Umami: Discover the Taste of Nature’s Hidden Treasure

“What is Umami?”

Umami is the fifth basic taste after sweet, salty, bitter and sour. Derived from the Japanese word umai, meaning “delicious,” umami (pronounced oo-MAH-mee) is described as a savory, brothy, rich or meaty taste sensation. To scientists, umami indicates a high level of glutamate, an amino acid and building block of protein. To chefs and food lovers, it’s a satisfying sense of deep, complete flavor, balancing savory flavors and full-bodied taste with distinctive qualities of aroma and mouthfeel.

Imagine such wholly satisfying foods as steak with sautéed mushrooms, coq au vin and pasta with tomato sauce and Parmesan. That burst of rich, savory flavor is umami. Cured meats, soy sauce, aged cheese and mushrooms are rich in it.

“It’s so rewarding to see our guests respond to umami, the sublime experience that mushrooms bring to our signature dishes. When I see someone’s eyes close briefly as they are eating, or the sauce wiped clean from the plate, that’s when I know I’ve earned a guest that will come back again and again.”

— CHEF ALEXANDRA GUARNASCHELLI, BUTTER, NEW YORK
WHY UMAMI IS IMPORTANT TO COOKING AND HEALTH:

- Flavor enhancement: The more umami present in food, the more flavorful it will be.
- Enhances guest satisfaction: Umami creates both appetite appeal and satiety, the feeling of being gratified to the fullest extent.
- Less salt use: Umami counterbalances saltiness and allows up to a 50 percent salt reduction without compromising flavor.
- Brings out the best: Umami highlights sweetness and lessens bitterness.

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<th>UMAMI-RICH FOODS:</th>
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<td>Mushrooms</td>
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<td>Tomatoes</td>
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<td>Parmesan cheese</td>
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Sautéed, whole cap garnish, even a dusting of dried mushrooms in virtually any form—raw, more umami-rich than fresh ones, and cooked mushrooms are less salty and lessens bitterness. All mushrooms are a rich source of umami and the darker the mushroom the more umami it contains. Widely available mushrooms with the most umami:

- Shiitake
- Portabella
- Crimini
- Button

Dried mushrooms tend to have more umami than fresh ones, and cooked mushrooms are more umami-rich than raw. This means that adding mushrooms in virtually any form—raw, sautéed, whole cap garnish, even a dusting of dried powder—will add an umami lift to foods.

PUTTING UMAMI ON THE MENU:

Today’s focus on clean, fresh ingredients and natural flavors make umami a powerful tool. Perhaps nothing illustrates this so well as the following dishes from restaurants across the country:

- **Balsamic Caramel Beef Cubes and Mushrooms with Toasted Coconut and Gomashio**
  - Chef Monica Pope, Tafia (Houston, TX)
  - Savory beef cubes, roasted mushrooms, and beets sautéed in balsamic soy sauce, roasted ginger and garlic reduction with Gomashio (sesame and dried seaweed flakes) served with sticky rice.

- **Polenta Encrusted Scallops and Roasted Exotic Mushrooms**
  - Chef Chris Nason, Sapphire Grill (Savannah, GA)
  - Seared scallops with a crust of parmesan polenta served in a pool of golden tomato, white wine and lemon peppercorn broth with roasted mushrooms.

- **Salmon with Grilled Shiitake Relish and Cornbread Pudding**
  - Chef Tom Douglas, Etta’s Seafood (Seattle, WA)
  - Grilled salmon coated with spice rub and served over creamy cornbread pudding, garnished with an herb balsamic shiitake relish.

For complete recipes, further information on umami and additional resources, please visit: www.mushroominfo.com/foodservice

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