

GOURMET & TRAVEL

7 exotic ingredients fine dining restaurants use to excite your palate

From unusual to downright peculiar, here are 7 of the most intriguing ingredients gracing Singapore's finest tables.

by Shamilee Vellu / NOVEMBER 23, 2020



1. BADASOOP GAMTAE

Dish: Jeju Abalone at Meta

Resembling a cross between astroturf and washi paper, gamtae is an edible marine brown algae and a true Korean delicacy that is unlike supermarket-issue seaweed snack. Chef Sun Kim of Meta says, “Eating seaweed is very common in South Korea, but not many people know about gamtae as it’s quite rare.”

Little wonder, considering gamtae grows exclusively in the pristine waters off the west coast of South Korea and can only be harvested in the dead of winter. Its delicate constitution and demanding extraction meant that although it has a long history in Korean cuisine dating back to the Chosun dynasty, it remained the province of royalty.

Until now, that is. Meta’s gamtae is from Korean specialists Badasoop, which has been making it for over 30 years after painstakingly collecting, washing and drying it by hand. “Gamtae’s flavour is unique,” says Sun. “When you first taste it, it’s a little bitter but the finish is delicately sweet with a hint of the sea.” Other plus points: its shattering crispiness, striking emerald hue, herbaceous notes and health benefits.



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2. HERB OF GRACE

Dish: Berlingots at La Dame de Pic

“Stinky” is not an adjective you’d think would appeal to most chefs, least of all Anne-Sophie Pic, chef consultant at La Dame de Pic at Raffles Singapore and the only female chef in France to helm a three-Michelin starred restaurant. But her interest was piqued when her chef de cuisine first showed her the common rue or herb of grace plant, also known as rue or chou cao (stinky grass in Mandarin).

“It’s the perfect ingredient to infuse a sauce with and has a lot in common with sweet clover or tonka beans. It has a light, bitter taste, which is quite interesting as I work a lot with bitterness in my cuisine,” says Pic. La Dame de Pic sources its herb of grace from Chinatown’s wet market and Pic observes that it’s used in the popular local dessert green bean soup.

At La Dame de Pic, the berlingots are paired with almonds, sunflower seeds and a pea broth accented with the herb of grace. “I use it in the consomme as it adds a floral taste to my signature dish,” says Pic. “The combination of this with the French cheese also enhances the dairy notes in the dish.”

3. AJI AMARILLO

Dish: Baked Sweet Potato with Aji Amarillo Mayonnaise at Esquina

Chilli fans, meet your new obsession. The aji amarillo chilli pepper – a staple in Peruvian cuisine – comes in a vibrant bright orange when ripe, has a moderate heat (30,000 to 50,000 Scoville heat units versus chilli padi’s 200,000) and boasts a flavour unlike any other chilli pepper.

“The first time I tried it was in Pakta, a Peruvian-Japanese restaurant in Barcelona,” says Chef Carlos Montobbio of modern Spanish restaurant Esquina. “It surprised

me because I couldn't associate it with any other ingredient I'd ever tried before. It's a chilli pepper and it's spicy but it's not hot like regular chilli or wasabi. It's very different. It has a fruity taste, like sour, spicy mango with a hint of passion fruit." Montobbio uses the pepper in his Baked Sweet Potato with Smoked Quail Egg and Quinoa – a dish born from his heritage and gourmet travels.

He says, "It's a mix of two memories: the first time I tried Papa a la Huancaína, a delicious traditional Peruvian cold dish, and the charcoal-baked sweet potatoes in Catalonia – so soft, sweet and smoky that you can eat them with a spoon. I can't stop using aji amarillo even though it has nothing to do with Spanish cuisine!"

4. SEA ANEMONE

Dish: Ortiguillas de mar at Pollen Singapore

If sea cucumbers are the ugly ducklings of the ocean, sea anemones are the indubitable swans. Named for anemone flowers, these flamboyant cousins of the jellyfish are typically found affixed to corals, their wildly colourful tentacles swaying seductively in the current. But they're as deadly as they are dazzling – just the lightest touch from an unsuspecting fish triggers each tentacle to shoot out a paralysing neurotoxin, after which the stunned prey is swiftly guided towards the anemone's waiting maw.

Despite this, sea anemones are surprisingly delicious and safe to eat when deep-fried – a secret long known to Andalusian gourmands. Ortiguillas de mar, a dish rarely seen outside Spain because sea anemones oxidise quickly and need to be kept in seawater until they're cooked, features the critters dipped in batter and deep-fried to a rich crusty brown, Michael Wilson, executive chef at Pollen, known for fun, creative dishes like watermelon ravioli and mini shepherd's pie, was instantly hooked after being introduced to sea anemones shipped over from southern Spain.

"They have an intense seafood flavour," says Wilson, who prepares them Andalusian-style. With their strong iodine note, the taste and texture of sea anemones have been compared to oysters, custard and even shirako (cod milt). "When fried, they are a delicious treat that's crispy on the outside but soft and gelatinous on the inside," he says, "almost like eating veal sweetbread."

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5. SOFTSHELL CRAB

Dish: Local Softshell Crab at Kausmo

If you think you know what softshell crab tastes like, think again, say Lisa Tang and Kuah Chew Shian, Kausmo's chef and manager respectively. "We always thought softshell crabs were just crisp, with a tinge of crustacean flavours," says the duo behind the Les Amis Group-backed restaurant. "But the local ones from Crab Lovers Farm have a completely different texture – they have a meaty, juicy flesh and a crisp, light and much crunchier shell. We were also blown away by their flavour – they have such a sweetness that's balanced by natural salinity."

According to Tang and Kuah, it's a typical industry practice to chop off crabs' legs and claws to artificially induce moulting and increase production. This isn't the case at Crab Lovers, though, which uses a slower, but more ethical method, giving the crabs enough time and space to moult naturally, resulting in a higher-quality product needing little embellishment.

“We want our guests to taste the crab in its purest form,” says Tang, who serves it simply fried and unseasoned. But if you love your softshell crab with a dipping sauce (and who doesn’t), each comes accompanied by a piquant trio of homemade sauces, including salted calamansi, fish liver XO and Kausmo hot sauce.

6. GOTU KOLA

Dish: Seabass Belly Popper at Kausmo

Gotu kola or centella asiatica is the miracle that grows underfoot. The weed-like plant, known as the herb of longevity, features heavily in traditional Indian, Chinese and Malay medicines, where it’s used to remedy ailments from ulcers to neurological disorders. It’s also used in cosmetics and has purported anti-ageing benefits.

Like many medicinal plants, its bittersweet, astringent taste is an acquired one. At Kausmo, chef Lisa Tang uses gotu kola in the restaurant’s petite Seabass Belly dish. Tang steam bakes the fish (which she says is full of collagen and can be very fatty) with smoky paprika, ponzu and shaoxing wine, then shreds and forms it into a

croquette topped with a daub of aioli. Over this, she places a single, silky gotu kola leaf because “its slight astringency balances very well with the sweetness of the fish, as well as the fattiness of the aioli.”

Kausmo sources its gotu kola from Green Circle Eco Farm, a local organic operation whose approach mirrors Kausmo’s focus on sustainable, conscientious dining, echo Tang and Kuah Chew Shian, Kausmo’s manager.

“By growing and educating people about the native plants they farm, they’re helping to sustain the biodiversity we have in Singapore, something that we’re gradually losing to our urban progression,” says the duo. “Most of these native plants are not only beautiful, but they require minimal resources to thrive and pack a lot of flavour, too.”

7. GREENGAGE

Dish: Greengage & Apple Palate Cleanser at JAAN by Kirk Westaway

For Britons in the know, the curiously-named greengage tastes like the most delicious plum you've ever eaten, only better. It's also a quintessential taste of late summer, a secret pleasure among those who know that beneath its distinctive green skin lies incredibly sweet, juicy flesh.

"Greengages are found in hedgerows all over the British countryside," says Kirk Westaway. "I remember seeing greengages during my walks with my family as a child and in the farmers' markets and local vegetable shops in my hometown – so they bring back very fond memories of my childhood. At the start of the season, they're so full of juicy, candied sweetness that you want to eat them as they are – I could finish a whole bag!" the executive chef enthuses.

While they're fantastic eaten raw, greengages lend themselves well to a variety of culinary applications, like desserts, chutneys, jams and cocktails. Their bright, sweet freshness also cuts through fatty meats and oily fish nicely. "It's the perfect refresher," says Westaway, whose new summer menu's palate cleanser features translucent slices of greengage atop fresh pomelo, alongside a cooling apple sorbet and lemonade mousse. "I want every customer to have a chance to taste and enjoy one of my favourite summer fruits."

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