

Slate

Vacuum Sealing for the Everyday Cook

Ideas in Food argues that technological cuisine is within reach of amateurs.

By Sara Dickerman

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As you may have heard, the cookbook sensation of the season, if not the decade, is *Modernist Cuisine*, a six-volume magnum opus on contemporary cooking principles that will set you back roughly \$500. Self-published by Nathan Myhrvold—the genius founder of Microsoft's research division, zillionaire, famed dinosaur enthusiast, and the world's most serious, best-funded amateur cook—it is a thrilling specimen, filled with scientific explanations of culinary phenomenon, ambitious graphics that would make even Edward

Tufte's head spin, eyepopping photography, and recipes from the world's most famous, and famously provocative chefs. In short, *Modernist Cuisine* is fully Diderot-ian in its ambition to document the whys and hows of today's gastronomic techniques. Oh and, by the way, unless you placed your order some time ago, you can't have it—at least not for a while. The first run, scheduled for April 14, has been oversold, and Myhrvold's fans are waiting for extra shipments from the printers.

If you're on Myhrvold's list and growing impatient, or if \$500 sounds like way too much money but you're curious about the techniques eulogized in *Modernist Cuisine*, there's an alternative. For you, there is in stock, and for only \$25, another new book worth reading. It is

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essays. Alex and Ali encourage their

not a single photograph, and a modest title: *Ideas in Food*. By food writers and restaurant consultants H. Alexander Talbot and Aki Kamoza—almost universally known as Alex and Aki—the book is an outgrowth of their popular blog of the same title.

For the past decade or so, the gulf between forward-thinking professional kitchens and home kitchens has appeared almost uncrossable, in part because the former is so enamored of gadgetry (vacuum packers and their complementary temperature-controlled water baths, for example). Coffee-table cookbooks from chefs such as Thomas Keller, Grant Achatz, Heston Blumenthal, and the patron saint of contemporary cookery, Ferran Adria, reinforce this perception with their multicomponent recipes that seem impracticable without an army of assistants. Alex and Aki's book, by contrast, makes an effort not just to bridge the abyss, but to question whether there is such a well-defined separation at all. Traditional cooking involves just as much chemistry as newer techniques, they suggest. Along with funny futuristic methods like "cryo-blanching" (tenderizing food by freezing it and thawing it repeatedly) and "controlled-bruising" (marinating and concentrating flavors in watery produce by compressing it with a vacuum packer), the authors mix in recipes for old-school cottage crafts like making butter, vinegar, pickles, and bread (no-knead bread, of course).

Whether describing familiar techniques or new ones, *Ideas in Food* takes a pedagogic tack. In a series of short

readers to understand the molecular reasons behind the behavior of ingredients, using colorful similes to help get our brains into the science. When writing about egg-white foams like meringues, for example, they say fats "are like kryptonite for the egg whites, rapidly causing them to lose strength. Fats work by destroying the surface tension of the liquid which is necessary for the stability of the foam matrix." Each essay on a technique or family of ingredients is followed by recipes. After an essay on dairy, there is a recipe for brown butter puree, its nutty flavor intensified by seeding the butter with dried milk powder; after a consideration of pasta cookery, there are instructions for infusing pasta with additional flavor by soaking it in a cold liquid (in this case watered down barbecue sauce) before cooking; and following the egg-foam discussion mentioned above, there's a recipe for crispy chocolate cookies cooked at low heat for five hours—slow-baked chocolate mousse or uncommonly buttery meringues depending on which way you look at it.

The most compelling recipes are those

tomato stock rather than standard

involving new-school tweaks to everyday home cooking, which may enhance efficiency, or deliciousness, or both. Alex and Aki write in typically understated prose: "We are not discounting traditional methods or procedures, we are simply trying new things to see if the evolution of technology and the supply chain have given us the tools to do things in a better way. The answer is sometimes yes and sometimes no. But we never know for sure until we actually try to find out." Their cryo-blanching technique yields a less salty take on preserved lemons in a couple of days rather than a couple of weeks. Alex and Aki posit that vegetables cooked in vacuum sealed (or zip-top) plastic bags preserve an intensity of flavor that is washed away if you blanch your veggies in a big pot of water. I tried it with some green beans this week, and with artichokes too, and in both cases, the vegetables retained a bright, undissipated flavor that I hadn't encountered before. I feel squeamish about the additional plastic landfill that comes with the technique, but I'm kind of wowed by it nonetheless. Less ambivalently, I loved the trick of presoaking pasta in cold water, which allows you to cook pasta both very quickly and in very little water without making a sticky mess—a nice option when the kids are possessed of a sudden mutinous hunger.

Alex and Aki are always on the trail of intensifying flavor: They promote the concept of "micro-stocks," that is, making stocks with very pronounced flavors (and contra French tradition, in a pressure cooker), like an extra zingy

their brand of technical cooking is well within reach of amateurs, they do cordon

chicken or mixed vegetable. I was impressed with their mushroom stock recipe, though it needs to be used judiciously, as it's quite assertive.

I should warn traditionalists that some of the recipes rely on weary pop-food-culture jokiness that's part of the high-contemporary style, like ranch-flavored risotto, or a recipe for potato-chip flavored fresh noodles. I tried out the latter item—which required working toasted instant-mashed-potato flakes into an egg pasta dough—and found that the pasta did indeed evoke a toasted 'tater flavor. It was amusing, but didn't quite achieve the greasy-sharp flavor I look for in a delicious chip, and definitely didn't taste better to me than a more conventional pasta. Restaurants sometimes enlist this kind of high-concept dish to liven up the menu (and frankly to get a little buzz going in the press), but I don't foresee many at-home chefs working potato-chip-pasta into their repertoire.

Although Alex and Aki are adamant that

full-scale reference book. And that's what makes it a compelling tool, even in

off a section of their book under an "Ideas for Professionals" heading. The division may contradict the technology-to-the people message a bit. But only a bit. Alex and Aki assert that "anyone can use both sections, but the part for professionals utilizes ingredients and equipment that require a little more of an investment of time or money from the home cook." In "Ideas for Professionals" they introduce the farther reaches of the contemporary batterie de cuisine: liquid nitrogen, carbon dioxide chargers, and a whole spectrum of hydrocolloids, stabilizing compounds like xanthan gum, carrageen, and gellan, which are repurposed from the commercial food-processing industry and are key tools in avant-garde cookery today.

If the "professionals" pages aren't exactly aimed at the home cook, the basic pedagogic bent keeps it accessible: The explanatory essay on, say, methylcellulose is as clear as that on sourdough. More importantly, Alex and Aki give a sense of how liberating these tools can be—a step toward culinary abstraction, where a chef is no longer beholden to the original physical limitations of an ingredient. It's also nice to know—if only for knowing's sake—just how a chef might make cheddar "tofu" or turkey thigh roulade glued together with transglutimase (aka "meat glue").

From the price to its design to its plainspoken prose, *Ideas in Food* is self-consciously aimed at the curious neophyte rather than the seasoned technical chef; it's an invitation to be more experimental with cooking, not a

comparison with the splendid promise of Myhrvold's volumes. Alex and Aki encourage experimentation at all levels, and give a toehold for dabblers like me. Indeed, the book convinced me to purchase both a vacuum sealer and a pressure cooker (the immersion circulator's going to have to wait a little longer). I'll have to report back to you on how much I'm using them in six months, but for the moment, Alex and Aki have me noodling around with great relish.