

MOLECULAR GASTRONOMY: THE FAT DUCK

Globe Life

The champion of British haute cuisine; Snail porridge and bacon-and-egg ice cream have put Heston Blumenthal at the top of the food chain

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CHICAGO -- There is a new item on the menu at the Fat Duck restaurant in England that looks like it could have been stolen from an interactive exhibit at the London Aquarium.

It's called Sound of the Sea, and here is what it looks like: a blob of white foam lapping up against grey beach sand; to the left of the main plate, just above the bread dish, is a seashell containing an iPod digital music player, its familiar white earphone cords strung out on the table like tentacles.

The "sea" in this multimedia trompe l'oeil is a frothed-up blend of bivalve juice, oysters, cockles, razor clams and three types of seaweed. The "sand" is made from eel parts, anchovies and Japanese breadcrumbs that have been dissolved in fish oil, then desiccated into a powder with a chemical called tapioca maltodextrin.

Before tucking in, the diner is instructed by the waiter to don the earphones, which are tuned in to a soundtrack of seagulls squawking and waves crashing against the shore.

Welcome to the science-fusion cuisine of Heston Blumenthal, one of the world's top-ranked chefs and a leading exponent of so-called molecular gastronomy.

"You know it's food, but it's amazing the impact it has," said Mr. Blumenthal, whose previous hits include "snail porridge" and "bacon-and-egg ice cream," the latter scrambled and frozen at the table in a smoky cloud of liquid nitrogen at -196 C.

Impact, indeed. Mr. Blumenthal added that a month ago, a mother and daughter broke down crying during the Sound of the Sea because it brought back memories of their recently departed husband and father, respectively, a onetime sailor who had wanted to eat at the Fat Duck but never got the chance. The restaurant even burned a copy of the sea sounds onto a CD – at their request – to play at the man's funeral.

With reservations at the 46-seat, Michelin three-star establishment harder to come by than a private box at the Rugby World Cup, even the bereaved, apparently, don't give up their place in line easily. Not even at \$250 for an 18-course tasting menu.

"Restaurants are a bit like films in that sometimes you want to see a comedy, sometimes you want to see action, sometimes a drama," Mr. Blumenthal told me recently over watery hotel coffee in Chicago, where I met him before I flew to England to eat at his restaurant.

Located in the village of Bray in Berkshire, 40 minutes west of London, the Fat Duck was last month rated best restaurant in England in the first top-40 ranking by the country's fine-dining bible, Good Food Guide. In 2005, Restaurant magazine called it the best restaurant in the world.

Mr. Blumenthal's meticulously researched recipes, codified for the masses in his Sunday Times newspaper columns, are the stuff of instant legend. Internet bloggers debate his dispatches with cult-like zeal. A typical example was the chef's recent declaration that using a cup of vodka instead of water in the batter is the secret to perfectly golden fish and chips.

Mr. Blumenthal's dramatic rise is an unlikely one for a 41-year-old former office-equipment repo man who, apart from two weeks working in a professional kitchen, is a self-taught cook. He launched the Fat Duck in 1995, after selling his home and borrowing some money from his parents. He converted a 16th-century stone building that had been a pub for 350 years, most recently known as the Bell, into what he thought might rate as a decent local bistro.

The first task was to find a less generic-sounding name than the Bell. "What I was looking for was actually something which is British, had a pub connotation but also had slightly gastronomic connotations," he said.

Inspired by the writings of Harold McGee, author of the science-oriented text *On Food and Cooking*, he quickly added new techniques to his repertoire. Four years after it opened, the Fat Duck earned its first Michelin star, a remarkable achievement for a place that at that time had an outhouse for a bathroom and to this day has a ceiling and wooden beams that, for a person of my 6-foot-2 frame, add special meaning to the word "duck."

"When it rained, we had to lean an umbrella up against the door so people could go to the toilet," Mr. Blumenthal said. "It took a long time for that to sink in, that we got a star with an outside loo."

Perhaps more bizarre, the tiny stone building, erected in 1530, has just one door. All staff, equipment and supplies must come in through the main entrance, often yielding awkwardly to the Prada-clad patrons making their way out.

"We've got 55 staff now and we do 40 to 45 customers," Mr. Blumenthal said. "Had I known that, there's no way in a million years I would have gone for that building."

Mr. Blumenthal's second cookbook, *In Search of Perfection*, has been released to accompany a seven-part BBC series of the same name that began airing this month on Food Network Canada.

The idea is to deconstruct and rejuvenate British favourites, such as bangers and mash, and Continental-inspired dishes such as spaghetti bolognese, with the help of flavour spectrometers, centrifuges and the like.

It makes for riveting television, if not exactly easy-to-reproduce recipes. In one memorable scene, Mr. Blumenthal, who has the virile build of a rugby player, dons a lab coat and safety goggles to pound away at blocks of dry ice with a rolling pin to whip up flash-frozen, ultra-smooth ice cream for his salt-topped treacle tart.

But the series is also something of an artist's manifesto. Other more famous British cooks, such as Jamie Oliver and Nigella Lawson, may have catapulted England's profile in the food world, but they are populists tweaking and adapting classic recipes for time-strapped home cooks. **Gordon Ramsay**, England's most internationally renowned chef of the past decade, who operates an eponymous three-star restaurant in London, is at heart a French cook. In contrast, Mr. Blumenthal is the new-paradigm revolutionary, a hard-boiled scientific empiricist in a culinary world of romantic Luddites. His mission: to forge what some might consider an oxymoron, British haute cuisine.

"He is one of the people who have understood the balance of taste and creativity, and also who engages in research as well," Ferran Adria, Spain's celebrated molecular-gastronomy pioneer, told me. "England would never be able to repay Heston for what he has done for the country in the world of gastronomy."

Mr. Blumenthal's next project is to create a second tasting menu for the Fat Duck based on centuries-old British dishes, which he is developing with two historians from Hampton Court Palace, a historic residence of the British Royals. Among them: chocolate wine, lemon salad, lobster loaves and – familiar to Harry Potter fans – buttered beer.

"It's his thirst for knowledge and his natural curiosity which drives him to really drill down to the definition of food, which few chefs have done," said Thomas Keller of California's French Laundry, considered by many to be the greatest restaurant in the United States.

Molecular gastronomy has its share of critics, who argue it places too much emphasis on technique at the expense of flavour. And Mr. Blumenthal himself admits to some blunders, such as savoury candy floss, which he abandoned after years of trying.

Another catastrophe was hot ice cream, made with methyl cellulose, a compound that has the unusual property of setting when it's hot and melting when it cools. It worked from a technical standpoint, he says, but it didn't taste refreshing the way ice cream is supposed to. "Unless there are ice crystals in there, it doesn't feel like ice cream. It's a play on a name and that's it."

But Mr. Blumenthal is convinced molecular cuisine is here to stay. Bread, he likes to point out, is "technically a foam;" it's just made with yeast rather than nitrous oxide, the gas used to create *Sound of the Sea*.

"If you don't want to use modern technology, then you should cook over a fire."

Illustration

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