

BATH TIME

The modern French method for vacuum packing ingredients and cooking them in water baths has been embraced widely by the nation's top chefs over the past few years, but what is it about sous-vide cooking that gets people so hot under the collar? Rosie Birkett reports.

Sous vide cooking divides opinion. Fay Maschler has referred to it as 'boil in the bag' cooking, while Heston Blumenthal swears by it – using the gentle, low-temperature water bath method to cook a large percentage of the ingredients at his three Michelin-starred Fat Duck restaurant in Bray. While many high-end chefs favour its consistency and low temperatures as a means of maintaining the integrity of ingredients; others argue that it can take the skill and soul out of cooking, and sometimes distance the diner from the kitchen.

Literally translating from the French as 'under vacuum', sous vide is the method whereby chefs vacuum pack ingredients in plastic bags (often with the addition of butter and aromatics) and then cook them at low, set temperatures in temperature-maintained water baths. There are two main ways of using the method, for direct cooking, which is when a customer is cooked a sous vide dish there and then by the chef; and indirect cooking, which is when the chef has prepared an ingredient, cooked it (often slowly, over a long period), chilled it and then reheats it in the water bath for the customer's order.

Discovered at the three-Michelin starred Troigros restaurant in Roanne, France in the 1970s as a way to preserve the texture and fat of foie gras during cooking, it has more recently, with the help of chefs like Blumenthal and Thomas Keller (who released a cookbook 'Under Pressure: Cooking Sous Vide' in 2008), been adopted widely across the world's top restaurants. Edmund Wong, executive chef of the Bellagio hotel in Las Vegas, uses the method frequently when cooking, including for the fillet of beef in his surf and turf dish. "We cook using the sous vide method in order to enhance flavour, consistency and productivity," he says. "It also allows us greater



flexibility which in turn lets us be more creative."

Wayne Edwards from The Food People agrees, "sous vide has enhanced chefs creativity by allowing them to push the boundaries with flavours and textures whilst delivering increased precision and consistency in the kitchen ensuring against over and under cooked dishes as well as giving the chef greater control over heat." It is this ability to induce different flavours and textures from familiar ingredients that is appealing to creative chefs, "they can serve medium rare, moist portions which are also tender or eggs yolks where the yolk is actually set more than the white," says Wayne.

Antonin Bonnet, head chef of London's Greenhouse restaurant, also favours the method for its consistency. "We use it mainly to cook meat or fish or to do some infusions, to avoid oxidation," he says. "We use it for many different things, to make sure the texture is perfect, because it's a great way to keep consistency. There are lots of advantages to it if it's not abused and lately we've been doing veal cheeks slow cooked for 36 hours, and they're absolutely beautiful. You can cut them with a spoon; they're delicate and haven't lost any of their flavour."

"Sous vide is fantastic if you use it properly," agrees Claude Bosi, chef proprietor of London's

Hibiscus restaurant, who uses it mainly for braising meats like pork and lamb belly that need a long time for the cooking. "It's a great method for consistency and if you get the weight right when you put it in the bag, then the customer who comes on the Tuesday will have the same quality as the one who comes on Thursday – whether the chef is tired or not. It means a bit less pressure for the service."

This is a common attraction with the technique, which leaves less to chance and performance on the day than other methods and also creates less heat in the kitchen than induction hobs or gas. But as Bonnet points out, there is more work to do during the mise en place. "The pressure is on a different level," he says. "There is more preparation because you get everything prepped before hand, so it takes a different sort of organisation – but it certainly makes life easier during service."

On paper, sous vide is in danger of sounding a bit like autopilot cooking: weigh ingredient to establish allotted cooking time and temperature; vacuum pack ingredient; cook ingredient in water bath for said allotted time – at said allotted temperature: serve. It seems somehow distanced from the labour-intensive skill often associated with the best cuisine. But Bonnet insists that "it's not as simple as it sounds," and he tends to take extra steps to heighten the flavour of sous vide meat, by searing it off first and making a brazing jus to glaze it with. "You need to finish off the meat in the proper way to make it perfect," he says. For Bosi too, serving the ingredient straight from the bag is a no-no. "At Hibiscus everything cooked in the sous vide bag is finished on the plancha," he says. "We don't serve anything just from the bag because it's missing a bit of flavour – it's missing out on that roasting taste."

Pied à Terre's head chef Shane Osborn uses it to cook chicken oysters which he serves with pan fried scallops, butternut squash and autumn truffle but for him it's a method that should be used as a 'clever tool' for chefs, rather than a constant cooking style. "It's very consistent and very concise and you know it's going to be perfectly cooked after the allotted time," he says. "But I believe it's still important to teach young chefs about other classic methods like pan-cooking fish and cracking a roast chicken. I want my chefs to know the way a piece of meat should feel when it's cooked instead of working off timer and a thermometer. It can distance the chef from the cooking, and pan-cooking and roasting is more difficult to master and shows more skill."

Bonnet agrees that there is a time and place for sous vide. "It is not applicable to all types of ingredients and we don't use it for everything," he says. "For me, when I roast a chicken I roast a chicken – I can't do that sous vide, it's the same with a big joint or meat on the bone, but it's common sense for chefs to apply sous vide where it's useful to them and keep classic cooking for the other bits."

And it doesn't come cheap. In order to use the technique properly, kitchens need to be fitted out with the right kit – namely a water bath (which starts at £495) and a vacuum packing machine (which will set you back just short of £2000) – all of which need to be scrupulously clean in order to ensure that bacterial contamination (which is a higher risk because of the lower temperatures chefs employ in sous vide) does not occur.

But as Melvin Dickson, from supplier Clifton Food Range, points out the equipment can be seen as an investment when you consider that initial outlay can be recovered in savings. "Sous vide can give you

significant savings," he explains. "It gives greater yield from the product – because the meat doesn't shrink, it has lower energy running costs than gas and electric and it's very accurate in terms of portion control. The fact that portions can be prepared in advance and then regenerated means that chefs aren't second guessing and don't waste anything."

"There is no shrinkage, so you can start with a smaller piece of meat. Normally you'd start with a 220g and it would shrink to 180g but with sous vide what you cook is what you get. It's also energy efficient. A typical long cook of about 14 hours will cost less than £2 in energy, whereas with gas or electricity it would be much more. It also helps take the heat and stress out of kitchens and, apart from the operational benefits, the flavours are very good."

As well as these obvious yield savings Wayne Edwards points out the commercial benefits, "sous vide extends shelf life and reduces labour costs allowing chefs to prepare more ahead of service," he states. "It doesn't replace craft and skills but it allows chefs to develop their own more personal expression of their imagination and tastes."

More information on sous vide cooking, including temperatures, pricing and recipe suggestions can be found on:

www.cliftonfoodrange.co.uk/sousvide.htm and www.thefoodpeople.co.uk

Reference books:
Under Pressure: Cooking Sous Vide by Thomas Keller
Sous Vide Cuisine by Joan Roca and Salvador Brugués