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## Chefs Are Fanning the Flames for Mustard Oil

By INDRANI SEN

**L**AURENCE EDELMAN is not a chef who looks often to Asia for culinary 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. But while making his own mustard, he found an enticing ingredient from the East, mustard oil. Mr. Edelman now serves this pungent amber oil with lightly pickled mustard seeds on a frisée and cornichon salad with rich pig's-head terrine.

"It's got this clang to it," he said. "It's one of those things that once you get that taste of it, then all of a sudden everything is lacking mustard oil."

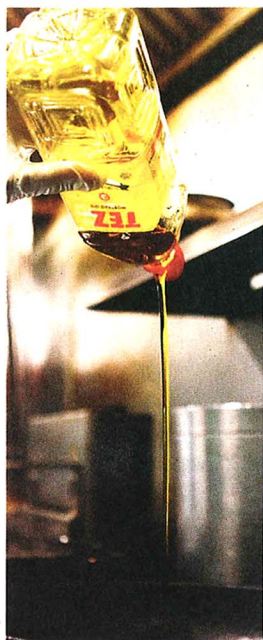
Mustard oil's silky heat and sinus-clearing vapors will ring a bell for South Asians, particularly in the Bengal region of eastern India and Bangladesh, where it flavors fish curries and mashed vegetable bharatas. It is also used as a massage oil, the only use for which it is legally approved in the United States.

But more American chefs hunting for new flavors have discovered mustard oil. While Bengalis mostly use it for sautéing, reducing its intensity, American chefs usually finish dishes with a trickle of the sharp raw oil, as Jean-Georges Vongerichten does with blanched mustard greens in his new book, "Home Cooking With Jean-Georges: My Favorite Simple Recipes" (Clarkson Potter).

Mustard oil is a key ingredient in the "uni panini," a sandwich with a cult following at Alex Raji's Chelsea tapas bar, El Quinto Pino. Playing on the Japanese pairing of sea urchin and wasabi, Ms. Raji mixes it into butter she slathers on a ficelle and tops with sea urchin. "It has these great vapors, but it's not the kind of heat that lingers," she said. "I think because it's an oil, it hits the tongue differently."

Ken Oringer said he discovered mustard oil when the Indian cookbook author Madhur Jaffrey made a guest-chef visit to his restaurant, Clio, in Boston. Now he marinates jalapeños in mustard oil for Indian-inspired pickles and poaches fish in mustard oil before searing it with Spanish paprika. "There's no ingredient that comes close to it," Mr. Oringer said. "It brings so much flavor."

Few American chefs have featured mustard oil as prominently as Michael Hodgkins, the former chef at Hung Ry, a hand-pulled-noodle shop in Manhattan. In his time there, Mr. Hodgkins used mustard oil as his go-to seasoning in everything from a simple salad dressing for shaved apples and local greens to a fried squid dish with fennel and coriander 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."

Koreans use mustard oil in a hot seasoning oil, and some Chinese cuisines employ it in cold dressings. But the most classic Bengali use is in shorshe bata, a powerful paste of mustard seeds and oil that is often used to showcase the delicacy of the shadlike migratory fish ilish. Mohammed Rahman serves it at Neerob, 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 oil 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 tuck 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.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY EMILY BERL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

### FISH IN BANGLADESHI SHORSHE BATA (MUSTARD PASTE)

Adapted from Neerob restaurant, the Bronx  
Time: 30 minutes

- Juice of 1 lemon, plus 2 tablespoons lemon juice
  - 1 pound of fish fillets (ilish, available frozen in Bangladeshi groceries, is traditional, but skinless, boneless bluefish, tilapia, shad or catfish may be substituted)
  - 3/4 teaspoon salt
  - 1/2 teaspoon turmeric
  - 3 tablespoons yellow mustard seeds
  - 2 green chiles (or to taste)
  - 2 garlic cloves
  - 6 1/2 tablespoons pure or blended mustard oil
  - 2/3 cup chopped fresh 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 1/4 teaspoon turmeric, 1 chile (or 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, 1/3 cup of the cilantro and 3 tablespoons water. Process until smooth, adding more water if needed to get a paste with the consistency of cake batter.
  3. In a large skillet over medium heat, heat 2 tablespoons 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. Sauté 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 nigella 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 or 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.

Although they are usually found on shelves of cooking oil, not massage oil, bottles of pure mustard oil sold in the United States must bear a warning: "For external use only." Since the mid-1990s, the Food and Drug Administration has banned the import or sale of pure mustard oil as a foodstuff. Some mustard oils are 20 to 40 percent erucic acid, which studies have indicated might cause heart problems in lab rats. But a spokeswoman for the F.D.A. said

**POUR ON THE HEAT** Mustard oil in use at Neerob restaurant.

that as long as bottles bear the warning, the agency doesn't regulate the oil, and can't dictate how it is displayed in stores. A spokeswoman for the New York City health department said that if restaurant inspectors saw mustard oil bearing the "external use only" label, they could discard it and issue a violation for having an unapproved food, though she said she has no record of any such violation being issued.

Despite the rules, erucic acid levels in mustard oil are not necessarily dangerous, 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 e-mail. "The potential hazards are based on animal studies, and to my knowledge we don't have real evidence of harm to humans."

A study in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition in 2004 found that Indians who ate mustard oil had lower incidences of heart disease, possibly because of its alpha-linolenic acid, an omega-3 fatty acid that is found in plants. Ramanan Laxminarayan, a research scholar at the Princeton Environmental Institute, said any benefits, like any risks, have yet to be conclusively proved. But Mr. Laxminarayan said he has no concerns about the safety of a drizzle of mustard oil.

"I can't imagine that at that quantity of use it could do much of anything at all," he said. "Just as it would require a lot for serious health benefits, it would probably require a lot for any harm."

Swetal Patel, a vice president at Raja Foods, an importer of the oil, said many South Asian home cooks probably ignore the warning. "They've been using it since the day they were born," he said. Under the brand Swad, his company sells a version blended with vegetable oil that needs no warning.

For some chefs, the warning is a badge of authenticity. Tom Valenti, chef and owner of Ouest in Manhattan, discovered mustard oil at Kalustyan's, the international food store. He ignored blended oils without the warning. "I decided to select the one that said 'for external use only,' figuring that was the one with the most horsepower," he recalled. He said he now uses a blended oil in his salmon gravlax on a chickpea pancake, drizzled with mustard-oil-steeped caviar. Customers love the dish, Mr. Valenti said. "I've gotten a couple of, 'Woo, that's spicy,' with slightly watery eyes," he said. "But there's always a smile under those watery eyes."

### 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 seeds
- 2 tablespoons distilled vinegar
- Salt
- 1 to 2 tablespoons pure or blended mustard oil
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- Black pepper
- 2 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.

Reserve 2 tablespoons of the bloomed seeds; the remainder may be covered and refrigerated for up to two weeks.

2. Mix the seeds with the vinegar, 1/4 teaspoon salt, and 1 to 2 tablespoons mustard oil, depending on how much heat is desired. Add 1 to 3 tablespoons reserved syrup, 1 tablespoon at a time, until the mixture is the consistency of a thick sauce.

3. In a bowl, mix olive oil, lemon juice, reserved mustard seeds, and salt and 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 pâté or other charcuterie.

Yield: 4 servings.



DOMINIC PERRI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

### BUTTER-BLANCHED MUSTARD GREENS WITH MUSTARD OIL

Adapted from "Home Cooking With Jean-Georges" (Clarkson 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 to taste
- 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.