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Chef Seminar Puts Us Potatoes On Asian Consumers' Plates

DENVER (April 8, 2010)—US table-stock potatoes are popping up in new forms and new dishes at restaurants throughout Asia—a trend that owes its origin to an annual chef seminar organized by the United States Potato Board (USPB). Just months after concluding the second annual seminar, new menu additions created by the participants bring the total to at least 39 new potato-based dishes launched in 16 restaurant chains in the past 15 months.

Held November 10-11, 2009, the USPB's second annual International Chef Seminar drew 27 chefs from leading restaurants in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore. This year's event was held in Hong Kong at the Chinese Cuisine Training Institute and was conducted with assistance from the Hong Kong Chef's Association. The two-day event was geared toward helping Asian chefs gain a new perspective on how US fresh table-stock potatoes fit into local trends and new menu items.

"In Asia, potatoes are not usually one of the first things chefs think of in creating new dishes. Local cuisine historically relies on rice and noodles," explained the USPB's Sarah Mahler, Manager of International Marketing-Table-stock. "Even in restaurants that traditionally use US potatoes, such as American-style steakhouses, the offerings have not typically been very innovative. Our objective with this event has been to help chefs forge a new outlook on the versatility of US potatoes and their suitability to a range of dishes."

Throughout the two-day event, chefs learned about the US potato industry, the many US potato varieties and how to fit US potatoes into current foodservice trends. They were shown how to use fresh US potatoes in 13 different menu applications from American comfort food to dessert to dim sum. Chefs from the Hong Kong Chef's Association demonstrated recipes and shared ideas on using US potatoes to create innovative dishes.

After the cooking demonstrations, the chefs applied what they learned through a "black box" cooking competition. They were organized into groups of three, given a sealed black box containing ingredients, and assigned a category for menu development. The key requirement was the new recipe must use US potatoes. The results yielded dishes with great eye appeal and great taste that ranged from recipes for children to classic European-type cuisine.

The real test of the event's effectiveness came afterward, however, as USPB followed up to see if the new ideas were being utilized. Based on the number of new potato dishes added to menus and the number of potato promotions conducted, the seminar achieved its goal.

For example, in Singapore, Sizzler restaurant conducted a promotion featuring four US potato side dishes with a fresh take on traditional American food via new varieties and ingredients. Yellow flesh potato wedges, baked purple potatoes, roasted fingerling potatoes and Dijon russet mashed potatoes were all popular with customers.

In Malaysia another event participant, Bubba Gump, added two new potato varieties to their menu during the Christmas period, which were so well-received it is now considering adding them to the regular menu. Also, the Bankers Club restaurant just introduced several new recipes

using US potatoes in main courses and snack items, using russets in addition to more unique blue, purple and yellow flesh varieties.

Successes like these build upon the first year's seminar, which also spurred many new dishes. In Hong Kong, the Double Star Group added 10 new menu items after participating in the 2008 seminar. These used six US potato varieties in snacks, side dishes and main courses. Double Star Group then ran a promotion from March to May 2009 raising US potato sales by 67 percent.

“The chef seminar is proving to be an effective way to give consumers a new outlook on US potatoes,” Mahler said. “By focusing on working with chefs, US potatoes are becoming more visible to consumers.”

For more information about US potato exports and the USPB's international marketing programs, visit www.uspotatoes.com.

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David Fairbourn is Manager, Industry Communications & Policy, at the United States Potato Board in Denver. The mission of the USPB is to increase demand for potatoes and potato products through an integrated promotion program, thereby providing US producers with expanding markets for their production. David can be contacted at 303-369-7783 or david.fairbourn@uspotatoes.com. For complete information about the programs, ROI results, resources and tools available to all members of the industry through the USPB, please visit www.uspotatoes.com. The United States Potato Board—Maximizing Return on Grower Investment.

