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Asked & Answered | 'Ideas in Food'

By *CHARLOTTE DRUCKMAN*

Courtesy of Clarkson Potter/Publishers

Spouses Aki Kamozaawa and H. Alexander “Alex” Talbot of the [blog Ideas in Food](#) are the chic geek’s answer to Alton Brown. Based in Levittown, Pa., they’re the inventors of such ingenious concoctions as [Ritz cracker ice cream](#), and manage to break down the scientific hows and whys of cooking without becoming pedantic or bewildering. At the end of the month, their first cookbook, “[Ideas in Food: Great Recipes and Why They Work](#),” hits shelves. Here’s a taste of what’s to come, including reasons you might want to salt your coffee, plus a little something they like to call “crispy chocolate mousse.”

Q. You talk about both the no-knead method and more traditional kneading practice used for baking bread, and note that there’s a time and place for both. Which do you find you turn to most at home?

A. Aki Kamozaawa: I would say probably we do kneading more than no kneading. At home, I’d love to say we plan a lot, but we really don’t plan ahead as often as we could. You need to plan in advance to make the no knead. ... You can make kneaded bread in a couple of hours, whereas with no knead you need a day. For most bread, I’d say kneading, except for the no-knead brioche — I love that recipe.

Alex Talbot: If we could plan a little bit — we work with organized chaos here — we would do more no knead. For the kneaded breads, that focaccia recipe, or the idiot-proof, which we call it —

AK: — it’s the Fail-Safe bread in the cookbook —

AT: Fail-Safe, idiot-proof, really, they’re one and the same. ... The focaccia is awesome. It’s so versatile; when you haven’t planned anything, it helps you get things on the table quickly.

In the book, you have a recipe for ice cream flavored with a brown-butter purée. How did you come up with the idea of a purée, and what else can it be used for?

AT: It certainly evolved from a [conversation](#) on the [Web site](#). [Corey Barrett](#) chimed in about what [Michael Laiskonis](#) was doing and suggested jacking his brown butter with milk solids. You can add it to gravy, soup, breads. ... That nuttiness, that dairy-like quality, is fabulous. Something that didn’t make it into the book is a garlic-bread soup that has no bread in it, just uses toasted milk solids. We start browning the milk solids in the butter, and the garlic cloves cook in that as well. Then we season that with a little bit of cayenne. We make a parsley and

Parmesan stock in a pressure cooker, strain that, pour it over the milk-solid mixture, purée it in the blender, and you have garlic bread soup without bread.

The five-second rule: yes or no?

AT: There should be a no-second rule: It drops, it goes.

What's up with the cookies called "crispy chocolate mousse"? How did you come up with that recipe?

AT: Chocolate mousse is something that you talk about a fair amount in cooking in general, and changing textures and shapes is important.

AK: It's about that light texture and release of chocolate flavor.

AT: We weren't going to put a recipe for chocolate mousse in our recipe book; that's not who we are. ... We've made big sheet pans of chocolate mousse and laid them out for a while, but we couldn't say that for a cookbook. So we tweaked it and made it into cookies — crunchy, light, airy, and it turns into chocolate mousse in your mouth.

Are there any examples of classic dishes that defy the logic of science in the book? Exceptions to the rule?

AT: Take a look at the risotto recipe. By isolating the starch in the risotto, you boil it for seven minutes instead of cooking it for 23. You hydrate the starch and then cool it down so it retrogrades and it can never be released from the rice. Each grain remains individual and you end up with a beautiful risotto. We first cook the rice in a water bath at 65 °C (149 °F) for 30 minutes, and then you can rinse it off and use it when you want. This is incredible risotto ... you're hydrating the rice and keeping the starch at bay.

AK: You're stabilizing the starch.

How do you take your coffee?

AK: We drink it with skim milk. Personally, I think coffee is like many other intensely flavored liquids, that little bit of milk dilutes things. Coffee has that bitterness, and we use a **local skim milk** that's a little on the sweet side, but it's not as if you added sugar.

AT: I just got back from doing a workshop for baristas and mixologists at **Woodberry Kitchen**, and we did a tasting. In the coffee world, you brew coffee with what? Water. But what if you brewed it with something else? So we tried pumpkin juice. For the reception we did brandied cherry juice from the kitchen, and it was done in the **Chemex**. We topped it with steamed milk that was flavored with caramelized white chocolate. We made an ice cream using the coffee cherry (cascara) and made an affogato with it. ... In barista world it would actually be an affogato macchiato. ... Back in 2008, we talked about **salt**. **Shirley Corriher** had talked about adding salt to your coffee beans. Going down to this barista event, we thought, What's really going to change your world? The perception of salt in coffee is considered a

flaw. We took the calves to slaughter, so to speak, and we blindfolded them for a taste test and found that that they liked the coffee best when it was closest to .1 percent or .2 percent salt. That's why it blew their minds ... they weren't perceiving salt; there was no flaw, but they were perceiving a better cup of coffee. We did the same thing with the cocktail and it was .2 percent. You can use less sweetener in cocktails and use salt instead. You get balance.

AK: But those are usually sweeter, so they need the extra salt. If you think of it all as forms of cooking, then it's a natural progression.

AT: The chapter on salt talks about salt ratio, and all sorts of stuff we season to taste is not really seasoned to taste.

AK: Someone else's salt ratio might not be our salt ratio.

AT: What we found during blind tasting is that it hits our same ratio. ... When we found outliers during the tasting, usually they were smokers. The cusp of salty is still salty. It's like football: if you're on the line of out-of-bounds, you're out of bounds. You're either in or you're out.

Aside from your own perfected recipes, do you have any favorite restaurant- or shop-made preparations?

AT: I would love to say that we do, but since our daughter was born, and she just turned 2 on Monday, we don't go out nearly as much, or at all in the sense of things. ... You know who does a pretty good cinnamon bun, though?

AK: The one in Plainsboro [N.J.]? [Sugar + Sunshine](#) bakery. They make good cupcakes, and they make *good* cinnamon buns.

AT: Woodberry Kitchen is doing great flatbreads — or really flatbread as a pizza. ... The toppings are things like sauerkraut, apple and pork belly, and they're curing all their own meats. They have one pizza with coppa, homemade pepperoni and fennel salumi on there as well. They're getting a whole cow each week and using the whole thing. The whole culture they have going down there and the philosophy of things is just amazing.

AK: It's the best restaurant you may not have heard of. The food is good, it's really really, really, good. [Craigie on Main](#) in Cambridge is another of our favorite places to eat. His [Tony Maws's burger](#) is awesome.

AT: He only makes 20 burgers a day now. He's also making great homemade pastas.

AK: My favorite pizza is actually [Nick's Pizza](#) in Forest Hills in New York.

What will you be cooking for the holidays?

AK: We have dinner with family. Christmas Eve is seven fishes, and we contribute something. We're very much spur-of-the-moment. We figure out what everyone else is making first, then we go shopping and we pick what we like at the fish counter and go from

there.

AT: For breakfast on Christmas day, eggs Benedict. Has to be [eggs Benedict](#).

Any cooking gadgets or edible items on your holiday wish list?

AT: [iSi](#) is making [something](#) where you can actually carbonate in small batches, in individual liter bottles. That's a neat thing, especially with our interest in carbonation in the book and in general, but we'll have to find a way to test it. We just did a coffee soda. We used French press coffee and clarified it, using the technique we came up with in the book ... gave it xanthan gum for some body (.05 percent). Then we added peach-honey bourbon and a float of the [Spice Tree](#) single-malt scotch on top for that smokiness. It was like coffee, toast and jam all at once. We put a little bit of sorghum in there as well, because the peach honey bourbon was sweet but not enough. And of course we put a little bit of salt.

AK: We're looking for a new gratin pan.

AT: We're bringing back the potato gratin.