

Big flavors enliven once tame breakfasts

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Chef Wafi Dinari admits he's a fan of light breakfasts: fruit, yogurt, coffee, and he's off to work. So when he took over the kitchen at Ouisie's Table in Houston, he couldn't believe guests were asking for more dinner-like items for their morning meals.

So he met them where their appetites were headed with dishes like slow-roasted beef short ribs served with poblano salsa and corn tortillas. "Breakfast of champions, right?" he says with a laugh.

A recent survey of nearly 1,300 chefs by the National Restaurant Association bears that out. The association's What's Hot 2014 Culinary Forecast lists full-flavored ethnic-inspired breakfast items — including Asian-flavored syrups, chorizo-scrambled eggs and coconut milk pancakes — as being among the top 20 trends of the year.

While the trend toward big flavors in the morning is being driven mostly by smaller restaurant companies, their influence is bubbling up on menus at breakfast-centered chains such as the 1,600-unit Denny's, which

sells a Santa Fe Skillet with eggs, crumbled chorizo sausage, fire-roasted bell peppers, onions and mushrooms. Incorporating the virtues of a well-known sandwich into an egg dish, 386-unit Huddle House sells a Philly Cheese Steak Omelet.

Arlene Spiegel, a New York City-based restaurant, retail and hospitality consultant admits she's somewhat surprised it took chefs so long to add some pizzazz to breakfast. It was the final meal frontier that few chose to modify, yet perhaps that unwillingness was rooted in research showing most breakfast eaters are ritualistic and slow to change their routine, even when it might taste better.

"The good news about breakfast foods is they lend themselves to customization whether it's sweet or savory or the celebration of some ethnicity in terms of spices or herbs," she says. "An egg can become anything: Asian with scallions, bean sprouts and soy sauce; Mexican with jalapeños and salsa. Just by themselves, eggs become a canvas to express culinary point of view, and so now you're finally seeing that happen at breakfast." ●

