

Fat Duck's Heston Blumenthal sings praises of sous-vide cooking

One of the world's greatest chefs is recalling how he worked himself into a frenzy one night in the 1990s.

Heston Blumenthal - self-taught three-Michelin-star chef, owner of Fat Duck restaurant in England, named the best restaurant in the world in some circles - was recently in Vancouver, and I had the opportunity to sit down with him.

The purpose of the visit ties into that exciting moment in bed back in the mid-1990s. It was about sous-vide cooking, which, in French, means "under vacuum."

(Apparently, he often wakes up his wife in the middle of the night, excited about - cooking. "Taste this! Taste this!" he'd urge, waking her up out of a dead sleep.)



That particular frenzied night, he was flipping through a scientific equipment catalogue, a thrill a minute for a slightly mad-scientist chef. He had lit upon something he just had to have an industrial water bath for keeping things at a consistent temperature.

"In those early days, it was hard to get a water bath," he says, about a cooking technology that keeps a water bath heated to a precise and consistent temperature. It's crucial to sous-vide cooking, in which vacuum-packed foods are cooked at low temperatures for a long time.

"The beauty of sous vide, from a chef's point of view, is the controllability. There's greater control for the chef than anything, because in cooking, five degrees can make a difference to the end result," he said. Sous vide, he feels, is the single biggest change in professional cooking in decades. "It hasn't yet broken into the domestic market."

And that's precisely what brought him to Vancouver. He was promoting the first domestic sous-vide machine - the SousVide Supreme made by Eades Appliance Technology. It's the first home version of an even and precise-temperature water bath. Cost: US\$450.

"I'm getting involved with the [Seattle-based] company on an ambassadorial level, but at the moment, my involvement has been in research and development."

The unit costs more than a toaster oven, but far less than the commercial versions, which start at about three times the price.

A decade ago, sous-vide cooking was avant-garde and rare in restaurants. Then it began making its way into many European, then North American high-end restaurant kitchens. It's been sniffily referred to as "boil-in-a-bag" by those who don't see the finer points of cooking food in vacuum-sealed bags in heated water.

But what was once hush-hush because of the stigma attached to an industrial "Cryovac" style of cooking is now de rigueur for high-end kitchens. If you've eaten at Lumiere, C, West or Cioppino's, you'll have eaten dishes cooked sous vide. The Cactus Club chain has a machine in its test kitchen, and executive chef Rob Feenie is looking at its possibilities.

Most of the world's top chefs - including Blumenthal, Charlie Trotter, Joel Robuchon and Gordon Ramsay - rely on it in search of perfection [which, by the way, is the name of a Blumenthal cooking show]. Last year, top-tier chef Thomas Keller, of The French Laundry in the Napa Valley, wrote a beautiful cookbook, *Under Pressure: Cooking Sous Vide*, a kind of coming-out for sous vide in North America.

Pino Posteraro, owner-chef of Cioppino's, has been using sous vide since 1992 in Singapore, when two German chefs convinced him sous vide would be the future of cooking. "I thought it made sense," he says.

Although cooking in a bag might sound simple-minded, he warns there are food-safety issues to be aware of, as food is being cooked at a low temperature. Vacuum-sealing eliminates air, which bacteria need to multiply, but home-sealing machines weren't developed for sous vide and the SousVide Supreme does not come with one.

"I've been using it solidly since 1992," says Posteraro. About 50 to 60 per cent of his dishes have a sous-vide element.

"I'm 100 per cent a fan. It's one of the greatest methodologies I've learned, but I value it for the right reason -not for the trend. All of the high-end restaurants have it now."

Warren Geraghty of West restaurant echoes that, adding the next step is to create a home version of sealing the food. It doesn't, however, take the guesswork out of cooking, says Geraghty.

"It took me many, many, many years, a long time, to understand the results - how to get them, what to do once I got them."

As the chefs say, operating the machine is one thing. Creating dishes, understanding how each and every ingredient - including different species of fish and different cuts of meat - combine to make them taste remarkable, is quite another.



"If you think of how much people spend on an oven and put that against the versatility of this system, it's not expensive," Blumenthal says. "It can cook anything."



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