

EATING & DRINKING

Any-Day Gourmet

These sauces take the stress, not to mention time and labor, out of cooking something new

By JANE BLACK

ON A RECENT Tuesday, I whipped up Thai larb for dinner. The pork was spicy and a little crunchy. Topped with cilantro, served with lettuce wrappers, it was both visually appealing and delectable. But the best part? It was ready in 15 minutes.

All I did was sauté the ground meat, then add a flavor packet from a new meal-starter company called Omsom. It's not that larb is that hard to make; the Omsom packet includes only fish sauce, lime juice, sugar and chile. But as we enter our second pandemic year, I'm torn between opposing desires to eat terrific food and do as little as possible in the kitchen. Apparently, it's not only me. When Omsom launched with three southeast Asian recipe starters last May, it sold out in 72 hours.

Meal starters are nothing new. Campbell's Cream of Mushroom soup, the can that launched a million casseroles, debuted in 1934. Rice-A-Roni arrived in 1958, followed in 1971 by Hamburger Helper. But Omsom is part of a new generation designed for high-minded cooks who prize global flavors and shun the artificial ingredients, fillers and stabilizers of yore. These pantry shortcuts come in jars, packets, even squeezable tubes, with the goal of aiding exhausted but still curious cooks to serve up West African maffé, Oaxacan molé or steak chimichurri in under 30 minutes. "We're replacing things from our favorite restaurants that may, sadly, now be closed," said David Portatatin, a food and beverage analyst at the NPD Group. "If there's a jar or a kit to help, consumers are interested in giving it a try."

Alison Cayne, who ran a culinary school and café called Haven's Kitchen in New York for eight years, heard this firsthand from her students. "They don't want to invest time and energy into something people don't like," she said. So she developed a series of fresh, refrigerated sauces to help make dinner foolproof. The line, released in Whole Foods Market in 2018, includes flavors such as ginger-miso, nutty lemongrass and a spicy harissa. (Ms. Cayne's timing could not have been better: Her New York cooking school was forced to close last year due to the pandemic.)






Haven's Kitchen's sauces stand apart from others on the market because they are designed to be versatile. One night I tossed shrimp and broccoli in the chimichurri and roasted them for a sheet-pan dinner, and I used the rest of the sauce to marinate chicken breasts. The ginger-miso sauced a bowl of soba noodles and leftover veggies. The harissa spiced up an egg-and-cheese sandwich.

I appreciate that flexibility. But I'm also drawn to meal starters that introduce new dishes into my rotation. Until I tried Kitchens of Africa's simmer sauces, I had never cooked maffé, a sweet and spicy West African stew, or yassa, made with caramelized onions. Many Americans' unfamiliarity with such flavors is why Jainaba Jeng created the sauces in 2012.

Ms. Jeng grew up in Gambia. When she moved to the U.S., she was homesick for her country's cooking. One day, walking through



SAUCE MOTHERS / TOP MEAL STARTER LINES AND THEIR CREATORS

 <p>1 SALSAOLOGY Chef Lori Sandoval (pictured) started selling her sauces to fund opening a restaurant. They were so good they became a business of their own. Our Pick The Ancho Chile and Tamarind simmer sauce for perfect tacos in minutes. salsaology.com</p>	 <p>2 HAVEN'S KITCHEN These fresh, refrigerated sauces from Alison Cayne come in squeezable tubes for easy dabbing and drizzling. Our Pick Herby Chimichurri, which blends parsley and oregano with salty capers and a hit of vinegar. havenskitchen.com</p>	 <p>3 BROOKLYN DELHI Chitra Agrawal's line of plant-based sauces conjure classic Indian flavors. (Coconut and cashew cream stand in for the dairy.) Our Pick The mild, Goan-inspired Golden Coconut Curry with healthy turmeric, ginger and lemon. brooklyndelhi.com</p>	 <p>4 KITCHENS OF AFRICA Both East and West Africa are represented in this line of vegan-friendly African simmer sauces from Jainaba Jeng. Our Pick The luscious Maffé, a West African favorite that melds peanut butter, tomatoes and chile. kitchensofafrica.com</p>	 <p>5 OMSOM Founded by sisters Vanessa and Kim Pham, Omsom touts its products with the tagline "proud and loud Asian home cooking." The 30-minute meals deliver. Our Pick The Thai Larb, which works brilliantly with pork or mushrooms. omsom.com</p>
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the grocery store, she noticed how many Thai and Mexican sauces there were. "I had this lightbulb moment," she said. "If I can put it in a jar, then people can taste the food I was raised on."

Lori Sandoval launched her company, Salsaology, in 2015 with three regional Mexican moles. But after she adopted two children at the end of 2018, she realized even that wasn't convenient enough. Her line developed for the Instant Pot hit shelves last October—and overall sales soared. Similarly, Brooklyn Delhi, a company that made its name with different varieties of the tangy Indian condiment achar, expanded into simmer sauces after its founder, Chitra Agrawal, had her first child. "Our development process is definitely driven by what we need in the kitchen," she said with a laugh.

Who doesn't need a really good shortcut? "People are definitely looking for something to make [cooking] both easy and interesting," said Ms. Cayne. "Something to make the chicken tonight different from the chicken they ate last night."



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Ware literally invented the modern Bundt pan and still produces them in Minneapolis, where the family-run business got its start 75 years ago. The minis are ideal for intimate entertaining—one cake feeds four daintily, or three generously—and you can send the rest home with guests. And these babies were made for gifting: Wrap one in cellophane and voilà, you just made someone's day or, better yet, Mother's Day. \$65, nordicware.com —Gabriella Gershenson




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