

ISSUE TWENTY-TWO 2008 • S\$8.00 RM18

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A BOLD & PROGRESSIVE CUISINE

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appetite
issue twenty-two • september 2008

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S\$8.00 MICA (P) 252/10/2007 • RM18 KDNH 451450/5/2008

ISSN 1793-3064



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INSIDE:
SINGAPORE
F1 SPECIAL





the great **leap forward**

CUISINE THAT IS BOLD IN IMAGINATION
AND PROGRESSIVE IN EXECUTION

WORDS ELIZABETH SORIANO

Ryan Clift's beef and beets

as technology races forth on its fibre optic superhighway, so too does the world of gastronomy. We are in the midst of an exciting new culinary movement, and Asia is no exception.

It all started in 1992 when a funny thing happened in the course of an esoteric gastronomy forum. A small group gathered to attend the first of five molecular and physical gastronomy workshops and they literally turned cuisine as we knew it on its head. “Molecular gastronomy” was first used publicly in the title of a scientific workshop held in Erice, Sicily in 1992, before experimental cooking became prominent,’ writes Harold McGee, an expert and author on the chemistry, technique and history of food and cooking on his Curious Cook website. These workshops explored the physical and chemical transformations that occur in cooking, and how science is capable of altering food to a completely different state. ‘Pierre Gagnaire and Heston Blumenthal were the only ones to attend the Erice workshop. Ferran Adrià, the most influential pioneer of experimental cooking, was never invited to the Erice workshop,’ adds McGee.

Despite his absence, Adrià, later hailed as the greatest chef in the world, set up a laboratory dedicated to the research of innovative and scientifically altered cuisine in 1997. His restaurant El Bulli, in Rosas, Spain, is only open for six months in a year, and allegedly books out its entire year of reservations in a matter of days. (Only about one percent of those pining for a table get one.) Adrià then spends the rest of the year in his lab, thinking cap on and test tubes out, rewriting the possibilities of cuisine and pushing the limits of how we perceive the food on our plate.

But while Adrià may be the one most intimately associated with this bold, experimental cuisine, its high priest, so to speak, he is not alone in his endeavours to blend chemistry, technology and

gastronomy. Other culinary geniuses such as Heston Blumenthal from The Fat Duck in Bray, United Kingdom and Pierre Gagnaire from his eponymous restaurant in Paris, France have all been variously lauded for their unique interpretations and applications of this experimental methodology. But the problem with popular culture, however, is that it loves catchy taglines and the term ‘molecular cuisine’ is a shoo-in where that is concerned. Sure enough, the gastronomic world was soon neatly divided into two camps — the ‘molecular’ brigade versus the rest of the world, a scenario that hardly does justice to either camp, molecular or not. Count xanthan gum, lecithin and alginate in your list of ingredients and you are deemed molecular, never mind the fine grounding in French techniques demonstrated, and vice versa.

Unfortunately, popular culture also often reaps cheap replicas of the original product. Just like a shoddy faux Burberry or Louis Vuitton bag, ‘molecular cuisine’ has seen its fair share of fakes. Today, there are slews of ‘chefs’ armed with bags of artificial aromas and sprays — from caviar, lobster and black truffle to morel powder and sea urchin gel — all easily purchased online from websites like chefssimon.com, or marchetransatlantique.com.

So like last month’s flavour, the term ‘molecular’ swiftly went from trendy to dirty in culinary circles.

Outraged, notable chefs have responded. Joël Robuchon told the Hong Kong Chef’s Association: ‘Today, there are a lot of chefs who are trying to copy him (Adrià) and this is not helping... I am 200 percent against this cuisine. I am against it because they are using products like additives... products which have been prohibited by the health services.’ Blumenthal, Adrià, Keller and McGee have also lashed back in a shared statement issued on The Fat Duck website: ‘Certain aspects of it are over-emphasised and

sensationalised while others are ignored... We do not pursue novelty for its own sake. We may use modern thickeners, sugar substitutes, enzymes, liquid nitrogen, sous-vide, dehydration, and other non-traditional means, but these do not define our cooking.

‘The term “molecular gastronomy” does not describe our cooking, or indeed any style of cooking,’ they added.

It’s no surprise then that the newest wave of talent in the gastronomic world are skirting away from the term ‘molecular cuisine’. Though they still use many of the techniques wrought by molecular gastronomy, such as cooking sous-vide and freeze drying, these chefs emphasise the fact that they are staying pure to cuisine as cuisine, not as chemical reaction. Instead of the disreputed ‘molecular’ label, they variously consider their cuisine ‘progressive’, ‘modern’ or ‘postmodern’ — describing a bold, experimental cuisine that reinvents the old and makes it new. Sounds like a new name for an old trick? The jury is still out.

Leading the vanguard of this progressive cuisine is Grant Achatz, the 34-year-old executive chef and partner of Alinea in Chicago, who justly clinched the culinary equivalent to an Oscar this past June when he won the James Beard Outstanding Chef Award 2008. He calls his cuisine ‘progressive American’ but admits that that’s a hot topic and some call it ‘avant-garde’ and yes, ‘molecular’.

Here in Asia, molecular cuisine has never made a big splash — we have no Ferran Adrià, no Heston Blumenthal, no Wylie Dufresne (WD-50, New York) and no Grant Achatz. But there is a quietly seething hotbed of equally progressive talent in the Asian culinary world — forward-thinking, innovative chefs whose passion for creating clever, über food reigns supreme. While dining still remains for the most part conservative in Asia, these players are nonetheless forging ahead to create technologically advanced dishes that remain accessible to Asian palates. The good news is — some of them are gaining international acclaim.



Paul Pairet



Alvin Leung Jr



Chris Salans

Alvin Leung Jr, of BO Innovation in Hong Kong, is busy whipping up what he calls X-treme cuisine. 'It's about getting the right flavours down pat, flavours that people recognise. I want to push the boundary of the dining experience, but I don't want to take you too far out of your comfort zone,' he says.

Singaporean Benjamin Lim, chef de cuisine at Burj Al Arab's Asian-themed restaurant, Junsui in Dubai, agrees. 'I like to offer unexpected things — like an orange segment that is super fizzy like a soda. Diners are not just visiting the restaurant to eat. The chef should present diners with a complete dining experience, something they can "take" home and talk about,' he says.

English chef Ryan Clift, who recently opened Tippling Club in Singapore, Asia's first food-and-cocktail pairing venue, sums up his approach very simply — 'I want to make food that's mind-blowing but still tastes like food.' He says, 'My philosophy is to take one ingredient and push it as far as I can to produce a variety of flavours and textures. But I don't want to lose the focus of the ingredient itself.'

Indeed, while good chefs like Clift respect their ingredients and the food they are cooking, there are some who do not, particularly when it comes to the nebulous realm of avant-garde cuisine. 'For every cuisine, there are those who know what they are doing, and others who just try to do it. I believe that technique should be used, not abused,' says Chris Salans of Mozaic in Bali. 'I am very influenced by local ingredients. I also try to learn new techniques, experiment and implement them on my menu,' he adds.

'Just because you use modernity does not mean that your dish is modern,' points out Paul Pairet, from Jade on 36 ▶

FACES TO WATCH IN ASIA

ALVIN LEUNG, JR

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BENJAMIN LIM

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Chef de cuisine, Junsui Pure Asia

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Ryan Clift



Benjamin Lim

JEFF RAMSEY

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WORDS JOYCELINE TULLY

EXPECTED THE UNEXPECTED — that was the promise made by Paul Pairet, chef de cuisine of Shanghai's Jade on 36, when he was in Singapore earlier this year for a five-day stint at Shangri-La Singapore's fine dining restaurant, Blu. And that's exactly what the tall, intense-looking Frenchman delivered in two five-course degustation menus comprising signatures gathered from as far back as 1996, such as the shrimp jar, which he calls his 'most-copied dish'.

On paper, the dishes sounded innocent enough: duck a l'orange, passion-choco foie gras opera, cuttlefish noodle, jumbo shrimp citrus jar, truffle burnt soup bread — how unexpected could it be, we wondered. Then the amuse bouche arrived, and we were instantly sold.

A small, half-opened aluminium tin of the supermarket canned food variety was placed in front of us, packed with a light, tangy sardine mousse, and served with just toasted, delicate brioche bread, Pairet's witty take on the most humble of comfort food, sardines on toast. Next to arrive on our table for four were exquisite, melt-in-your-mouth bon bons bobbing precariously on skinny wooden sticks — made of foie gras and tamarind, that is. Hmm, we each thought silently, not bad, not bad at all. We licked our lips in anticipation as our waiter reappeared, this time proffering what Pairet cheekily calls 'No Shark's Fin', an intensely flavoured tomato consommé stewed with springy, translucent strands of peach-flavoured jelly. Impressive? Check. Unexpected? Check. Delicious? Check.

We haven't even started on our courses yet.

The rest of the dinner proved equally inspired: Foie gras opera turned out to be a graceful, layered 'cake' with chocolate brioche and a generous, velvety layer of foie gras terrine; the cuttlefish noodles resembled a white, fluffy coil of lightly torched marshmallow in appearance and delicate mousse in texture, and tasted faintly of otak and coconut; the jumbo shrimp made a grand entrance in a tall, sealed, air-tight jar that when opened, released a fresh, citrusy, orange fragrance; the black cod was cooked sous-vide, and scented with ginger, mushrooms and kumquat. It was a stunning meal — creative, delicious and ever so subtly reforming our perceptions of the food on our plate.

There was nary a test tube or a syringe in sight, and Pairet would certainly balk if the overenthusiastic were to try and label his cuisine molecular. As he declares, 'All cooking is chemistry.' But what with foams, quick-drying, blast-freezing et al, what's the innocent diner to make of it? We check in with the very articulate chef who is deeply passionate about two things in life: his family and his cuisine.

How would you describe your cuisine? Professional and personal — whether you like the food or not, I hope everyone will walk away thinking that what this chef is doing is very professional and unique.

There is, however, one thing that seems to unite the two camps of diners: when they like it, they talk about the design of the dish; when they don't like it, they use that against my food. But we don't put things on the plate just to make it pretty, they are there to show you how to eat the food, which is very important to me.

Do you see your food as avant-garde or cutting-edge? I don't like the term avant-garde because the term actually means two things. There is the abstract avant-garde that seeks the new and is pro-futuristic. I see myself more of the camp that is progressive but still related to tradition; we are still linked and we have not thrown out the old.

How do you feel about the whole molecular movement? And how does your cuisine relate to it? The term is too narrow, the way it is used today... Look at the Spanish guys who are



researching and experimenting with ingredients, machines and all. Those guys are doing work that I can use eventually and I think that's great. I don't want to be the guy who's putting the next new thing on the market — whether it's a tool or a gel or a stabiliser — that's not my interest. These people are opening doors, and if I see that what's being done is something that I can integrate into what I am doing, I will use it. Where I am concerned, there are no boundaries. But I am not trying to replicate what they are doing. I think of my food as modern — but you can still be modern without the fancy machines and stabilisers.

Tell us about one of your modern dishes.

The shrimp jar, which I came up with in 1996. For someone who has never been to my restaurant and is trying it for the first time, it will still be in tune with everything else that I am doing today. It is not 'less' modern; it is based on the same idea and it still makes sense after these years.

How would you say your work has progressed over the years? It remains grounded in the same spirit, but I must say it has gained in precision.

From thinking about the dishes, to creating them, to cooking and repeating them every night and talking about them — which part of the process do you enjoy best? Repeating them every night is a necessity because that's the only way you can spread a culinary creation. At the end of the day, cooking is a way to communicate. I like the whole deal.

AD



Chris Salans' Caesar salad



Ryan Clift's chicken and chips

in Shanghai. 'You can just as easily use old technique to make a modern dish. Nothing is out of fashion if you do it properly. Modern cuisine is a feeling.' On the molecular/ progressive cuisine debate, he has this to say: 'There has always been a progressive cuisine and a traditional cuisine. It's a false war. Technology offers new possibilities and is interesting for everybody.'

So, what are these chefs cooking to wow their audience? 'I like to challenge people's expectations, to surprise and excite. They may find my food shocking at first, but once they let go of what a particular dish should taste like, they will understand, accept and enjoy the dish in front of them,' says Leung, who's also a trained engineer. He takes authentic Chinese dishes and gives them a twist, pairing Eastern flavours with Western techniques. His deconstructed mui choy kau yok, a classic Hokkien dish made with braised pork belly and pickled sweet cabbage, is a perfect example. 'I cook the braised pork with soy, blend it and put it through a fine mesh sieve. Then I mix it with egg to make a royal custard. For the cabbage, I infuse milk with cabbage and make it into air,' he explains.

Others are also keen on foams. 'I do foams a lot, but not with chemical additions. Sous-vide is a great passion of mine and I never stop learning with it,' says Salans, whose cuisine is more fusion than progressive per se, marked by a generous sprinkling of local ingredients such as rice husk, clove leaves, kluwek, tenggulun berries and andakima peppers. 'At Mozaic, we serve a Wagyu beef carpaccio marinated in an oil flavoured with rendang spices, served with a Parmesan foam and sautéed porcini mushroom — it's a winner with all of our customers,' he adds.

Clift, who is quick to tell you that 'everything I make in my kitchen is made from scratch', offers chicken and chips. The 'chips' in question are actually made of chicken. He purées chicken breast, puts it in a Pacojet and adds egg white. Then he smears the mixture onto a Silpat and dehydrates it for 24 hours. The chips are later fried in extremely hot oil for four seconds before being placed on a docket spike alongside smoked pieces of chicken that have been cooked in vanilla tea. The dish is then garnished with garlic and thyme yoghurt. At first bite, it is crisp like a regular chip, but the texture soon unfolds to become chewy and meaty, resembling, well... fried chicken meat.



Benjamin Lim's
smoking salmon

Pairet took an old technique and made it modern with his signature cuttlefish noodle dish, which uses up to 10 kg of cuttlefish, an ingredient that he believes illustrates 'the power of cooking'. After removing the outer layer of skin, he blends the centrepiece with coconut milk, then eliminates the excess air in a vacuum. Next, he poaches the mixture at around 50 degrees Celsius before pan-frying it on a plancha. The dish is then piped onto the plate to resemble a giant noodle that's akin to a classic meringue. 'It has amazing texture, which is the most important part of this dish,' says Pairet.

A dish called smoking salmon, which looks like a burning cigar, is Lim's creation. It has three different flavours using one main technique — dehydration. The cigar is made with a miso crystal, filled with Tasmanian salmon belly and chopped smoked balik salmon. 'The "ash" is made up of burnt sesame seeds, which are then made into black oil with charcoal tablets. Perilla, or shiso, seeds are dehydrated, blended up into a paste, then mixed and bound with a tapioca starch known as maltodextrin,' he explains.

But despite the techno-coloured dishes streaming out from their kitchens, these chefs unanimously agree that fundamental basics are still key to succeed in the kitchen. Each of them have had years of training in classic techniques. 'At the end of the day, you still need to have a base, which is very important,' states Leung. 'You must have that basic knowledge.'

The great restaurants of today have evolved from the ones they were five years ago. Likewise, they will not be the same ones five years from now,' says guru chef, Alain Ducasse.

Pearly words of wisdom, indeed. He's right, of course. As globalisation continues to plow full steam ahead, level differences and make the world an even smaller place where the exchange of ideas and technology transcend geographical boundaries, one can only begin to surmise what the future holds for the world of gastronomy, particularly in Asia. Despite the current backlash against molecular gastronomy, one thing is certain — it has changed the way we view the food on our plate irrevocably, and nudged open a window to untold possibilities. For now, we'll simply sit back and enjoy the delicious ride ahead. **a**

AD