

The Sweet Science

We know ice cream can be savory ... but can it be hot?

by **A.D. Amorosi**

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[(NOT) JUST DESSERTS]



Jessica Kourkounis

ONE PRETTY SANDWICH: Alex Talbot and Aki Kamozawa's play on a BLT — bacon ice cream, purslane and a mosaic of heirloom tomato, with Minus8 Vinegar and croutons cooked in bacon fat.

Ice cream has long been safe from the deconstructing fingers of ambitious chefs. It's creamy, it's cold, it's nice — what is there to screw with? Yet here's a couple hellbent on doing just that: reconfiguring the joyful molecules that make you and me scream.

Alex Talbot and Aki Kamozawa — married experimental chefs, educators and bloggers — are at the forefront of those changing how ice cream tastes. Mainly because they love it. "That's why I'm so passionate about playing with it," says Talbot. "It's a fetish, really."

They started by cranking out savory specimens — brown butter and corn; white chocolate and Arctic char roe; grilled potato; sourdough. "Feta ice cream was not one of our better ideas," says Talbot, who co-authors the four-and-a-half-year-old blog *Ideas in Food* (ideasinfood.com) and runs the culinary consulting firm of the same name with his wife.

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Then they had to go and make ice cream hot. No, not "fried." Not Baked Alaska. Nothing like the non-melting stuff from Cold Stone. Created using a chemical process, theirs is ice cream that, when scooped, pulses like a steamed dumpling and is hot to the tongue. Yet "hot ice cream doesn't melt the same way as cold — it's much slower," explains Kamozaawa from the couple's home in Levittown. (More on why in a minute.)

Creating such innovations is what this couple — who's releasing a book, *Ideas in Food: Science and Creativity in the Kitchen*, in 2010 — does best. "Our kitchen is seasonally and emotionally driven," says Talbot, who with Kamozaawa takes on private cheffing gigs and teaches courses in Bucks County. "[And] since the greater part of our business is education, we work on the edge of trends by default."

"On the edge" translates to the couple crafting all manner of unconventional eats — pumpernickel pasta, calamari cracklings, aerated brie. But they started exploring ice cream's potential soon after becoming professional chefs in 1996.

Nowadays, they're fond of preparations like the ones they put out at some recent gigs, including a private cooking event and a special dinner at Elements in Princeton, N.J. For the first job, they created a "BLT," with ice cream produced using "bacon milk" created by fusing the flavors of pork and dark Okinawa sugar into whole milk (the "B"); the succulent purslane brushed with lemon olive oil (the "L"); and a "mosaic" of heirloom tomato (the "T"). At Elements, they used the bacon ice cream in a pre-dessert milk shake served in an egg shell.

The couple's experiments with hot ice cream, however, began back in 2005, when so-called "molecular gastronomy" was first earning mainstream attention in America. Talbot and Kamozaawa tested several ingredients to achieve their goal, one of which was Methocel. A Dow Chemical compound often used in food-prep adhesives, the methylcellulose product retains water, binds and thickens. It's a plant-based food additive used extensively in commercial baked and fried products. "Since it gels at warm temperatures and melts at cool temperatures, it seemed like an obvious fit," says Talbot. Sea salt, vanilla bean, cream cheese and yogurt rounded out the rest of the hot ice cream toolbox.

The biggest challenge, at first, was texture. "The hot ice cream needed to have the creamy texture of traditional ice cream," says Talbot. That's part of what the cream cheese and yogurt provide — texture, flavor and tang. From there, it was all about ratios. "Working with Methocel requires a very light hand," says Talbot. "In the beginning, I made lots of hot ice cream with a sticky, viscous texture. Aki said it was like eating warm slime. Once I figured out the right ratio to create a smooth and unctuous texture that was still semi-solid when heated, I was able to move on to tweaking the flavor."

After adding Methocel into the ice cream mix, Talbot drops scoops into boiling water, causing them to firm up. The compound's reverse-temp characteristic means that the ice cream "slowly melts into liquid" as it cools, notes Kamozaawa, with a flavor that's "sweet and tangy and very luxurious against the palate."

Her recommendations for serving the hot ice cream — you can try it at private classes at their workshop, or during one of their upcoming collaborative dinners with StudioKitchen chef Shola Olunloyo — are conventional. "It makes a delicious sundae when balanced nicely with crispy and crunchy textures, can be made into small quenelles and paired with croquant, or simply scooped into a bowl with fresh, chilled berries and a hint of Chambord," says Kamozaawa.

So why do they stick with sweet flavor profiles for the hot stuff, and not their usual retinue of savory meanderings? Talbot says you can only screw with one part of the equation at a time — mess with several and you'll flummox diners. "If we served hot jalapeño ice cream, you'd be pissed," laughs Talbot. "Trust me."

So what kinds of reactions have the two received? "When Alex first made a hot ice cream that we were both satisfied with, we were working at a small hotel in Colorado," recalls Kamozaawa. "He fed it to everybody who walked through the kitchen doors. He didn't explain that it was hot ice cream, and we found that we got a much better response when we simply called it 'ice cream.' Psychological? Probably. It seemed the best way to get an unbiased response."

Indeed — whether in classes or at dinner, the best way to test-drive the stuff is to offer it without telling people what's different. "Explaining that it's hot begets a knee-jerk reaction," says Talbot. "If you simply serve the ice cream, you get an honest reaction. Some people don't even notice that it's warm until we point it out."

(a_amorosi@citypaper.net)

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For more on Talbot and Kamoza and their classes and dinners, check out ideasinfood.com.

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