CHEFS ARE FANNING THE FLAMES FOR MUSTARD OIL

BY INDRANI SEN

LAURENCE EDELMAN is not a chef who looks often to Asia for cul
ture inspiration.

“I’m not the kind of guy that’s out there looking for the exotic,” said Mr. Edelman, who opened his new
American restaurant, Left Bank, this summer in the West Village. While making his own mustard, he found an
enticing ingredient from the East, mustard oil. Mr. Edelman now serves this pungent mustard spread on a fri
sie and cornichon salad with a high-voltage teriyaki.

“It got this thing to it,” he said. “It’s one of those things that once you get that taste of it, then all of a sudden ev
everything is lacking mustard oil.”

Mustard oil’s silky heat and sinus
clearing vapors will ring a bell for South Asians, particularly in the Bengal re

dion of eastern India and Bangladesh, where it flavors fish curries and mashed
vegetable bhartas. It is also used as a massage oil, the only use for which it is
legally approved in the United States.

But more American chefs hunting for new flavors have discovered mustard oil. While Bengali mostly uses it for
sau
toing, reducing its intensity, American chefs

usually finish dishes with a rickle of
the sticky sauce. As Jean-Georges Vongerichten does with blended must

dard greens in a new book, “Home

Cooking With Jean-Georges: My Favor

ite Simple Recipes” (Clarkson Potter).

Mustard oil is key ingredient in the “umami,” a sandwich with a cult fol

lowing at Alex Raji’s Chicago taqueria bar, El Quinto Pino. Playing on the Japanese pairing of umami

and umeshu, Mr. Raji mixes it into butter she slathers on a tideal and tops with sea urchin.

“It has these great vapors, but it’s not the kind of heat that tongues,” she said. “I think because it’s an oil, it hits the
tongue differently.”

Ken Oringer said he discovered must

dard oil when the Indian cookbook au

thor Mossaab Karim invited a guest chef visit to his restaurant, Cleo, in Boston. Now he marinates jalapeños in mustard oil in honor of those pictures and poaches fish in mustard oil before sear

ing it with a fish sauce “so there is no ingredient that comes close to it.”

Few American chefs have featured mustard oil as prominently as Michael Hodgkin, the former chef at Hung Ry, a

hand-pulled noodle shop in Manhat

tan. In his new book, “Taste of Asia,” Mr. Hodgkin used mustard oil as his go-to seasoning in everything from a simple salad dress

ing for sauted apples and local greens to a fried egg dish with fennel and co

ridgeyard seeds, lime and honey.

“IT DOESN’T HAVE THAT THICK, FATTY TEXTURE THAT COATS YOUR MOUTH,” he said. “You taste it, and then it’s gone.”

Korean use mustard oil in a hot se

asoning, and some Chinese cuisines employ it in cold dressings. But the most classic Bengali use is in shorbe

hita, a powerful paste of mustard seeds

and oil that is often used to showcase the delicacy of the shadikye migratory fish. Mahbubur Rahman serves it at Neoreh, his Bangladeshi restaurant in the Bronx. Although many Bengalis now cook with other oils, Mr. Rahman said, traditional dishes aren’t the same without the oil. “Back in the days before the British, nobody used vegetable or

corn oil,” he said. “When you eat it, you feel like you’re eating something.”

Until recently, good mustard oil was so hard to find in the United States that Bengalis coming here would take a can into their suitcases. As the South Asian diaspora has spread, however, mustard oil imported from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan has become easy to find in specialized stores for about $5 a liter.

FRISÉE SALAD WITH BLOOMED MUSTARD SEED AND MUSTARD OIL

Adapted from Laurence Edelman. Left Bank, Manhattan

Time: 30 minutes

3 tablespoons sugar
2 tablespoons mustard seed
2 tablespoons distilled vinegar
Salt
3 tablespoons to 2 tablespoons pure or blended
mustard oil
2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon lemon juice
Black pepper
Heads frisée, roots trimmed, most of the green frill removed
8 cornichons, halved lengthwise
3 tablespoons chopped parsley.

1. In a saucepan over medium heat, mix 1 cup water and the sugar until it is

melted. Add mustard seeds and simmer

until softened, about 20 minutes. Strain

and reserve the syrup from the seeds.

2. In a bowl, mix the vinegar, 1/4

lemon juice, and 1 to 2 tablespoons mustard oil, depending on how much

delicious heat is desired. Add 1 to 3 tablespoons

reserved syrup, 1 tablespoon of oil at a
time, until the mixture is the consistency of a

thick sauce.

3. In a bowl, mix oil, lemon juice, pepper to
taste. Cut the frisée at the root to separate the leaves. Add the frisée,
cornichons and parsley to the bowl, and
toss to coat with dressing. If desired,

serve with pate or other charcuterie.

Yield: 4 servings.

FOUR ON THE HEAT: MUSTARD OIL IN USE

that as long as bottles bear the warning, the oil doesn’t require any labeling, and can’t dictate how it is displayed in stores. A spokesperson for the New York City health department said that if mustard made from pure mustard oil bearing the “external use” or “label, they could discard it and issue a va


tion for having, unprocessed food, though she said she has no record of any such violation being issued.

Despite the rules, the erucic acid levels in mustard oil are not necessarily dan

gerous, said Walter Willet, chairman of the department of nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health. “The reality is that we are not really sure,” Mr. Willet

wrote in an email. “The potential haz

ards are based on animal studies, and to my knowledge we don’t have real ev
dence of harm to humans.”

A study in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition in 2004 found that

Indians who ate mustard oil had fewer incidences of heart disease, possibly be

cause of its alpha-linolenic acid, an omega

3 fatty acid that is found in plants.

Raman Laxmanan, a researcher at the Princeton Environmental Institute, said any bills, like any risks, have yet to be conclusively proved. But Mr. Laxmanan said he has no concerns about the safety of a drizzle of mustard oil in eating.

“THERE’S NO WAY I’D DO ANYTHING AT ALL,” he said. “Just as it would require a bright spot on my back. I would probably require a lot for any harm.”

Some chefs use it as a wicht at Raja

Foods, an importer of the oil, said many South Asian cooks probably Ig

ores it as well, “Now that it’s been

since the day they were born,” he said.

Underinvested and, his company sells a version blended with vegetable oil.

For some chefs, the warning is a badge of authenticity. Tom Valenti, chef and owner of Oceana, which covers a

cased mustard oil at Kathiyavars, the internal use only. Mustard oil is generally

covered blender with what he calls “mustard oil” without the warning. “I de

clared it. He said he now uses a blended

purchased his own mustard oil in his salads and gravy on a chicken

pattie, and safeguarded his stove with a

spilled carrier. Customers love the dish, Mr. Valenti said. “I’ve gotten a couple

of, ‘Wow, that’s spicy,’ with slightly wa

tery eyes,” he said. “But there’s always a smile under those watery eyes.”

FISH IN BANGLADESHI SHORSHE BATA

(MUSTARD PASTE)

Adapted from Neoreh restaurant, the Bronx

Time: 30 minutes

Juice of 1 lemon, plus 2
tablespoons lemon juice
1 pound of fish fillets (basa), available frozen in Bangladeshi
groceries, is traditional, but skinless, boneless bluefish, tilapia,

skin or catfish may be substituted.

1/4 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon turmeric
3 tablespoons yellow mustard
seeds
2 green chilies (or to taste)
2 garlic cloves
6 tablespoons pure or blended
mustard oil
1/2 cup chopped cilantro leaves
1 teaspoon nigella seeds.

1. Pour the juice of 1 lemon onto the fish fillets and sprinkle with 1/2 teaspoon

of the salt and 1/4 teaspoon of the

turmeric; set aside.

2. In a spice grinder, combine the mustard seeds, remaining 1/4 teaspoon

salt, remaining 1/2 teaspoon turmeric, (chili to taste) and the garlic. Grind to

a smooth paste. Transfer to a food processor and add 3 tablespoons of the

mustard oil, 2 tablespoons lemon juice, 1/4 cup of the cilantro and 3 teaspoons

water. Process until smooth, adding

more water if needed to get a paste with the consistency of cake batter.

3. In a large sauté over medium heat, heat 2 teaspoons mustard oil and add

the spice paste. Let it sizzle for a few

moments, and then use a wooden spatula to flip and stir it in the oil, reducing

the heat if it starts to brown too

quickly. Saute until it darkens and

thickens, about 10 minutes. Scoop the

paste out of the pan and into a small

bowl.

4. Wipe out the frying pan with a paper towel and return the pan to medium-high

heat. Heat remaining 1 1/2 tablespoons mustard oil. When the oil is shimmering,

add the niggella seeds and, if desired, a whole green chile. Fry for a minute or

two, then add the fish fillets. Carefully

flipping them to brown both sides. When the fish is browned, add the spice paste

and 1/4 cup hot water as needed to

loosen the paste. Bring it to a boil and

simmer until the fish is cooked through, about 5 minutes depending on the

thickness of the fillets. Sprinkle with

chopped cilantro.

Yield: 4 servings.

POTATO FRY WITH BANGLADESHI SHORSHE BATA

Time: 30 minutes

1 pound potatoes, peeled and cut

into wedges
2 tablespoons lemon juice
1/2 tablespoons mustard oil
1/4 teaspoon turmeric
2 green chilies (chili to taste)
1 tablespoon nigella seeds
1 teaspoon ground cumin
Salt

1. In a large bowl, mix the lemon

juice and mustard oil. Add the

turmeric to the bowl and mix

well. Add the potatoes and

chilies. Cover and let marinate

for at least 1 hour.

2. Heat 1-2 inches of oil in a large

frying pan. Drain and dry the

potatoes on paper towels. Save

the remaining marinade.

3. Deep-fry the potatoes for 2-3

minutes, or until golden brown.

Drain and cut into sticks.

4. Serve with leftover mustard

paste and jute or onion raita.

Yield: 4 servings.

BUTTER-BLANCHED MUSTARD GREENS WITH MUSTARD OIL

Adapted from “Home Cooking

With Jean-Georges” (Clarison Potter, 2011)

Time: 20 minutes

1 pound mustard greens, washed
well, ribs removed and discarded
12 tablespoons unsalted butter
3 tablespoons kosher salt or more
1 to 2 tablespoons pure or blended
mustard oil
Black pepper.

1. Cut mustard green leaves into

quarter-inch strips.

2. In a large pot, bring 6 cups water to a

boil, add butter and salt. When it returns to a boil, add greens. Stir until wilted and

tender, about 4 minutes. Drain well, and

transfer to a serving dish. Mix in mustard oil, and salt and pepper to taste.

Yield: 4 servings.