



# FLAVOUR NOTES

## SERIES II

*The Chef's Flavour System*

### Issue 26 — Grains & Base Ingredients

*Ingredient Systems*

by Mark J French | [ChefsNotebooks.com](http://ChefsNotebooks.com)

I write a great deal about herbs, spices and seasonings. This week, as we close the Ingredient Systems section of Flavour Notes, I wanted to look at something quieter: the ingredients that receive, carry and hold all those flavours.

Rice, grains, pasta, noodles, couscous, polenta and potatoes can easily be treated as supporting players – something placed underneath or beside the more interesting part of the dish.

But that understates their role. A base ingredient may begin quietly, but its culinary purpose is to receive, distribute, soften, extend and sometimes transform flavour. And “neutral” does not mean flavourless. Rice can be subtly fragrant, barley nutty, potatoes earthy and polenta gently sweet. Their real strength is that they are receptive and adaptable.

That makes them particularly interesting as cooks explore more plant-led dishes. A thoughtfully prepared grain or base needn't feel like the absence of meat; it can provide structure, satisfaction and a foundation upon which the rest of the flavour system is built.

This week, rather than catalogue grains, we will look at what the neutral carrier actually does.





**Kitchen Haiku**

Quiet grains receive  
Stock, spice, fat and fragrant herbs  
Flavour finds a home

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## **This Week's Focus**

The Carrier Is Part of the Flavour

Consider some familiar combinations:

Curry + Rice

Tagine + Couscous

Ragù + Pasta

Stew + Potato

Sauce + Polenta

The base does more than accompany the strongly flavoured component.

It moderates intensity, distributes sauce and seasoning, contributes texture and changes the pace at which we experience the dish.

Too much carrier and the dish becomes bland.

Too little and the accompanying flavour may become overwhelming.

The carrier is therefore part of the flavour architecture – not an automatic side dish.



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# Flavour Lens

## Profile

Mild • Starchy • Subtly Sweet • Nutty • Earthy

## Behaviour

Absorbs • Carries • Dilutes • Binds • Distributes

## Balance Role

Moderates intensity and provides structural and textural contrast.

## Key Pairings

- Stock • Fat • Aromatics • Sauces • Ferments • Spices • Herbs • Acidity



## Chef's Insight

Neutral Doesn't Mean Flavourless

Different carriers behave differently.

Rice readily absorbs cooking liquid and aromatics.

Couscous hydrates rapidly, taking its flavour largely from the liquid and finishing ingredients.

Pasta & Noodles provide structure for sauces and seasonings to cling to and penetrate.

Barley & Farro bring their own nuttiness and chew.

Polenta incorporates liquid, fat and cheese throughout its structure.

Potatoes absorb seasoning, fat and cooking juices while contributing their own earthiness.

The question is therefore not: "Which base should I serve?"

But: "What do I need the base to do?"

# Professional Approach

## Five Ways to Build Flavour into a Neutral Carrier

### 1. Cook in Flavour

Replace some or all of the water with stock, coconut milk, aromatic water or another appropriate cooking liquid.

### 2. Toast Before Cooking

Rice, bulgur, grains and maize can develop noticeably nuttier, roasted notes before hydration.

### 3. Season Throughout

Don't expect the sauce to correct an unseasoned base. Salt and aromatics added during cooking become part of the carrier itself.

### 4. Finish with Fat & Aromatics

Butter, olive oil, ghee, sesame oil, herbs, spices and citrus can transform both aroma and mouthfeel.

### 5. Use Contrast Deliberately

Sometimes the correct decision is restraint. A mildly seasoned carrier can provide the necessary counterweight to something salty, acidic, bitter, spicy or intensely savoury. Season the carrier – not just what goes on top of it.



## Kitchen Curiosity

### What Happens While It Rests?

Cooking does not necessarily stop the moment a grain leaves the heat.

Rice, couscous, grain salads and congee continue to absorb moisture as they stand.

Seasoning migrates, Texture changes, Sauces tighten.

The congee recipe illustrates this particularly well: when prepared ahead and reheated, additional liquid will almost always be required because the rice continues to absorb moisture during standing. Congee with Ginger

Understanding this matters for both restaurant service and leftovers.



## GRAINS & BASE INGREDIENTS

### The Neutral Carrier

QUIET INGREDIENTS. ESSENTIAL FLAVOUR WORK.

Rice, grains, pasta, noodles, couscous, polenta and potatoes may seem simple, but they are active flavour ingredients. They receive, carry, distribute and transform flavour, providing structure, texture and balance throughout the dish.

#### THE CARRIER IS PART OF THE FLAVOUR

A base ingredient does more than accompany a dish. It moderates intensity, distributes sauce and seasoning, contributes texture and changes the pace at which we experience flavour.

*Too much carrier and the dish becomes bland. Too little and the flavour may become overwhelming.*

#### KITCHEN HAIKU

*Quiet grains receive  
Stock, spice, fat and fragrant herbs  
Flavour finds a home.*



#### FEATURED DISH

#### CONGEE

with Ginger, Spring Onion & Sesame

A simple grain transformed into a canvas for aromatic garnishes and condiments.

#### FLAVOUR LENS



##### PROFILE

Mild  
Starchy  
Subtly Sweet  
Nutty  
Earthy



##### BEHAVIOUR

Absorbs  
Carries  
Dilutes  
Binds  
Distributes



##### BALANCE ROLE

Moderates  
intensity and  
provides  
structural and  
textural  
contrast.

#### KEY PAIRINGS



Stock • Fat • Aromatics • Sauces  
Ferments • Spices • Herbs • Acidity

#### WHY THEY MATTER



**RECEIVE** Absorb cooking liquid and seasonings.



**CARRY** Provide a vehicle for sauces and flavour.



**DISTRIBUTE** Spread intensity through the dish.



**BALANCE** Moderate strong flavours and add body.



**TEXTURE** Create satisfying structure and contrast.



**VERSATILITY** Work across cuisines and cooking styles.

#### KEY GRAINS & BASE INGREDIENTS

##### RICE



Absorbs flavour well. From fluffy and fragrant to creamy.

##### BULGUR



Quick cooking grain with a nutty flavour and pleasant texture.

##### COUSCOUS



Hydrates rapidly. Takes its flavour from the liquid and finishing ingredients.

##### QUINOA



Light, nutty and versatile. Holds shape well.

##### BARLEY



Nutty and chewy. Great for soups, risottos and hearty dishes.

##### FARRO



Rich, nutty flavour and satisfying texture.

##### MILLET



Mild and slightly sweet. Works well in both sweet and savoury dishes.

##### POLENTA



Incorporates liquid, fat and flavour throughout its structure.

##### PASNTA



Provides structure, tarts and penne structure.

##### PASTA



Provides structure for sauces to cling to and penetrate.

##### POTATOES



Absorb seasoning, fat and cooking juices while adding earthiness.

#### ABSORB OR COAT?



##### ABSORBED FLAVOUR

Rice cooked in stock, polenta, couscous and congee take flavour into the grain.



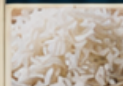
##### COATED FLAVOUR

Pasta and noodles rely on sauce adhesion and surface starch, although seasoning also penetrates during cooking.

#### FIVE WAYS TO BUILD FLAVOUR INTO A NEUTRAL CARRIER

- 1 COOK IN FLAVOUR**  
Use stock, coconut milk, aromatic water or other flavoured liquid.
- 2 TOAST BEFORE COOKING**  
Develop nuttier, roasted notes in rice, bulgur and grains.
- 3 SEASON THROUGHOUT**  
Add salt and aromatics during cooking.
- 4 FINISH WITH FAT & AROMATICS**  
Stir in butter, olive oil, herbs or spice pastes.
- 5 USE RELEASED STARCH**  
Let natural starches help thicken, emulsify and bind the dish.

#### TEXTURE & FLAVOUR IN ACTION



##### FLUFFY



##### CREAMY



##### AL DENTE



##### SOFT



##### CHEWY



##### CRISP EDGES

#### COOKING APPLICATIONS



**SOUPS & STEWS**  
Add body and richness.



**CURRIES & TAGINES**  
Soak up sauce and spices.



**SALADS & GRAIN BOWLS**  
Provide texture and structure.



**ROASTING & GRILLING**  
Enhance natural flavours.



**BAKING & PASTRIES**  
Used in breads, tarts and desserts.

#### CHEF'S REMINDER



*A neutral carrier is never just a filler. When cooked and seasoned with intent, it becomes an integral part of the flavour system, adding texture, balance and satisfaction to the dish.*

— MJF

*"Quiet ingredients, big potential. A well-prepared base gives flavour a home." — Mark J French*



## Featured Application

**Congee**, a savoury rice pudding or porridge

The congee is deliberately restrained so contrasting garnishes can change the flavour experience throughout the bowl. Congee with Ginger

Neutral Carrier - Jasmine Rice

Foundation - Ginger • Spring Onion • Sesame

Build the Bowl

- Aromatic » Ginger • Spring Onion
- Acidic » Rice Vinegar • Black Vinegar
- Spicy » Chilli Crisp • Fresh Chilli
- Savoury » Soy • Preserved Mustard Greens
- Fresh » Coriander • Cucumber
- Textural » Sesame • Crispy Shallots

Optional Substance

Ginger-Soy Chicken • Soy-Seared Beef • Sesame-Soy Tofu

Congee with Ginger

One quiet base. Many flavour directions.



**This Week's Reference Chart**

 Nuts & Seeds Grains & Supporting Ingredients



## Kitchen Practice

**Technique:** Choose the grain or base ingredient according to the role it needs to play: absorb flavour, carry sauce, provide structure, soften intensity or create contrast.

**Timing:** Season and flavour at the correct stage. Grains and base ingredients often develop their character during cooking, not afterwards. Stock, aromatics, fats and seasoning added to the cooking medium can become part of the ingredient rather than simply sitting on its surface.

**Common Mistakes:** Using too much or too little liquid • failing to season the cooking medium • overcooking until texture is lost • under-resting rice and grains • treating every grain with the same cooking method • allowing the carrier to dilute rather than support the main flavours



### Pairing Logic

- Earthy Blends – Cumin • Turmeric • Fenugreek  
Work naturally with: Pulses • Lamb • Roots • Tomato • Yoghurt
- Warm Blends – Cinnamon • Clove • Allspice • Nutmeg  
Work naturally with: Slow-cooked meats • Fruit • Pumpkin • Rice • Nuts
- Aromatic Blends – Cardamom • Coriander • Fennel  
Work naturally with: Fish • Poultry • Rice • Citrus • Coconut
- Hot Blends – Chilli • Pepper • Cayenne  
Need balancing elements such as: – Fat • Sweetness • Acidity • Fresh Herbs
- Bright / Tangy Blends – Sumac • Dried Citrus • Sour Spices  
Work naturally with: Grilled Meat • Vegetables • Yoghurt • Salads • Pulses



A practical application of this week's flavour system

## **Congee with Ginger, Spring Onion & Sesame**

A gently simmered rice congee designed as a neutral carrier for layers of aroma, acidity, heat, savoury depth, freshness and texture. Ginger, spring onion and sesame provide the foundation, while a flexible garnish selection allows each bowl to be customised with contrasting flavours and optional chicken, beef or tofu.



### **What This Dish Teaches**

Congee gives us an unusually clear demonstration of the neutral-carrier principle.

Jasmine rice is slowly simmered in water or light stock until the grains begin to break down and release their starch, creating a loose, silky base. Ginger is introduced towards the end, with sesame oil, spring onion and toasted sesame providing the aromatic foundation. Congee with Ginger The congee itself remains deliberately restrained.

The flavour system is then constructed around it.

The neutral carrier doesn't need to compete with its accompaniments. It can provide the space in which contrasting flavours become clearer.

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[\*\*Recipe: Congee with Ginger, Spring Onion & Sesame\*\*](#)



## The Liquid Counterpoint

For a lighter bowl, consider green or jasmine tea.

With chilli, soy and richer protein garnishes, a dry lager or crisp aromatic white wine can provide refreshment without adding unnecessary weight.



## From the Kitchen

We spend a great deal of time thinking about the ingredients that make food taste distinctive - The herbs - The spices - The acids - The fermented ingredients - The smoke.

But flavour also needs somewhere to go.

A bowl of rice beneath a curry, couscous beneath a tagine or pasta carrying a sauce isn't empty space on the plate.

The carrier receives flavour, regulates its intensity, changes its texture and extends the experience across the dish.

Perhaps that is why these apparently simple ingredients have become fundamental to cuisines throughout the world.

They don't always need to lead the flavour. Sometimes their purpose is to make everything around them work better.



## Around the World

### Flavour Needs Somewhere to Land

Across cuisines, strongly flavoured foods are repeatedly paired with receptive carriers.

Different ingredients. Different traditions.

The underlying principle is remarkably consistent:

Intensity needs balance - and flavour needs a carrier.



### **Chef's Reflection**

Don't treat the base as an afterthought.  
Decide what you need it to carry.

## Further Reading & Resources

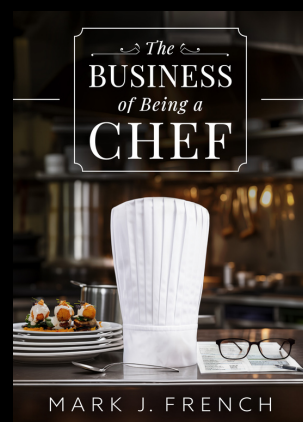
### From the Library

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

### The Business of Being a Chef

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>



The Business of Being a Chef is the result of more than 30 years of experience in hotels and restaurants throughout the world. It is a guide to managing the multiple business demands of today's executive chef, encompassing diverse areas including cooking, taste, food safety, human resources, finance, and sales & marketing, amongst others. It is also a great resource for operations managers.

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### About the Author

Mark J French is a hotelier, chef, consultant, and author of several books on culinary arts and business. Based in the UK and Philippines, he blends classical training with global flavours.

