

Gourmet Live Blog

APP EXCLUSIVE: Ideas in Food

Posted on [December 9, 2010](#) by [Kelly Senyei](#)

The below feature appears in the current issue of *Gourmet Live* and was written by Sarah Rich. [Download the free *Gourmet Live* app](#) to get this story and more.



Photo by Aki Kamozaawa and H. Alexander Talbot

Last week, while many dinner tables sagged under a heavy casserole full of turkey tetrazzini, Aki Kamozaawa and Alex Talbot were composing their own salute to Thanksgiving leftovers. But from the photo of their results, which can be found on their website, [IdeasInFood.com](#), nobody would suspect this meal emerged from the same holiday that married marshmallows and sweet potatoes.

In Kamozaawa and Talbot's kitchen, leftovers were ribboning out of the heavy bronze mouth of an Arcobaleno pasta machine, a sizeable contraption that extrudes homemade dough with industrial precision. "I was forbidden from making pasta for Thanksgiving day," says Talbot, by way of illustrating how consumed he's been by his love affair with the Italian machine. But he wasted no time inventing a clever way to fire it up the next day, mixing a batch of bright green pasta dough tinted by surplus salsa verde, which had played a starring role in the couple's holiday meal, alongside cranberry horseradish sauce and a capon prepared sous-vide with shishito pepper butter.

"Overall we kept with tradition," says Kamozaawa, "just using thought and technology to make it tastier and more efficient." Though she speaks modestly of their approach, she and Talbot, her husband and cooking partner, have become known in the food world for their scientifically precise cooking methods, and the famously delicious results. Fortunately for their growing following, their innovative work will soon make the leap from the web to the printed page, with the release of their first book, *Ideas in Food: Great Recipes and Why They Work*, which will be released later this month from Clarkson and Potter.

Though the final weeks of waiting for a book to hit the shelves can be agonizing, Kamozaawa and Talbot have kept plenty busy with their two-year-old daughter, Amaya, who makes frequent cameos on the blog; and of course, they find endless distraction in their kitchen gadget of the moment, the Arcobaleno, which turns all of their wild ideas into pasta. The flavors, each of which they document on *Ideas in Food*, are almost preposterous: coffee ravioli, hickory smoked linguine, beer and pretzel casarecce, kimchi cavatelli and roasted potato chip agnolotti. The dishes are adventures as much as they are food.

"We begin by asking what is possible," Talbot says, but he's quick to emphasize that the goal is not simply to be outrageous.

"We are always after a particular result." In general, they are after every potential path towards improved taste and efficiency. Each far-out flavor profile is a springboard for a process that involves breaking a familiar food down to its fundamental characteristics and considering new ways to rebuild it. This, of course, often involves as much chemistry as culinary artistry.

The pasta machine, according to Talbot, is comparatively simple in contrast to some of the other approaches the pair has previously taken. "Years ago we used transglutaminase to make noodles," he says. As a substitute for naturally occurring gluten, transglutaminase (sometimes referred to as "meat glue") acts as a bonding agent that allows almost any substance to be formed into the shape and texture of a noodle. Kamoza and Talbot have developed pastas made entirely from pureed tofu, turkey meat, mozzarella and other protein-rich ingredients.

"When you think about it, what is pasta, really?" he asks, "You have substrate, binding agent and flavor." In the case of the salsa verde fusilli, the leftover sauce activated the proteins in semolina flour, gluing the flavor of parsley, garlic and capers to the starchy vehicle. Beyond the initial idea, all Talbot needed was basic math to calculate the appropriate amount of liquid for his dough.

While trained as chefs, you could say Kamoza and Talbot's profession is curiosity. The titles of their blog posts—which are echoed on their Twitter feed—read like a series of Zen koans centered around cooking, presented as catalysts for further investigation rather than recipes or even directions toward a singular outcome.

"How to make an onion ganache?"

"Pan de mie made with corn flake milk"

"Lovage pod bitters"

"What's the crispy chicken skin of the vegetable world?"

On the morning I visited the chefs at their home in Levittown, Pennsylvania, I was the beneficiary of their latest meditation on a cheese course: cheddar and apple pie. To construct the dish, Talbot led me into their garage-cum-laboratory, where a test kitchen laden with equipment sits alongside an extensive library of food books. He pulled a steel canister from the freezer and locked it into a PacoJet—the Swiss-made machine with a culinary cult following, which transforms a hard block of frozen ingredients into an intensely creamy, spoonable substance using a set of rapidly spinning blades. In seconds, Talbot held out a pristinely whipped batch of apple pie flavored ice cream.

Back in the kitchen, he shaved a wedge of Cabot clothbound cheddar then pulled a jar from the refrigerator filled with reddish-orange gelatin. "Caramel apple," he explained. The Ideas in Food version of caramel apple consists of apple cider, hard cider and sugar that have been solidified using a small amount of low acyl gellan, then diced until they resemble cubic tapioca pearls. Onto the serving plate he distributed a small bed of the bright, glassy cubes, topped them with a quenelle of ice cream, built delicate walls of cheddar around the entire structure, then handed it to me. Nothing wrong with eating fruit and cheese for breakfast.

Later in the day, Kamoza posted a photo of the newly crafted cheese plate on the blog, along with recipes for each of the components—a rare bonus for Ideas in Food readers. Unlike other food bloggers, Kamoza and Talbot rarely post step-by-step instructions—not because they are proprietary about their creations, but because for many years their audience was largely composed of restaurant professionals, for whom a list of ingredients and the name of a technique often suffice as a prompt.

But things have changed. Among the growing Ideas in Food readership are home cooks who request traditional recipes, as well as industrial food manufacturers, who call on the couple to help develop new variations on grocery store products. Fortunately, the latter buys them a bit of time to attend to the former.

Kamoza and Talbot didn't set out to make a living off their blog, but as with many Internet success stories, the site took on a life of its own. "When we launched it in 2004, it was really just a digital notebook for our own experiments," says Talbot. At the time, they lived in Pagosa Springs, Colorado, where they worked as the chefs at a small, high-end mountain retreat called Keyah Grande. After working in restaurants like Boston's acclaimed Clio, where they met, the native New Yorkers were

unaccustomed to being so isolated from the bustling, urban food scene. The blog became an opportunity to establish a virtual network of like-minded chefs, and to stay in touch with their East Coast food community.

On the historic timeline of the web, 2004 was relatively early, and Ideas in Food stood out, not only because there were fewer food blogs then, but because Kamozawa and Talbot's intelligence and earnestness were unmistakable. By the time they moved back east in 2006, they were able to forego restaurant jobs and focus on growing Ideas in Food into a business.

They began offering workshops on topics as homely as cheese making and as high-tech as liquid nitrogen techniques, consulting with corporations such as Marks & Spencer and Unilever, and occasionally appearing as guest chefs in restaurants around the northeast. In addition, chefs began hiring them to develop new formulations to improve taste, cost, and efficiency in a context where consistency is everything. "We're a failure-based business," Talbot says. For a fee, they undertake trial and error on a client's behalf and deliver a perfected result.

Many people would call Kamozawa and Talbot's style of cooking molecular gastronomy, but like a lot of the chefs who actually practice scientific techniques, they reject the term. "You can call it modern cooking," Kamozawa says, referencing the other label given to chefs like Heston Blumenthal, Grant Achatz and Wylie Dufresne, "but really it's just about understanding how food works and making it better, using whatever means are available."

While they realize that not every home cook has a PacoJet and a supply of chemically reactive powders, they're adamant that once you comprehend the fundamentals, the possibilities are endless. It's knowledge, not tools, that matter in the kitchen.

And that's a key to understanding their new book, which is a practical, text-only book about food science. One might expect that a book based on Ideas in Food would be richly illustrated with big, glossy photos of the chefs' sculptural dishes. That was what Kamozawa and Talbot had envisioned long before they had a publisher, when they fantasized about what kind of book they might one day like to do. But when an editor at Clarkson and Potter approached them to do a book, it wasn't a lavish coffee table book she wanted.

"The project fell into our laps," Kamozawa recounts, "It wasn't something we'd ever considered doing. We don't think of ourselves as food scientists—we don't have the backgrounds for that. We think of ourselves as chefs who like to understand how things work." But for the purpose of teaching other cooks, Kamozawa and Talbot's experiential education more than makes up for their lack of doctorates in chemistry. Their 300-page book is an authoritative and accessible handbook for learning to manipulate food by better understanding it.

The book is divided into two sections: the first caters to cooks at all levels, and the second is geared toward professionals—though according to the authors, that distinction has more to do with access to special equipment and ingredients than with skill level. In part one, "Ideas for Everyone," the chefs focus on kitchen staples like salt, vinegar and eggs, providing some hard and fast rules that hopefully make simple preparations a bit more fool-proof.

Most of the rules hinge on precise measurements—weights, ratios and temperatures that pare down variables. The optimal degree of saltiness for the human palate, they've observed, appears to be consistent across most recipes, weighing in at 0.5 percent of the total weight of the ingredients. In order to benefit from the trial and error that the authors have done on the reader's behalf, any cook who doesn't have a gram scale will want to run out and buy one.

Once crisp pickles, tender gnocchi and runny yolks have been mastered, the chefs move into the chemistry lab. Part two, "Ideas for Professionals," covers ingredients most people have only seen printed at the end of a long list on a packaged food label. But lest food purists recoil at the thought of adding alien substances to their meal, Kamazawa and Talbot point out that many of these chemicals are neither unnatural nor scary.

"The idea that manufactured foods can be dangerous to our health is a common one," they write in their introduction, "Some of them, like trans fats, actually are." But they point out that sugar, salt, and fat can also pose a threat if we're not prudent. Many of the substances they use, such as xanthan gum, carageenan and transglutaminase, "were originally developed and tested extensively for the food service and food manufacturing industries, [and] have proven themselves to work."

Now, Kamazawa and Talbot are finding innovative applications for industrial ingredients in home cooking and restaurants.

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Their book provides explanations and recipes for locust bean gum, guar gum, methocel, gellan and sodium alginate, all of which can be ordered online. And though the names may be hard to pronounce, their final guises are familiar, if slightly modified. Recipes include whipped cherry juice, white chocolate sheets, reheatable brown butter hollandaise and cheddar tofu. In each case, they use the minimum amount of ingredient needed to achieve the desired reaction, while giving the core flavors center stage.

For Kamazawa and Talbot, delicious food is the bottom line, and no approach is off limits. They are neither chained to tradition nor blindly wooed by technology. Still, when I ask Talbot what his next culinary concubine will be when the Arcobaleno loses its luster, I'm surprised by his answer. Not a blast chiller. Not a Thermomix. "I want a MacBook Air," he says. I decide he must be investigating the next iteration of his cheese course, perhaps using carbon dioxide and hydrocolloids to take all the weight out of an apple.