Seaweed Beyond Sushi: Culinary Institute of America Leads the Way

CIA chef Paul Crispo talks about and demonstrates his cooking techniques for a menu of delicacies featuring seaweed.

The launch of a new cookbook, *Fabulous and Flavorful Gim*: a Collection of Korean Seaweed Recipes Developed by Faculty Chefs from The Culinary Institute of America, published by Korea Agro-Fisheries and Food Trade Corporation, was a very tasty occasion. Sea Grant extension agent Anoushka Concepcion, seaweed researcher Charles Yarish and school officials from the Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science and Technology Center attended the book launch at the CIA’s Hyde Park, New York campus with me and other invited guests and were treated to selected dishes prepared by Chef Phil Crispo. We were also asked to rate the taste and texture of various items according to preference.

The attendees heard Yongja Kim, a leading gastronomy journalist, talk about the historical and traditional Korean culinary uses and roles of gim (the Korean term for seaweed). For example, Miyoguk soup, a nutritious soup served on special occasions, is traditionally prepared for women giving birth and is then offered every year to the offspring as “birthday soup.” Toran guk soup, made with taro root, white radish and kelp, is served at harvest time and at ceremonies to honor ancestors.

While seaweed has long been a staple in the Korean diet, the CIA chefs and book author hope to “break the sushi mold,” appealing to the American and global palates in new healthy and appealing ways. The seaweeds they use are high in proteins essential for amino acids, high in vitamin C and fiber, yet low in calories. Some flavored Korean seaweeds are now offered for sale in this country at outlets such as Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s.

Bun Lai, a well-known chef and restaurateur who is also known for his environmental and social activism, told the chefs how he uses seaweed and how growing seaweed helps the environment. You can find Lai at Miyas Sushi in New Haven, Connecticut. New Haven, known for its exceptional restaurants, was also the original home of the Culinary Institute of America when it was founded in 1946, before it expanded and moved.

“Your job,” Lai told the student chefs, “is the most important because leaders who influence what people eat influence society as a whole.”

“It’s an incredibly dynamic time for food in our society,” he added. Lai talked about the problems Americans have that relate to unhealthy diets, such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

“What I did was rethink the idea of sushi,” said Lai. “Instead of serving white rice, I replaced it with multigrain rice. All the food I use in the restaurant is sustainably grown or fished.” He believes that people should open their minds

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—Chef Bun Lai, New Haven restaurateur, to student chefs at the Culinary Institute

to eating foods that are both good for their bodies and the environment. Lai even developed a recipe for cooking Asian shore crabs. Asian shore crabs are very abundant small striped crabs which are documented as invasive nuisance species known to displace native crabs.

“Seaweed is ultimately sustainable food,” Lai said. “There is no fertilizer, no antibiotics, and no pesticides used to grow it.” Be conscientious about your choices, he advised.

Some seaweeds have a nutty flavor, some taste like chicken, and others vary in color, texture, or fragrance, chefs and tasters agreed. “Just like the chefs here, I started tasting different versions then categorized them by flavor and texture.” Lai said. “Now, with this cookbook, people can enjoy Gim every day.”

Korea produced 10 billion sheets of nori, the seaweed used in sushi and other foods, last year.

“You hold the key to the future,” Lai told the student chefs.

Yummy!

Seaweed-flavored gourmet ice cream was the pièce-de-résistance of the tasting opportunity at the CIA’s book launch event. While most ice cream contains carrageenan, a colloidal extract from red seaweed that makes it smooth and thick, this ice cream dessert was quite different because the seaweed itself was used for nutritious flavor and as a garnish. It tasted a bit like green tea to this taster. Recipes are featured in the new gim cookbook.