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Review: *Ideas in Food: Great Recipes and Why They Work*

By **Nicholas L. Hall**

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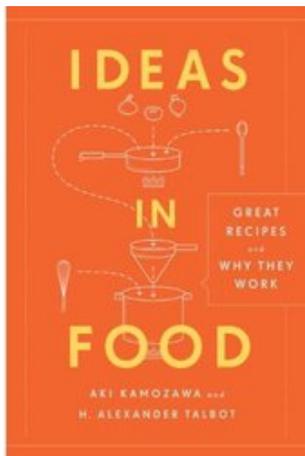


Ideas in Food mac & cheese.

I've been reading the Ideas in Food (blog.ideasinfood.com) blog for quite a while now. Husband and wife chefs Alex Talbot and Aki Kamozawa are two of the most fascinating culinary minds I have ever come across. Their blog never ceases to provide insightful, thought-provoking ideas, and their creativity is seemingly boundless. Needless to say, I was thrilled to discover that they were putting out a book.

That book is *Ideas in Food: Great Recipes and Why They Work*, and it came out a few weeks ago, on December 28. The title of the book is remarkably descriptive of the contents. This book is, in many ways, not really a cookbook at all. Sure, there are recipes, but that's not really the point. The idea is the point.

The book itself is structured with two major sections, the first labeled "Ideas for Everyone," and the other "Ideas for Professionals." Don't take those designations too seriously, though. Remember that, first and foremost, this book is an idea generator and concept incubator, much like Aki and Alex's blog.



Some of the ingredients in the "Professionals" section might be a little esoteric (few home pantries stock transglutaminase or dewars of liquid nitrogen), and some of the equipment, immersion circulators and vacuum sealers notable among them, might be a bit out of reach for most home cooks, but that doesn't really affect the value of the information, itself.

Their section on transglutaminase, affectionately known as "meat glue" in the industry, contains interesting and illuminating information about enzymatic action, the way pH affects foods, and the nature of proteins from both meat and dairy sources. It also contains a recipe/method for making a "Shrimp Mosaic," which I intend to adapt into an inside-out shrimp spring roll. I can even source the Activa needed for the project from the handy Sources section at the back of the book.

In the chapter on Hydrocolloids, which contains numerous concepts that are easily approachable by home cooks, they discuss low-oven dehydration techniques for manipulating foods into novel forms and textures, such as their amazing-sounding Red Cabbage Kimchi Cracklings. I'm eager to try their Agar-Agar clarification method, a more efficient update on the [gelatin clarification technique I wrote about](#) a while back.

Even the more advanced techniques are described in such a way that an enthusiastic home cook with a bit of skill and determination could give them a shot. It's mostly a matter of sourcing the ingredients. Aki and Alex even suggest alternative methods for recipes and techniques that require sous vide cooking.

Unfortunately, this is also the one way in which the book falls short. While it's all well and good to suggest zip-top bags with the air squeezed out in lieu of a vacuum sealer, and a carefully watched pot in lieu of a [PolyScience unit](#) for relatively quick cooking items that are fairly forgiving, lots of the recipes and techniques in the book don't fit that mold. Take the Root-Beer Braised Short-Ribs recipe, which calls for vacuum sealing the ribs and cooking them at precisely 149 degrees for 24 hours. I don't know about you, but I'm pretty sure my stovetop is not reliable enough to maintain that exact a temperature over that long a time, and I'm also not sure that many people would be willing to make use of an open flame for that long, largely while they're sleeping.

I think most people would agree that the use of immersion circulators has two main benefits in the kitchen, both of which are lost when you try to replicate the technique on the stove-top. First, they allow extremely accurate and stable cooking temperatures. Many of the recipes in Ideas in Food stipulate cooking temperatures to the tenth of a degree. If the recipe gets that specific, I would assume that even relatively minor fluctuations in temperature (think half a degree, or even a few degrees) would have a relatively major impact on the finished results.

This has everything to do with things like coagulation temperatures for proteins. Go over the coagulation temperature of albumin, for example, and your beautiful Onsen Style egg will turn from

barely set whites and silky smooth, oozy yolk to something more akin to a traditional soft-boiled egg, which largely defeats the purpose of the exercise.

On the other hand, things like their technique for blanching green vegetables sous vide are certainly repeatable with just a zip-top bag and a pot of water on the stove top. The results are worth the slight extra effort of sealing the veg, with noticeably brighter color, fresher flavor, and better nutrient retention. This technique works wonderfully, yet flies in the face of common wisdom around sous vide and vegetables, which suggests that the process will render green veg an unappetizing shade of grey-green. Nothing could be further from the truth, and Aki and Alex's culinary curiosity led them down the path to that discovery, which they in turn point us down with their writings on food.

The quibble about sous vide methodology is a slight one, though, in an otherwise fantastic book. Quite possibly my favorite aspect of *Ideas in Food*, both the book and the blog, is that these two put no restrictions on their willingness to experiment. This means, among other things, that ingredients likely to be scorned by most chefs are looked at for their inherent properties and possibilities, rather than their lack of pedigree.

Take, for example, their use of dehydrated potato flakes, roasted in the oven, in the creation of potato chip pasta that has all of the flavor, while eliminating the greasiness of, actual potato chips. While most cooks eschew things like freeze-dried mashed potatoes as pedestrian, even undignified, Aki and Alex look at the ingredient as just that, rather than an end unto itself. When we free ourselves from our presumptions, the world offers an almost limitless variety of avenues to pursue, in both ingredients and techniques.

A perfect example of both is their recipe for Macaroni and Cheese. It's easily the best version I've ever had, and it employs a bit of unorthodox technique, and one off-the-beaten-path ingredient, to get there. The casserole begins with hydrating pasta in cold water for an hour or so. This takes the noodles to a stage just shy of al dente, and has a major impact on the finished product, resulting in a much firmer, delightfully chewy texture in the pasta. It's not undercooked at all, but manages a springy bite.

The softened pasta is drained, then finished in the sauce before the casserole is broiled. This step allows the pasta to gelatinize (release its starch) in the sauce, thickening it in the process, and to absorb the sauce into itself as it finishes hydrating. The result is a Macaroni and Cheese that is truly that, a fully integrated dish, rather than becoming something more like macaroni with cheese, which is the fate of many lesser versions.

The other thing that sets this mac apart is the use of evaporated milk. The nutty, slightly caramelized flavor of the milk adds surprising depth to the dish, and helps to create an amazingly creamy sauce without any graininess. Coupled with the starch released while the pasta finishes, and the emulsification of the cheese into the base, the evaporated milk adds just enough body to thicken the sauce perfectly without any of the usual additives (flour, etc) that can mar the texture.

It's simple, it's thoughtful, and the techniques involved are adaptable to an astonishing array of applications. Those are the hallmarks of *Ideas in Food*, and what makes this book so great. Nearly every page had me wondering two things: why I hadn't thought of doing that, and how I could modify it, adapt it, and use it in other ways. In short, it's a book whose aim is to make us better, more thoughtful cooks. It succeeds wildly.

Showing 6 comments



mfsmit 3 months ago

My sous vide rig consists of a crock pot, a thermocouple, a PID controller and an old extension cord. The parts can be had for about \$50

or less, and there are a couple detailed descriptions of the set up (written by others) that are only a Google search away. If you want a cleaner solution, Auber Instruments sells a pre-packaged controller for about \$150 that you just plug your crock pot, rice cooker or hot plate into.



Nicholas L. Hall 3 months ago [in reply to mfsmit](#)

Thanks, mfsmit. I've been curious about hacking a crockpot for sous vide. Perhaps that's one for Kevin, of "What a Crock" fame?



Kevin Shalin 3 months ago [in reply to Nicholas L. Hall](#)

Sounds like I have some homework.



Nicholas L. Hall 3 months ago [in reply to Kevin Shalin](#)

YES!



Kevin Shalin 3 months ago [in reply to Nicholas L. Hall](#)

\$150 for a sous vide instrument, \$75 for a Robb Walsh Tex-Mex class...do I have money to spend on either? No. Will I end up doing both? Probably.



Lisa@ButteryBooks 3 months ago

Ideas in food is one of my favorite blogs. I will have to check out their book.