

Video killed the radio star "Performist" cuisine and the new way to cook

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Chef Sean Brock, a Willy Wonka-like creative force in the kitchen, displays a crispy eggless mastic meringue
Leslie McKellar

The new culinary guard has arrived in Charleston and they cook with lasers and liquid nitrogen, incinerating old traditions and ideas in the process. Their radical new style has spurred a critical re-examination of anything and everything associated with the preparation and serving of food, including its history and provenance. As revolutionary aesthetic and philosophic movements so often do, it even entertains the notion that such culinary legacies may not be worth saving.

You couldn't pick a better place to observe the unexpected insurrection than McCrady's, a 229-year-old tavern cobbled together in a mishmash of retooled spaces and transformed into a fine architectural gem, still lorded over by an ornate private dining room that once served dinner to George Washington. It is a masterpiece of tradition, now subsumed with the brilliance of Sean Brock, a madman with food, a savory Willy Wonka, a precise innovator of all things culinary. He prods and plots like a young Leonardo, a baby-faced whirlwind of ideas and notebooks filled with the scrawl of midnight musings and the leading edge of creative food.

Everything is different at McCrady's, turned on its head daily and shaken down, deconstructed and reconstructed from the bottom up and constantly tweaked in a midday, breakneck, experimental bop. Brock dances through the kitchen at a frenetic pace, his newest favorite kitchen spoon (he collects some pretty eclectic tools) dangling from his fingers. He works on dozens of ideas at one time. In fact, the whole kitchen does. Themes bounce around the room in a steady stream of reciprocal conversation. New thoughts become reality in seconds or are recorded on large whiteboards, saved for future experimentation, massaged into a subsequent burst of creativity. I've been in a lot of kitchens, but never one quite like this. Brock's resembles an artist's studio as much as a prep kitchen. But it's more than process that sets this world apart. The ingredients and the way they are treated sometimes look like, or perhaps even typify, a biotechnology lab and leave many old-school chefs agog.

Popularly termed "molecular gastronomy," this new movement fuses the worlds of chemistry, physics, and gastronomy with spectacular results, but no one seems to like that particular moniker. As Heston Blumenthal, a pioneer in the field whose restaurant outside London is currently considered one of the finest in the world serving such food, puts it: "Molecular makes it sound complicated ... and gastronomy makes it sound elitist." In reality, it is neither, and this is not the first time such dramatic shifts in the food world have taken place.

The 1970s and '80s saw haute cuisine similarly redefined. The revolution played out in the kitchens of France between the arbiters of the nouvelle and the defenders of the classique. Names like Troisgros, Bocuse, and Geurard rose to prominence as methods shifted to lighter, whimsical preparations and minute portions, often displayed on comically huge plates. The innovations of that era dramatically changed gastronomy, were filtered and assimilated into mainstream preparations, and continue to inform almost every chef in the Western world -- even those who now decry this new manipulation of ingredient and process.

They do so primarily because it threatens to undermine their traditional, conservative, and somewhat mythical understanding of "authentic" food and its preparation. The new "molecularists" - now-famous names like Ferran Adrià (El Bulli), Thomas Keller (The French Laundry and Per Se), and Wylie Dufresne (WD~50) -- use cutting-edge technology and an understanding of food at its basic chemical level to produce astonishing, sometimes surreal, effects with food. Esoteric additives,

mostly fancy plant derivatives, with names like maltodextrin and ultra-spse play havoc with traditional expectations of texture and taste.

Liquid nitrogen-fueled "anti-fryers" and super-heated "plancha" griddles that sear food at incredibly high temperatures produce delicate crusts and luscious texture. Vacuum-packaged ingredients, layered with aromatics, bathe in bubbling vats of hot water circulated through heated immersion pumps originally designed for medical research purposes (a technique known as "sous vide"). With temperatures controlled to within a tenth of a degree, these water baths allow for extreme precision and produce a streamlined, efficient kitchen operation with less waste -- not to mention some really tender, tasty food.

Something as simple as chicken noodle soup becomes fodder for reinterpretation. Ravioli might pop in the mouth, magically filled with liquid chicken stock. A bowl of vegetable broth ultimately reveals that the chicken noodles are actually made from gelatinized chicken. Or the "soup" itself may be gone altogether, dehydrated and reconstructed in piles of powders and gels which rehydrate and combine in the mouth to leave the diner with the lasting impression of a warm bowl of mom's finest.

Olive oil comes stretched like pulled sugar, liquid "dippin' dots" take on the flavors of spicy mustard and pork barbecue, foie gras swirls as a super-extracted tea in a prim glass, topped with a woolly tuft of roasted-peanut cotton candy. Such is the fantastic world in which chefs like these reside. The best of them, those who go beyond symbolic re-presentations, produce a post-postmodern spectacle best described using such philosophical terms as "performatist" to describe the cuisine.

On the ground floor, these ideas are already reaching into the upscale kitchens across town -- perhaps even your own. Over at Cordavi, Chefs David Szlam and Corey Elliott have begun adapting the new techniques. They regularly visit McCrady's, learning the latest of Brock's innovations, and scour the internet for information. They also experiment with methods themselves, but being chefs/owners of a small, often short-handed kitchen on a budget, their main focus involves incorporating the new gastronomy into proven method. The result is an approachable blend of classic contemporary American food with the most proven techniques of the avant-garde.

Seared pork belly is paired with a solidified gel of truffle and cauliflower puree and topped with a poached quail egg and dehydrated bacon powder to produce an astonishing rendition of "Bacon and Eggs." Rounds of beef filet are rubbed with black truffles before being vacuum-packed and slowly poached to a rare temperature, then seared on a hot grill. These recognizable, yet innovative dishes speak to the wider applications available to chefs everywhere, not just those with big budgets and fancy gadgets.

Places like Cordavi will help solidify the new cuisine beyond fad or fleeting trend. Their adoption and adaptation of the "runway fashion" down the street will push the effects of such experimentation toward the mainstream Charleston dining scene. A chef like Tyler Florence might even pick up some tips for Applebee's.

If you shop at Costco, this stuff has already perhaps graced your table. A company called Cuisine Solutions sells its sous vide braised short ribs and lamb shanks through the big-box retailer (flash frozen and packaged in bulk), enabling the busy cook to put a rather acceptable and meltingly tender entrée on the table in less than 15 minutes -- and for those worried about the aforementioned "food additives"? They're in every candy bar and lowfat ice cream on the shelf. This is not cloning; it's a creative, and delicious, application of modern science.

Brock, supported by the new owners of McCrady's, is not content with their present space or its ability to showcase the new aesthetic. They have begun to rethink the architecture itself and how it relates to presentation, employing new lighting to better showcase intricate forays into color and composition. The new year has brought even more change, including a total transformation of the popular wine bar into a space more adept at presenting such ultramodern food. It will entail not only a retooled environment, but a separate, experimental dining room dedicated to artistic platings of over 20 courses, allowing Brock a suitable environ for pushing the boundaries of modern gastronomy. Efforts such as these not only speak to the emerging impact and importance of serious

experimentation with food, but also of Charleston as a significant contender in the forging of a new cuisine.