven to 160C and roast the ribs (covered with the foil) for 2 hours. Bring the temperature up to 190C. Remove the foil and finish roasting for 30 minutes — or until the ribs are lightly charred and starting to fall off the bone. Glaze with the rest of the marinade and cook for a further 10 minutes, until really sticky.

3. Transfer the ribs to a serving platter and serve topped with a row of the chopped umeboshi and a row of the sliced spring onions and toasted sesame seeds. Alternatively, purée the umeboshi and leave on the side as a dip.

BOB TYRER



Part of me has been feeling glum because I feared that my little plot of vines was suffering from leaf roll virus, a scourge of modern viticulture. It makes the leaves go a lovely red but blocks photosynthesis, so they can't do their job of converting sunlight into Château Bob. There is no cure. I was thinking of pulling them up, yet they are so young.

Enter one of New Zealand's greatest winemakers, Larry McKenna of Escarpment Vineyard in Martinborough, who was here for the London Wine Fair.

Invited to lunch with him, I whipped out my phone to show him photos of my lurid leaves. Larry makes world-famous pinot noir. My vines are wrotham pinot, an English clone of the same grape. Larry had never heard of it but he was kindness itself in adjusting his glasses and taking a look. The leaves had the red lobes and green veins of leaf roll, he said, but the green didn't extend far enough. It looked more like magnesium deficiency, which is easily dealt with. Give them a dose of Epsom salts. Phew.

He also talked about why NZ pinots are so drinkable when young — but go on to great things as they age — while comparable burgundies take several years to become approachable. It's due to the ozone hole over New Zealand, which lets in more ultraviolet light and gives brighter fruit. His pinots, though made for the long haul, are dazzling in infancy. I guess that proves the point.

Larry is also a keen cyclist and a fan of our David Walsh, the scourge of corruption in the sport. David likes good wine, so perhaps I can swap a dazzling bottle for a signed copy of his book and give Larry something to read on the journey home ■

THREE
OF THE
BEST



ESCARPMENT KUPE PINOT NOIR 2011

Dark and slightly growly, it's built for ageing, but a rich seam of fruit makes it enjoyable now. (£26.60, thedrinkshop.com, from June 14)



VIÑA VENTISQUERO GREY GLACIER PINOT NOIR 2012

Classic new world pinot with heaps of dark berry flavours and a hint of grit. (£14.95, thefinewinecompany.co.uk)



CHÖREY-LÈS- BEAUNE JOSEPH DROUHIN 2010

I bought this pinot for £14 when it was very young and uncouth. Now it's sweetly seductive but costs another seven quid. (£21, bbr.com)