By Sara Dickerman

Posted Friday, April 1, 2011, at 7:19 AM ET

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

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not a single photograph, and a modest

title: Ideas in Food. By food writers and

restaurant consultants H. Alexander

Talbot and Aki Kamozawa—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 j

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