The world is our OYSTER

Sushi and ceviche are about as far as it gets from classic British food, but a growing number of chefs are creating their own kind of fusion – combining fresh, local ingredients with international flavours. **Jenny Linford** finds out more

When it comes to foreign flavours the British are famously open-minded; these days curry is considered as big a part of our national cuisine as fish and chips or pie and mash. While many of these international-inspired flavours inevitably require sauces and spices that are produced thousands of miles away, more and more chefs are looking much closer to home when it comes to sourcing fresh meat, fish and dairy.

Of course, a London curry house ditching imported meat for British lamb or chicken seems like a no-brainer, but things do get a bit trickier when it comes to sourcing more specific ingredients, such as sushi and sashimi-grade fish.

When Caroline Bennett opened her Japanese restaurant Moshi

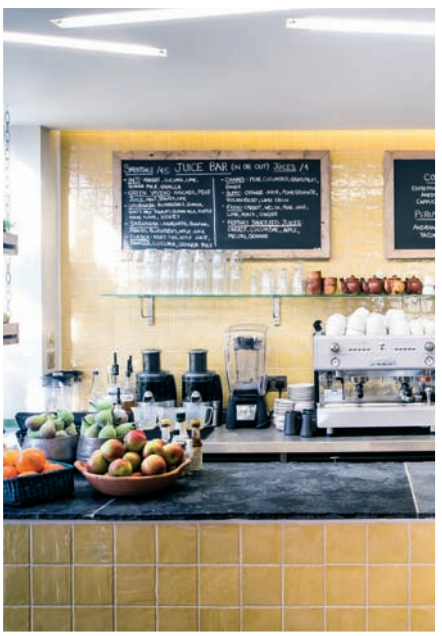
Moshi Sushi in Liverpool Street in 1994 – inspired by her time living and working in Japan – it was the UK's first conveyor belt sushi restaurant. Even more radical was her decision in 1998 to take blue fin tuna off the menu for ethical reasons. "When I realised that eating a blue fin tuna was like eating a panda or a rhino, that was my eureka moment," she explains. "We did lose customers. Today people understand and appreciate our reasons, but ten years ago they didn't." Keen to source her fish as sustainably as possible, Caroline also wanted to use only locally-caught, wild, British fish, but experienced huge problems in finding the right quality.

Sushi Standards

"We went through our usual supply chain and the fish we found were local and British, but we weren't told when or where it was landed or how it was caught. Invariably it stank!" Eventually, Caroline met a Cornish fisherman called Chris Bean who offered to send her a box of his own-caught. "I remember when the first lot came in," says Caroline. "It was a mixed box of fish, some of which were species we'd never seen, like horse mackerel. We opened it, expecting the usual stench, and instead there was just that lovely sea freshness. The fish were still in rigor mortis, still covered in slime [a sign of freshness], with bright eyes and red gills. It was extraordinary."

Chris Bean continues to supply Moshi Moshi Sushi to this day. "The whole premise of eating sustainable fish is working with what the sea offers. Each day we serve Cornish catch of the day, changing the menu depending on what comes in. We cook using the same techniques they do in Japan, the same base ingredients – it's hard to get away from soy sauce or nori seaweed – but when it comes to vegetables and fish,


GRANOLA BAR
£2.80


JUICE BAR

you can be much more in tune with your native surroundings." Caroline relishes the quality that sourcing her fish locally has brought to the menu. "Older Japanese customers come in especially for our white fish. They love brill, which has a slight crunchiness, or horse mackerel, which is oily yet has a firmness to its texture. Once we started using Cornish fish our menu just felt alive."

At Benares, Atul Kochhar's glamorous Michelin-starred restaurant in Mayfair, the chef prides himself on offering Indian food which draws on both British and Indian influences. His reasons go back to childhood. "As a boy, when I went food shopping with my father in India, I remember he wouldn't buy anything which didn't come from the area we were living in. He believed that if the food was fresh and local it would taste the best. When I opened my own place I kept this in mind."

Before starting Benares, Atul worked at the renowned Tamarind restaurant in London, noted for its authentic Indian cooking. He remembers being scolded by his father for not using local ingredients. "He would look at my menus and say 'You have pomfret and okra – these foods don't exist here.' He was always asking me if I had visited local farmers and fish markets. Looking back at history you see that red chillies came to India with the Portuguese, and that the mighty tandoor actually originated in Persia. Food is about journeys of people, of different cultures. For me it's about adapting and adopting, so my food will always continue to grow."

Peruvian Fusion

Meanwhile, restaurateur Martin Morales is on a mission to bring his beloved Peruvian food to a British audience. Having opened his first restaurant Ceviche in 2012 to great acclaim, he has just launched a new venue, Andina.

In his restaurants Martin respects the heritage of Peruvian cuisine, but innovates at the same time. "We love our food, we love our tradition, but we are in London. This is who we are as well. It's important that everything, from the ingredients we source to the design of the restaurants reflects how we live here."

Recreating the food of Peru while reflecting the realities of food sourcing in Britain is a balancing act, but Martin enjoys the challenge. When it comes to sourcing ingredients he says just 5-7% of the ingredients are imported. "The key flavours for Peruvian cooking, such as panca, Amarillo and rocoto chillies, are very important. We have to use authentic ingredients, but we also try and use seasonal produce when we can, especially your fantastic British asparagus"

For ceviche dishes, both restaurants utilise British-sourced seafood and fish. "We use British mackerel and gooseberries in one recipe, but we also need limes, which obviously have to be imported. It's all about adapting dishes a little bit, so they still have that flavour of Peru, but in a new way."

East Meets West

Through his elegant food stores and restaurants, popular cookbooks and TV programmes, Yotam Ottolenghi is famous for boosting the profile of lesser-known Middle Eastern ingredients, such as pomegranate molasses, in the UK. But when it comes to sourcing raw ingredients for his shops and restaurants, he's a big fan of buying British. What strikes Yotam is the sheer range of British-made 'exotics' now available. "We used to import our Burrata cheese, but now it's made for us here in London from British milk. The quality is fantastic. Black garlic, which originally comes from Asia, is now being produced in the UK too. It's made by ageing garlic quickly, so that the bulbs loose a lot of moisture and turn sweet and caramelly. We use a lot of it."

The chef is particularly impressed with how receptive British growers are to new flavours and ideas. Eight to ten years ago, innovation was much more static. It felt like the food scene in the UK wasn't going anywhere. Now there's a real sense of movement. We're constantly being sent new British-made products to try. It's not just a minor esoteric phenomenon, it really is happening!"