

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Entrée: A culinary revolution comes into the home kitchen



One of the world's greatest chefs is describing how he whipped himself into a frenzy lying in bed one night.

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 so-called frenzied night, he was flipping through a scientific equipment catalogue, a thrill a minute for a slightly mad-scientist chef. He 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: \$450 US. “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. “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.”

A decade ago, sous vide cooking was avant-garde and rare in restaurants. Then it began making their 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 a heated water. But what was once hush-hush because of the stigma attached to an industrial “Cryovac” style of cooking is now de rigeur for high-end kitchens. If you eaten at Lumiere, C, West or Cioppino’s, you’ll have eaten dishes cooked sous vide. The Cactus Club chain has one in its test kitchen and executive chef Rob Feenie is looking at its possibilities at the moment.

Most of the world’s top chefs, like Blumenthal, Charlie Trotter, Joel Robuchon, 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 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 methodology 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 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, different cuts of meat, to make them taste remarkable, is quite another.

For more information on SousVide Supreme, visit www.sousvidesupreme.com.

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