

# Contents

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## FEATURES

### UNDER PRESSURE 16

Sous-vide emerges from the realm of large, industrial kitchens into restaurants across the country. *By Signe Langford*

### THE CHAIN GANG 23

The Canadian franchise industry remains a powerful club to belong to in uncertain economic times. *By Iris Benaroya*

### THE FRESHMAKERS 28

In just two and a half years, Mucho Burrito has grown to 17 stores across Canada selling fresh and tasty Mexican nosh. *By Brianne Binelli*

### THE 2009 FRANCHISE REPORT LISTINGS 31

### TO EACH HIS OWN 61

Foodservice operators are gauging the changing moods of tabletop design. *By Denise Deveau*

### A SOBER TALE 63

Over-serve a customer and it could be the last drink you pour. *By Iris Benaroya*

### THE SHOW MUST GO ON 66

CRFA Show product preview

## DEPARTMENTS

2 From the Editor

3 Masthead

5 FYI

13 The Pinnacle Awards

15 From the desk of Robert Carter

72 Chef's Corner:

Alexandre Gosselin,  
Le Local, Montreal





# Under Pressure

*Sous-vide emerges from the realm of large, industrial kitchens into restaurants across the country*

By SIGNE LANGFORD

Conventional wisdom suggests living your life in a vacuum is a bad idea, with bad consequences. Where emotional growth is concerned, it can foster a personality that's empty, uninspired and without character. In a word: bland. Fortunately, when chefs are preparing food in a vacuum, it's a much more flavourful experience.

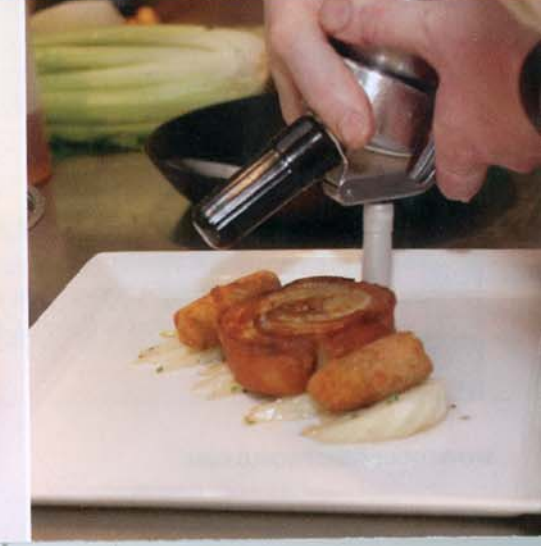
Sous-vide (French for 'under vacuum') is a cooking technique that's become increasingly popular in Canada's professional kitchens the past few years, from fine-dining and experimental eateries to family style restaurants and convenience-meal operations. The military, rail and airline companies, and institutions such as hospitals all prepare sous-vide meals en masse.

Here's how it works: ingredients for either a complete dish, a stew perhaps, or a single element — let's say an individual serving of salmon — are vacuum-sealed (where all oxygen is removed) in a specially designed, extra strong, three-ply plastic pouch. Then the pouch (or vac-pack) is either flash frozen, refrigerated and held, or it's cooked immediately. To cook or reheat, the pouch is placed in a timed, temperature-controlled, circulating water bath and slowly poached at low temperatures, ranging from 57°C (134°F) to 71.1°C (160°F).

**WORK IN PROGRESS:** At Globe Bistro in Toronto, chef Kevin McKenna expertly prepares his nose-to-tail suckling pig. The animal is deboned, separated, vac-packed and cooked at 72°C for 15 hours. McKenna serves it with fried brawn, braised fennel, truffled potato foam and marjoram jus.

Photography MAY TRUONG







**FASTFACT**

In 2009, the big news in sous-vide will come from Ottawa where a \$10-million-plus federal government sous-vide kitchen/production facility project is now under construction to feed various members of Parliament. The program is being spearheaded by Judson Simpson, executive chef of the House of Commons, and president of the CCF.

## Amateur Hour

When it comes to sous-vide cooking, even amateur chefs are getting in on the act. Marc Nicholas, a Toronto IT manager and home molecular gastronomist, is an enthusiastic proponent of the technique. "I've been experimenting with sous-vide for more than a year now and originally MacGyver'd my own setup using an old rice cooker and a PID (an industrial temperature control device). More recently, I've built a prototype of my own design for the home kitchen, and I am in the final stages of designing what could become a commercial prototype."

In Canada – outside of high-end restaurant kitchens and industrial foodservice operations – sous-vide is still relatively unknown. But in France, everyday people are purchasing small home-kitchen models, so Nicholas might be on to something. Clearly passionate about molecular gastronomy and sous-vide, he writes a blog on the subject, [gastronatics.typepad.com](http://gastronatics.typepad.com), and runs a sous-vide mailing list on Google.

Nicholas explains the key to the tenderness associated with sous-vide is being able to consistently hold food at the temperature required for breaking down the proteins and collegians – elements that each break down at specific temperatures. His advice for sous-vide-curious chefs: fish is the easiest food for the novice to tackle. Try bagging a piece of salmon with a thin slice of lemon, some good olive oil, and a sprig of dill, or pack some black cod with white miso, a dash of sake and a drop of water. But remember, this method will intensify flavours, so go easy on herbs, spices and salt. And since tenderness comes from the cooking times and temperatures, the old tenderizing marinade may well become a thing of the past and sous-vide the way of the future.

The process was first developed in France in the 1970s, as chefs searched for a way to cook foie gras perfectly, while ducking out on the costly shrinkage that results from searing or roasting. After much experimentation, they found that not only was their initial goal of cost-savings achieved – reducing losses from 40 per cent to 10 per cent – but the texture, or cellular structure of the foie, remained mostly unchanged. And maybe, more importantly, its flavour was enhanced.

In sous-vide, an ingredient's naturally occurring moisture is held in the bag as it cooks, thus preserving its aroma, flavour and nutritional value. Moreover, the natural flavours of a variety of different foods are heightened by the cooking process, so less seasoning is needed. All ingredients, including seasonings and liquids, are added at the time of vac-packing and don't need to sit for marinating, as the infusing occurs during the sous-vide process. And while a lovely bit of sous-vide butter-poached lobster is delectable, foods prepared without the addition of fats are equally tasty, making sous-vide a healthier option for diners, too.

For Pino Posteraro, chef/owner of Cioppino's Mediterranean Grill and Enoteca in Vancouver, it was love at first bite. He was introduced to sous-vide 15 years ago, by way of a tasty bit of veal tenderloin, while working in the kitchen of the Marina Mandarin hotel in Singapore. "It was pink all the way through and tender like I'd never had before." From that moment on, Posteraro has included the technique in his repertoire at kitchens in Asia, Europe and North America.

But don't assume the method is just some passing fancy – Posteraro believes sous-vide (and induction cooking) are the future. "The method is clean, green and safe," he says. And in addition to being a great way to prepare food that's tender and delicious, Posteraro is adamant sous-vide can be a vital tool for kitchen management, cost-control and expediting service. By having a walk-in well-stocked with individual portions of sous-vide-prepped dishes that only require reheating or searing à la minute, a kitchen can run more efficiently.

The chef does issue a word of caution when cooking at such low temperatures: "In Spain, for example, where fish comes off the boat and lands on the plate, cooking it at 65°C is fine. But in a country like Canada, where the food chain is so long, special care has to be taken to bring foods to safe, higher temperatures."

Joseph Castiglione had been following what chefs in France and the U.S. had been doing with sous-vide for years when he opened A Taste Above, in downtown Toronto in 2006. The self-described "venture capitalist/foodie" has worked closely with the chefs at Cuisine Solutions, a large sous-vide operation based in Alexandria, Va.

Castiglione is in the business of preparing gourmet sous-vide entrées and whole meals for the busy grab-and-go set. Large-scale recipes are prepped, vacuum-sealed, and brought up to 160°F (71.1°C) to kill any bacteria, before being quickly frozen. Once home, all the customer needs do is reheat it, right in the bag. But unlike boil-in-the-bag meals, nothing is ever boiled. Ingredients are always gently heated over a set amount of time – from 20 minutes for fish to 24 hours for lamb shank. In fact, one of Castiglione's bestsellers is his lamb shank with roasted garlic, onion and aromatics (\$16 per kilogram). "We cook it so long the meat just falls from the bone."

When asked about fears concerning the growth of anaerobic bacteria, and the fact that cooking food at temperatures too low may not eradicate them – fear, which led to a 2006 ban against sous-vide cooking in New York City – Castiglione isn't fazed. "As long as you use good, fresh product and handle it properly, there is no problem. In fact, when done correctly, the process can actually extend the (refrigerated) shelf-life of foods."

While he's cautious about cooking temperatures, Posteraro embraces sous-vide wholeheartedly for cooking and reheating to order, though he's not exactly bragging about it. One of his favourite dishes is his classic veal ossobuco alla Milanese with saffron risotto (\$35), but he sees no need to explain to customers how the food made its way to the table, and he eschews using 'sous-vide' descriptions on the menu.

Posteraro also believes you don't have to be a devoted disciple of molecular gastronomy to be into sous-vide. "I'm not a fan of molecular gastronomy at all. [But]



## Sous-Vide Superstars

Check out these dishes at a few of Canada's best restaurants

**Gio (New Brunswick):** Swordfish with bacon, Mediterranean polenta, beets, sous-vide leeks, baby zucchini, anchovies (\$28). Executive chef Ted Grant cooks the leeks at 60°C for up to two hours until they are 'fork-tender'.

**C5 (Toronto):** Chef de Cuisine Ted Corrado likes to sous-vide bananas. "It keeps them really white and retains the texture of a fresh banana on the inside." His chocolate brownie with miso-caramel sous-vide banana (\$12) is poached at 85°C for 15 minutes.

**Toqué (Montreal):** As part of his seven-course tasting menu (\$92), chef Normand Laprise cooks a leg of rabbit in kalamata olive brine sous-vide at 70°C for 14 hours.

**C Restaurant (Vancouver):** Chef de Cuisine Quang Dang poaches sablefish in olive oil sous-vide for eight minutes at 55°C, finishes it in the pan to crisp the skin and plates it with a watercress sauce and crispy polenta (\$37).

**Perigee (Toronto):** Sous-vide Alaskan black cod with baby carrots *à la grecque* over a cardamom emulsion with birch foam (\$36); and sous-vide Deer Valley venison loin and braised leeks over a black current jus with tagliatelle tossed with sautéed chanterelle mushrooms (\$52).

every movement in the arts is important because the spirit of creativity can fall asleep, and a new movement can awaken it. I believe Ferran Adrià is a genius. He's achieved what Paul Bocuse did earlier with nouvelle cuisine. If you go back every 40 or 50 years, there's someone who wakes up that creativity."

If sous-vide is part of a creative awakening, it's also practical and easy to master, unlike the meticulousness and showmanship of molecular gastronomy. "Though, there are many different factors to consider," says Posteraro. "But once you understand it, you can master it, and it can be very versatile."

Unfortunately, you'll need to make a significant investment if you want to do it right, because, like a fine bottle of Bordeaux, a sous-vide-equipped kitchen doesn't come cheap. "The most expensive part of the set-up is the vacuum packager, which costs around \$5,000," says Posteraro. "The circulator is about \$1,500, but the returns are great."

In the restaurant business, quick returns are essential — unless they involve a customer sending back some dangerously undercooked poultry, of course. But the effective use of sous-vide can enhance the efficiency of a kitchen with good portion control, streamlined service, and the extended shelf-life of foods. "If you blanch vegetables sous-vide, you can keep them for up to a week, no problem," Posteraro says. "They're fresh, flavourful and full of bright colour, because there's no oxygen."

Chef Kevin McKenna of Globe Bistro in Toronto is another practitioner of sous-vide, though he's equally serious about the products he uses in his kitchen. "I get my suckling pigs at eight to 10 weeks old," he says. "They're naturally raised, locally, from Cumbræ Farms."

For McKenna, it's important to teach his cooks to respect the entire animal and not let any of it go to waste, an ethos that's evident in the food he serves. "I start by breaking the pig down, de-boning it, and then I reserve the head to make headcheese — although people seem scared by that name, so we call it by the British term, brawn. I make it into



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## Class Action

As the prevalence of sous-vide grows in restaurant kitchens across the country, George Brown College in Toronto wants to ensure its graduating students are well-versed in the technique as well. To that end, faculty has worked alongside various industry professionals to develop new sous-vide curriculum for its culinary school. The group also partnered with the Guelph Food Technology Centre to ensure the food safety components of the sous-vide and low-temperature cooking program are properly observed. The first course is available to students this spring.

### QUICK TIP

According to G. Ian Jameson of the Toronto-based consultancy Cini-Little International, it's critical to follow correct food-handling procedures since the bacteria that cause deadly botulism poisoning in foods may grow in the absence of oxygen. Here are a few of his guidelines:

- Always use fresh ingredients from a trusted supplier and clean, new bags.
- Label all bags with the ingredients, date, time and temperature they were packaged; the period of time cooked; and the expiration date.
- Understand each food product's safe cooking temperature and its danger zones, as well as its proper internal temperature.
- Once food is removed from the bath it must be served, grilled, immersed in cold water or blast-chilled or frozen.

a terrine, slice it, bread it, deep-fry it, and use it to garnish the finished dish."

The legs are then par-roasted with marjoram and parsley, after which he pulls the meat — still rare, but crispy on the outside — from the bones, and stuffs the cavity with it. This is rolled and then cooked sous-vide for 15 hours at 72°C. Wasting nothing, the bones are used to make the jus.

McKenna concedes the dish is technically challenging and a lot of work, but well worth it. The flavour of the suckling pig — grassy, earthy — is incredibly enhanced by sous-vide. For him it's a way to marry his eat-local philosophy with new kitchen technology.

Even though sous-vide seems to have sprouted overnight, entrepreneurs like Lawrence Bangay have been experimenting diligently with the method without the fanfare given to celebrity chefs. A George Brown-trained chef who also holds a degree in Biomedical Sciences from the University of Toronto, Bangay founded Sous Vide Canada Limited in 1995 after his interest was piqued by a short newspaper article on the subject. Some 13 years later, Bangay, in partnership with King Cole Ducks, is steadily building the business from his 17,000-square-foot plant in Mississauga, Ont., extending its reach from local clients to those in the U.S., and with HACCP accreditation. "We're now able to export around the world," he says.

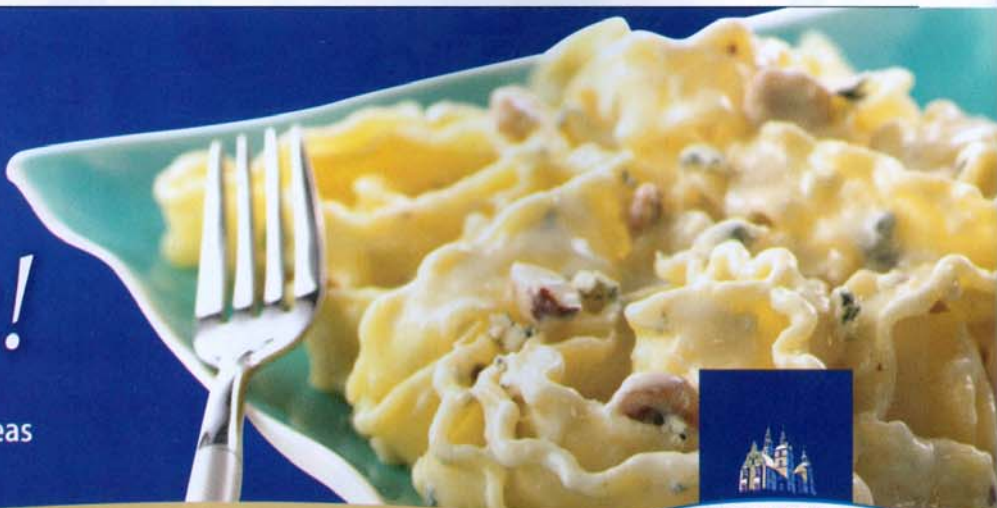
Bangay's impressive operation processes up to 1,100 duck breasts at a time in his 100-per-cent-humidity combi-ovens. Impressive, and quite an investment, as the set-up comes in at a cool \$75,000 for each oven, with the industrial vacuum sealers costing about \$25,000. And as his client base grows — Via1, Cara, Costco and PF Chang's in the U.S. to name a few — Bangay is making further investments, another \$80,000, in a continuous conveyor vacuum sealer.

Like Posteraro, Bangay believes sous-vide is the future. "I can take a gnarly piece of beef, cook it medium-rare and make it fork-tender — and I'm going to build four weeks of refrigerated shelf-life into the thing. If I freeze it, it's practically indefinite." ●

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