

FLAVOUR NOTES

SERIES II

The Chef's Flavour System

A Weekly Journal from The Chef's Spice Chest

Understanding Flavour — The Way Chefs Build It
“Where Ingredients Become Flavour”

CHEFSNOTEBOOKS.com

Issue 03 — The Role of Acid

The Structural Base of Flavour — Foundation

Flavour System Focus: Balance

Acid is one of the defining forces in flavour construction, yet it is rarely treated with the same discipline as salt or fat. In professional kitchens, acid is not simply brightness—it is structure. It shapes perception, sharpens definition, and determines whether a dish feels complete or unresolved. Beyond balance, acid plays a functional role: it preserves, tenderises, stabilises, and transforms. From the immediacy of citrus to the depth of fermented acids and the structure of vinegars, each source behaves differently. The distinction is not academic—it is operational. Understanding how and when to apply acid allows the chef to build flavour with intent, not correction. This week's focus moves beyond individual ingredients to examine acid as a system—how it works, how it behaves, and how it is used to create clarity, longevity, and precision in the kitchen. Acidity is used worldwide in the accompaniments for dishes, that elevate them through making the flavours “sing” in your mouth. I have previously posted a slow cooked spiced pork shoulder with pickled red onions, or various curries with their traditional raitas as examples. For me, sometimes, when served with some rustic bread, they are my favourite part of a dish!

Here is a link to an acidity chart that I have posted for further reference:
<https://chefsnotebooks.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/The-Role-of-Acid-Chart.docx>



Kitchen Haiku

Sharpness draws the line
Richness yields under its edge
Flavour finds its form

This Week's Focus

Acid is a foundational balancing system that interacts with all primary taste elements. It enhances salinity, moderates sweetness, and cuts through fat, creating contrast and clarity.

In preservation, it inhibits microbial growth; in cooking, it alters texture and stabilises structure.

The role of acid is both sensory and functional, making it one of the most versatile tools available to the chef.





Flavour Lens

Profile

Bright to deep acidity ranging from sharp and volatile to rounded and mature

Behaviour

Enhances perception, denatures proteins, preserves and stabilises

Balance Role

Cuts richness, controls sweetness, defines clarity and freshness

Key Pairings

Fatty meats, seafood, herbs, spices, fermented elements



Chef's Insight

Acid is not an adjustment—it is a structural decision that determines whether a dish feels complete.



Kitchen Practice

Technique: Select acid type based on desired outcome—citrus for brightness, vinegar for structure, fermentation for depth

Timing: Early for preservation and tenderisation; mid for integration; late for lift and definition

Common mistakes: Over-acidification, relying on a single acid source, adding too late without integration

Professional approach: Layer acids to create complexity and balance, matching intensity to the dish



Practical Applications

- Marinades and curing systems (ceviche, adobo)
- Pickling and preservation
- Deglazing and sauce balancing
- Final seasoning for brightness and lift
- Layered acidity using citrus, vinegar, and fermentation

Pairing Logic

- Fatty meats: balances richness and adds definition
- Seafood: enhances freshness and clarity
- Sweet elements: stabilises and sharpens
- Herbs and spices: amplifies aromatic expression
- Fermented foods: builds complexity and depth



A practical application of this week's flavour system

Pork Adobo

Adobo is one of the most iconic dishes in Filipino cuisine, built on the simple but powerful balance of vinegar, soy sauce, garlic, bay leaves, and black pepper. Traditionally slow-braised until tender, it reflects the essential culinary role of acid — preserving, tenderising, and creating depth of flavour. Over time, I refined the dish by carefully balancing the sharpness of the vinegar with a richer, more rounded finish, allowing the sauce to glaze rather than simply braise. By controlling reduction, layering the aromatics, and adjusting sweetness subtly, the result became a deeper, more polished version that still respected its roots — and one that local guests repeatedly requested

Acid finds one of its most complete expressions in traditional preservation systems. This national dish of the Philippines demonstrates how vinegar, salt, and aromatics combine to create both flavour and longevity.



What this dish teaches

Acid is not only about balance—it is about preservation and depth. In adobo, vinegar structures the dish, penetrates the protein, and carries flavour through time, creating a result that improves rather than diminishes.

Recipe link: <https://chefsnotebooks.com/main-courses/pork-adobo/>



The Liquid Counterpoint

A dry Riesling or a lightly chilled lager. Both offer clarity and freshness, balancing the depth and acidity without overwhelming the palate.



From the Kitchen

Always taste acid in context—its effect changes once combined with fat and salt.

Use multiple acid sources where possible to create depth rather than sharpness.



Chef's Reflection

Acid does not sit on the surface of a dish—it runs through it.



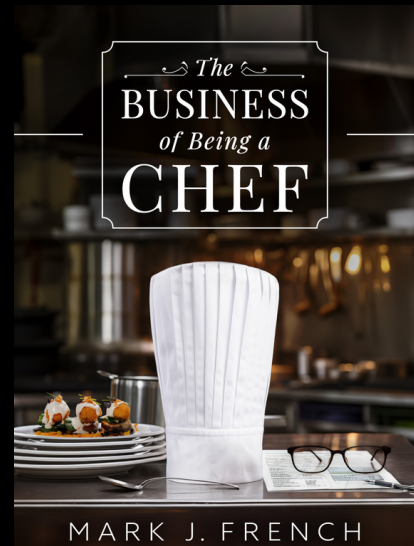
From the Library

See flavour balance charts and acidity mapping in the ChefsNotebooks archives.

Further Reading & Resources

For a deeper understanding of flavour structure and kitchen systems, *The Business of Being a Chef* provides useful operational context alongside culinary insight.

<https://chefsnotebooks.com/books/>



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