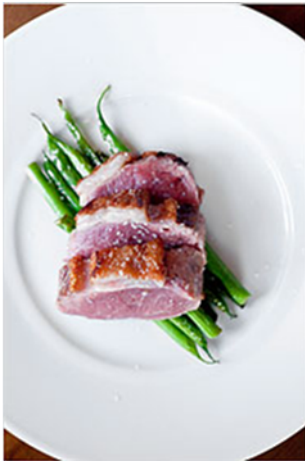


# The New York Times

## Sous Vide Moves From Avant-Garde to the Countertop

ONCE you sous vide, you never go back.



That, at least, is the chant of a global pantheon of chefs — like Heston Blumenthal, Joël Robuchon, Ferran Adrià, and Tetsuya Wakuda — who have made this low, slow cooking method the standard in the last decade.

And last month, Fritz Cloninger, a technical writer in Jersey City, joined that elite company with a pork chop and a SousVide Supreme, the first self-contained sous-viding machine for home cooks, which has just come on the market priced at \$449.

“My wife thought I was crazy to get this thing, but already she doesn’t want to eat anything else,” Mr. Cloninger said last week. “I even made a hamburger in it this morning.”

Sous vide combines the gentle, steady heat of poaching and an airtight seal, as in traditional methods of cooking in clay. “The food literally stews in its own juices: no air, no water, no evaporation,” said Wesley Genovart, the chef at Degustation, a restaurant in the East Village, who has experimented with sous-viding everything from carrots to crème brûlée.

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Until now, home cooks wanting to try the method have had to improvise, with solutions from low-tech (a stockpot and a handful of ice cubes) to high (a chamber sealer and an immersion circulator, generating about \$1,500 in start-up costs). But there seems to be an audience, however small, for an easier and cheaper way. The first 500 SousVide Supreme machines sold out via the Internet before shipping in November, according to the manufacturers. More are on the way, available for order online now, and scheduled to reach Sur la Table warehouses in January.



I recently spent a week with the device, basically a bread-machine-size hot-water bath, with simple, intuitive temperature controls. The heavy, boxy countertop unit and the long cooking times of some sous-viding recipes (up to two days) are not always inviting. But simple dishes like skirt steak were, as promised, transformed.

Oven-baked apples usually have good flavor but a mealy, exhausted texture. To test the machine, I combined peeled apples with butter, spices, brown sugar and raisins, then sucked the air out of the bags

with a handheld sealer. (The SousVide Supreme is not sold with a vacuum seal system.) Because of renegade air bubbles, I had to force the bags underwater, and there was splashing, scalding and profanity. Even so, the apples that emerged six hours later (they were done after two, but bobbed in the water for another four without complaint) were exactly as hoped for: tender, almost custardy, infused with butter and sweet juice but not at all overcooked.

While the apples were in, I scouted to see if I could slip in some whole eggs (sous vide is the reason there are so many beautifully slow-poached eggs on menus these days). But no: the apples demanded a 170-degree cooking temperature, and eggs prefer 150; the machine generally can't cook two different foods at the same time.

One true believer in the technique's usefulness for home cooks is Jason Logsdon, a Web developer in Southington, Conn. He uses a large Crock-Pot that is filled with hot tap water and plugged into a SousVideMagic, a \$139 device that turns the heating element on and off to maintain steady temperature. Mr. Logsdon became interested in sous vide when his wife gave him the chef Thomas Keller's glossy 2008 book "Under Pressure."

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Frustrated by the book's lack of instructions for everyday cooking, he used its time and temperature guidelines to develop his own recipes for green beans and fried chicken, which is cooked through in the water bath, then pan-fried just to produce a good solid crust. (He went on to build a Web site for home cooks, [cookingsousvide.com](http://cookingsousvide.com).)



"I think everyone who tries it will want one," he said of sous-vide machines, citing his success with pot roast and whole chickens. "I can put it in on Friday, then eat it on Saturday, or Sunday — whenever I'm ready."

At serving time, Mr. Logsdon (like most professional chefs) finishes most dishes with a blast of heat on a grill or in an oven, to crisp the skin or add a crust. Although amazing flavor infusion can take place inside the bag (a skirt steak I sealed with bacon fat, then cooked for two days, was memorable), the food emerges unnervingly pale and soft.

"You do have to ask," said Mitch Weinstein, a moderator on eGullet who was among the first to buy a SousVide Supreme, "if sous vide is so great, how come I have to cook the food again?"

Although the phrase "sous vide" translates to "in a vacuum," the selling point of the cooking method is the steady, low temperature, not the airless environment.

In sous vide, the cooking temperature is around the same as the serving temperature. For example, medium-rare steak is about 135 degrees in the center. In sous-vide cooking, the entire piece of meat is cooked at 135 degrees, for as long as it takes for the heat to slowly penetrate to the center. The whole steak, edge to edge to edge, reaches 135 degrees and cannot overcook, because the water temperature never goes any higher. (That said, meat can become overly tender if left too long in the bath.)

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*“The whole steak, edge to edge to edge, reaches 135 degrees and cannot overcook.”*

By traditional methods, the steak has to be blasted with heat from the outside, anywhere from 350 degrees (normal oven temperature) to 800 degrees (the grill at Peter Luger’s). As the heat transfer takes place, the meat changes: proteins coagulate, fibers contract, collagens loosen, liquid evaporates. By the time the center is a rosy 135 degrees, the surrounding flesh is dried out.

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**THUSLY** Wesley Genovart demonstrates the SousVide Supreme. Air is removed from the bag holding the food. The bag is then placed in hot water in the device, which cooks slowly at low heat.

“About 45 percent of a rare beef loin cooked by normal methods is technically overcooked,” said Chris Young, the culinary research manager at Intellectual Ventures in Seattle, where Nathan Myhrvold, a founder of Microsoft, maintains a staff of 16 chefs and scientists to complete his long-awaited book on the science of gastronomy.

This is not a problem that most home cooks are wringing their hands over. The public-relations challenge for sous vide is that it solves a problem so embedded in cooking that we don’t even notice it. Managing heat transfer — cutting into a steak, timing eggs, inspecting the juices of a roast chicken — is simply what cooks do, working by smell, sound, taste and touch, all of which are reduced or eliminated in sous vide. I found it unnerving to cook without my senses, but extremely liberating not to worry about doneness or cooking times.

“There’s some danger in cooking techniques that don’t require much attention,” Mr. Keller wrote in “Under Pressure.”  
“Eliminate the need to pay attention and you eliminate the craft.”

Modern sous-vide cooking originated in Switzerland in the 1960s as a way to preserve and sterilize food in hospital kitchens. Many restaurants now use the technique as a combination of cooking method and storage shortcut, because the food, once safely cooked under seal, can be quick-chilled and refrigerated for days. But sous vide also carries an edge of risk, because vacuum sealing creates an anaerobic environment that can silently breed toxins like the bacteria that cause botulism.

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However, chefs and experts agree that the vacuum seal is unnecessary for home cooks who serve their sous-vide handiwork as soon as it is cooked.

“As long as the food is cooked to the usual safe temperatures, this system seems fine,” said Elliott Marcus, the chief of food safety for the city health department, about the SousVide Supreme and other immersion baths. A tight seal does ensure even cooking, keeps the package from floating and, of course, prevents water from getting to the food. But for home use, the seal from a FoodSaver or similar device, or even a thick plastic bag with the air pressed out of it, is often perfectly adequate. After I ran out of bags, I used Ziploc bags and a straw.

The SousVide Supreme is not cheap, and the system may not be perfect for home cooks, but the possibilities are fascinating. The appeal of consistently perfect soft-boiled eggs, poached salmon that requires no attention, and juicy filet-tender flank steak is undeniable.

The device was developed by a married pair of physicians, Drs. Michael and Mary Dan Eades, who have long espoused a low-carbohydrate diet. This is their first foray into culinary technology, and they joined up with the English chef Heston Blumenthal, who once sous-vided a whole pig in a hot tub, to help develop and promote the machine.

“We eat a lot of meat,” she said. “We’re always looking for new things to do with it.”

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