

Modernist Cuisine

The Art and Science of Cooking



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Review: *Ideas in Food*

By Nathan

February 1st, 2011

[Book review](#)

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Although this blog is mostly about our book, *Modernist Cuisine*, I'd like to direct some attention toward another book that has come out recently: [Ideas in Food: Great Recipes and Why They Work](#) by Aki Kamozawa and H. Alexander Talbot. Aki and Alex have been friends of mine since we met online six years ago. Virtually nobody knows them from their restaurant cooking, because their main professional gig was at an obscure lodge in Colorado. The inn had only eight rooms and catered primarily to wealthy elk hunters, who sat down to dinner expecting ranch-style comfort food and instead got a state-of-the-art tasting menu. I once made the pilgrimage out to meet them and eat their food,

and it wasn't an easy journey. The nearest airport had no commercial flights and was more than an hour's drive from the lodge.

Despite the obscurity of that restaurant, Alex and Aki have gained fame because they also run a website, [Ideas in Food](#), which chronicles what they have learned from their many creative experiments with cuisine. Over the years, the two have written about many culinary innovations of their own and have also reported and explained techniques discovered by others. [Ideas in Food](#) has become a must-read for anyone interested in the evolution of cooking techniques.

Ultimately, the reputation that Alex and Aki gained from the site grew substantial enough to launch their careers as cooking instructors, consultants, magazine columnists—and now cookbook authors. It's a story that could have happened only in this Internet-enabled meritocracy that allows talented people to reach wide audiences regardless of their location or financial resources.

Ideas in Food, the book, brings their cuisine to a new and wider audience. It makes an interesting complement and contrast to *Modernist Cuisine*. It's a vastly smaller book (319 pages, each of which is a bit less than half the size of a page in *MC*), and as a result is vastly more affordable (\$25 list price, versus \$625 for *MC*). It contains no photos or diagrams, which is another big difference, because *MC* is an intensely visual book.

Ideas in Food is published by a traditional publisher (Clarkson Potter), and it seems clear that a lot of effort was made to ensure that it conforms to the normal expectations for cookbooks. This is part of the reason that the book is small and inexpensive and has no photos—but that is only the tip of the iceberg. I find this fascinating, because in *Modernist Cuisine*, we basically broke all of these rules, whereas Aki and Alex had to live with them. It is entirely appropriate that we each took the paths we did, because we had totally different goals. Indeed, that is the fundamental reason that we at *MC* decided to start our own publishing company.

The first 237 pages of *Ideas in Food* are organized into a section called “Ideas for Everybody.” The recipes give both volumetric measures (cups, tablespoons, etc.) and weights (in grams only) for the ingredients. A lot of effort has been made to simplify the recipes. They bravely (and in my view, correctly) position sous vide as a technique for everybody, and also include mention of the CVap oven (a brand of low-temperature steam oven, which we cover at length in *MC*).

The last 67 pages of the book are set aside for a different section titled “Ideas for Professionals,” and the discussion here focuses on hydrocolloids, both starches and gums. In this section, the volumetric measurements go away; only grams are given in the recipes. Many of the basic techniques of hydrating and using hydrocolloids are covered here, including a basic discussion of spherification.

The separation of “everybody” from “professionals” is, on the one hand, a reasonable compromise. I am sure that this structure let them get away with including some fascinating material, while at the same time, letting their publisher feel good about the accessibility of the book.

On the other hand, I can't help but think it ridiculous to imply that xanthan gum, tapioca flour, and some other common ingredients need to be quarantined off in a section for “professionals.” Xanthan gum is available in most supermarkets. (In Seattle at least, every Safeway carries Bob's Red Mill brand ingredients, and xanthan gum is one of them.) Xanthan gum is super easy to use—you just stir

it into a liquid to thicken it. Unlike some other hydrocolloids, xanthan gum's performance doesn't depend on the temperature of the liquid or its ion content. Just stir!

The only thing even vaguely technical about xanthan gum is that you use it in small quantities. If you want to thicken a sauce with xanthan gum, you typically add about 0.1% to 0.2% xanthan gum by weight. To put that in perspective, the typical amount of salt you put in a savory cuisine sauce is about 1%—so you use about one-tenth to one-fifth as much xanthan gum as salt. That just means you need a decent scale. One liter of sauce needs 1–2 grams of xanthan gum. Now, why is that hard?

Please don't think that I'm dumping on Aki and Alex—*Ideas in Food* is great. I'm not even dumping on the people at Clarkson Potter. After all, they have tons of experience selling cookbooks (a lot more than I have!), and I am sure that they made the decisions that they think are best. They very likely will sell *Ideas in Food* to many times the number of people who buy *MC*.

Another way in which the book differs from *MC* is in the kind of recipes it contains. Here too, I see the influence of the editing and selection process. A joke I have with Alex is that of the most interesting techniques that he and Aki have pioneered on their website, more of them appear in my book than in his! That probably isn't literally true, because *Ideas in Food* (the book) often mentions the techniques in passing. But *Modernist Cuisine* certainly covers them in more detail.

All in all, I heartily recommend *Ideas in Food*. It is a great introduction to many important ideas and techniques in cooking.

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4 Responses to *Review: Ideas in Food*

1. Anonymous

[February 1, 2011](#)

[11:52 am](#)

I read in one of their interviews that the section for professionals had more to do with accessibility than difficulty. Maybe Xanthan gum is becoming more accessible, but its still very difficult for the average home cook to find.

[Reply](#)

2. [ChuckEats](#)

[February 1, 2011](#)

[2:09 pm](#)

for those that might want to see those (old) meals from keyah grande — i ate there twice back in the day (when my writing was more embarrassing too):

<http://www.chuckeats.com/2007/01/19/keyah-grande-pagosa-springs-co-rip/>

<http://www.chuckeats.com/2006/10/23/keyah-grande-pagosa-springs-co-legitimate-2-star-dining/>

[Reply](#)

3. [Mark Harrison](#)

[February 5, 2011](#)

[9:59 am](#)

Firstly, thank you for the review. I've just ordered my copy while waiting for something else to be published 😊

Secondly, on Xanthan gum, it also appears to be widely available here in the UK — three of the big four supermarket chains stock it, at least on their websites, (I've not walked round each to see how easy it is to find in-store.)

[Reply](#)

4. David

[February 20, 2011](#)

[2:55 pm](#)

Just thought I'd add, in the UK you will normally find xanthan in the 'special diet' section of the supermarket as it is sold as a bread additive for people who are gluten intolerant (it creates an approximation of the texture gluten creates)

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