

Accent on ümami

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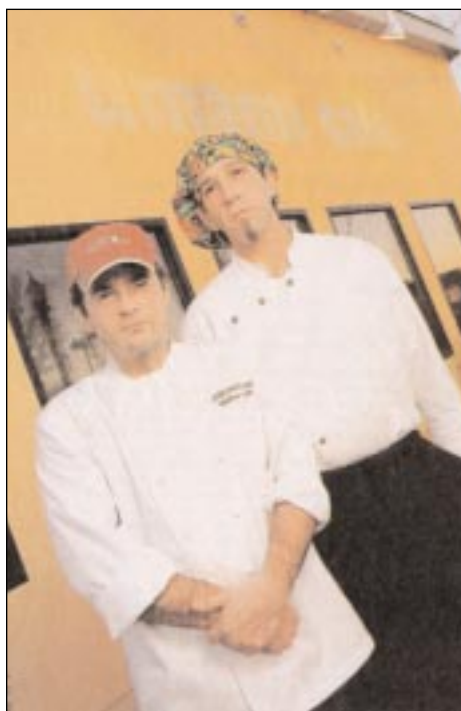
Croton-on-Hudson cafe specializes in foods that contain the 'fifth' taste

Elizabeth Johnson
The Journal News

Most days, a 1937 Dodge stands regally outside a new cafe on Riverside Avenue in Croton-on-Hudson. It's a feast for the eyes — curvaceous and black, with bulbous fenders, wide running boards, big-eyed headlights, a sleek silver hood ornament.

But his classic American automobile has a decidedly Asian word as its vanity plate: Umami. Its name comes from that of the week-old restaurant — the ümami café. Literally, the Japanese word translates to good taste.

Not a bad description for a cafe, or a vintage car. But probe deeper, and the car and the cafe have more in common than a name, appealing to the senses in similar fashions.



Owner Jonathan Pratt, left, and chef Mike Love at the ümami café.



Some of the foods available at the ümami café in Croton-on-Hudson include, clockwise from bottom center: Coconut Lime Soup with Shrimp, Evil Jungle Prince, Truffled Mac and Cheese, Sweet Chili Sauce Fried Chicken, Steamed Blackfish, Ahi Tuna Tacos with Hawaiian Guacamole and, center, Vindaloo Samosas.

Ask experts to describe umami, and they'll say it's the fifth taste, after salty, sweet, bitter and sour. Some people call it hearty, but that's not quite right. It's a deeply satisfying, nourishing taste. Mmmmmm, with a sigh.

In the case of the ümami café, it's the platform for anew flavor experience. Dedicated to the fifth taste, everything on the menu is rich in umami. While selections include Asian dishes, it is not a Japanese restaurant. Braised pork bathes in flavors of adobo, the Mexican and Filipino spice made of ground chilies, herbs and vinegar. Silky foie gras makes an appearance, as does crispy fried chicken.

"But it's more of a brain thing," says Jonathan Pratt, who opened the ümami café two weeks ago. "It's a reaction that makes you crave more of whatever it is that you're eating."

About 100 years ago, a researcher at Tokyo Imperial University named Kikunae Ikeda wanted to know why, after eating foods high in umami, the flavor lingered like a new lover's kiss. He had to have more.

He identified the taste as coming from L-glutamate, a protein that's widely found in plant and animal tissue, and naturally has the flavor enhancer monosodium glutamate, or MSG. When the proteins in glutamates break down through fermentation, aging, ripening or cooking, umami is at its highest.

In 2,000, scientists from the University of Miami identified a taste-bud receptor for umami, essentially confirming Ikeda's claims and heralding the flavor as the fifth taste.

But how do you know when you are tasting it? If umami were a shape, it would be round. If it were a color, that fish blue in the sky just before night falls. If you could touch umami? Velvet, but fuzzy — like a horse's nose.

"And we want more, more, more," says Tim Hanni, a Master of Wine in Napa Valley, Calif., who has been studying umami for more than 10 years.

Like when the waiter offers that measly sprinkling of Parmesan over your pasta and you wish he would just leave the grater on the table.

(continued on reverse)

Accent on the ‘fifth taste’

“Parmesan cheese is the highest source of glutamate in western culture,” says Hanni. “It’s like soy sauce in Asia as an umami delivery device. The primary tastes of Parmesan are salt and umami — two things that make it delicious.”

Add truffles to that Parmesan cheese — like the Truffled Mac and Cheese at ümami café — and you’ve got umami to the nth power.

Others try to describe umami in English words: savory, brothy and meaty.

“It accentuates other flavors,” says Pratt, who also owns Peter Pratt’s Inn in Yorktown Heights. Add fish sauce to a dish, like Pratt does to his Coconut Lime Soup, and suddenly the taste comes alive.

But Hanni’s method of description — by saying what it’s not — works best.

It’s not plain tofu. Broth or soy sauce — both high in umami — must be added for tofu to have any taste.

It’s not raw mushrooms. But sauté those mushrooms, and break down some of those proteins, and you have umami.



Foods that contain umami include, clockwise from bottom left, black truffles, foie gras, mushroom soy, miso, dried shiitake mushrooms, fish sauce, Parmegiano-Reggiano cheese, fermented black beans and center, Thai red curry paste.

Want to try umami? Taste these foods

- Parmesan cheese
- Soy sauce
- Potato chips
- Caviar
- Foie gras
- Shiitake mushrooms
- Fish sauce
- Green tea
- Gruyère cheese
- Fresh clams
- Perfectly ripe fruit, like tomatoes and peaches



“Suddenly, it’s delicious and rich,” says Hanni.

It’s not unripe tomatoes. But imagine just-picked, grown-in-your-own-garden tomatoes. Juicy, filling and delicious. Umami.

“And when a tomato is ripe, it’s measurably higher in glutamate,” says Hanni.

Potato chips, caviar, foie gras, truffles, shiitake mushrooms, fish sauce, green tea, Gruyère cheese, fresh clams. It’s even found in mother’s milk.

“I’ve always through ‘fruition’ was one of the better definitions, both literally and figuratively,” says Jonathan Zearfoss, a professor of culinary arts at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park who has researched taste physiology and flavor development.

Literally, because of the presence of umami in ripe fruit.

“But it’s the flavor that brings a dish to completion,” says Zearfoss. “Without it, there’s something missing, like in a jigsaw puzzle.”

Umami is both filling and fulfilling, and it rounds out a dish.

Gordon Churchwell, a writer who lives in Cold Spring and is working on “The Umami Trail: In Pursuit of the Perfection of Flavor” (Bloombury, to be published in 2003), sees two ways of looking at umami. One is the new definition of the fifth taste.

“The other is a sort of ancient, Zen definition: food achieving its moment of perfection,” he says.

People who are obsessed with perfecting food are driven by a umami taste, Churchwell says. “So like other art forms, it’s a natural instinct.”

Natural enough that Churchwell believes that the craving for umami may have shaped human evolution. He argues

the switch in human diet from fruit and vegetables to higher-protein meat may have been one of the reasons for the increase in brain size that led to the evolution of language.

“It works on a prehistoric level,” says Pratt. “They don’t know why they have to have more of it, but they do.”

At the ümami café, Pratt highlights dishes that he’s had over the years and can’t stop eating.

“I have a sense memory of everything on the menu,” he says. The adobo pork? His wife cooked it for him the first time she invited him over for dinner.

Despite the complexity of the name, the ümami café is an exercise in simplicity. Midnight blue walls, simple sconces, bare tables with highlighted edges, and a pair of weather-beaten doors that Craig Purdy, Pratt’s partner, found buried in the sand in the Kuwaiti desert after the Gulf War.

If only the taste could be described with such simplicity.

Zearfoss, the CIA professor, says he’s not convinced umami is a fifth taste — because of the strict definition of taste as perceived through the taste buds on the surface of the tongue — but he agrees that’s just an issue of semantics.

“It’s part of making the whole dish appealing,” he says. “The completion of the plate.”

Full, elegant and delicate, with a pop now and then.

Just like that 1937 Dodge.

ü mami café

325 South Riverside Avenue
Croton-on-Hudson
NY 10520

914-271-5555

