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## WORD OF MOUTH

The Sun's Mia Stainsby takes a bite out of Vancouver

### Modernist cuisine

January 31, 2012. 5:10 pm • Section: Word of Mouth

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(Glass Potato Chip at Diva at The Met)

BY Mia Stainsby

Vancouver Sun

Posted by:  
**Mia Stainsby**

When Hamid Salimian, Diva at the Met chef, told me he makes glass-like potato chips, I thought, yeah, yeah, show me.

Well, he did, by email. When I first saw his step-by-step photos I thought the photo of the end product amber-hued candy that he'd included by mistake. And I thought the photo of frying potato skins were his 'glass chips' and wasn't impressed.

Now that I've been set straight, I am impressed. Totally. [See method and recipe here.](#)

The glass potato chip is served with chives, crème fraiche and truffles as an amuse bouche on the Diva tasting menu.

### WORD OF MOUTH

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Salimian is one of the city's modernist chefs, incorporating innovative and bold techniques into dishes on the regular and tasting menu. He says about 20 per cent of the menu, usually elements on a dish, have utilized a modernist technique.

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chefs that make them special.

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Diva at the Met's amuse bouche with grated truffles, glass potato chip on stone

"All we want is to make tastier food," he says. "We don't want to scare people. It's all about flavour and texture and putting smiles on people's faces." Until he replaces his broken-down cotton candy machine, though, he can't make his smile-inducing foie gras or bacon cotton candy.

He and Jefferson Alvarez of Fraiche restaurant in West Vancouver are the most prominent local chefs showcasing modernist methods but most high-end chefs are employing these techniques to some degree. We've all seen the foams and froths which are stabilized with lecithin or the 'caviar' and 'pearls' made with flavourful liquids, gelled into spheres with sodium alginate (gels) and calcium chloride (creates skin around droplets of liquid).

DC Duby Wild Sweets, of Richmond, has been using modernist techniques with their chocolate products and desserts for about a decade and sells some of the products (for spherification, densifying, emulsifying and gelling) online ([www.dcduby.com](http://www.dcduby.com)).

Customers are home cooks, chefs and mixologists, co-owner Dominique Duby says. Many local chefs employ modern cooking techniques as a matter of course and without fanfare. "It's got to do with ego – they don't want people to think they're copying," he says.

In many cases, the methods save time and money. "You can thicken sauces, for example, with xanthan gum faster than reducing it and without losing volume and without cooking if you don't want heat. Some chefs buy sodium alginate to thicken fruit coulis. At a hotel banquet, the desserts can be plated with this coulis ahead of time and it will hold its shape and stay shiny, the coulis doesn't have to be cooked to thicken or plated at the last minute. Methylcellulose, a 'reversible' emulsifier, is great for making fruit pies, he says. It gels the liquid when hot so there's no liquid bubbling over and soggy pastry. When it cools down, it becomes a little runnier.

"Chefs see the value of these modern ingredients and how it can make life easier," says Duby.

Modernist cooking, he says, is about stepping away from the confines of tradition. "We always say, everything works until it doesn't. If it hasn't been done, it doesn't mean it can't be done."

One 'wild sweet' he and wife Cindy developed for a cookbook is the microwaved sponge cake. "It's fantastic. It looks like coral. The microwave heats up the centre and steam creates pockets and holes and membranous.



(DC Duby's coral sponge cake with mango and raspberry 'coulis')

For Salimian, these modern techniques go beyond the practical. He creates novel elements, like the glass potato chips. His current menu also features puffed foie gras lightening the texture without diluting the flavour. The process involves vacuum sealing with aromatics and seasoning, removing the seasonings and resealing, then cooking in a hot water bath. The melted fat is strained, blended and placed in a whipping cream gun and dispensed, like whipped cream.

Another dish includes truffle papparadelle – noodles made from a paste made of truffles, leek, shallots, thyme, sherry and madeira. The paste is gelled, then cut into pasta ribbons and served with pork hock stock and finished with truffle water, madeira, an egg yolk cooked at 63 C and sliced truffles. It's Salimian's way of intensifying the truffle flavour because he feels a flour and egg dough would dilute

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the truffle experience.

At Fraiche, Alvarez (who has cooked at two leading edge kitchens – Arzak and Mugaritz in San Sebastian, Spain) sees modern techniques as a continuum of traditional methods. “Making mayonnaise and hollandaise sauce is molecular gastronomy,” he says. In his restaurant kitchen, you will find soy lecithin, xanthan gum, arabic gum for thickening and emulsifying. He uses maltodextrin to make powders from oily ingredients like chorizo and olive oil itself. “It absorbs the oil and dries it up,” he says.

“In our latest experiment, we had found the collagen in sturgeon bone very good for thickening sauces. It’s not fishy at all,” he says. “We do a lot of experimenting and never stop creating.”

He took note of the way the crisp, airy Asian shrimp crackers are made using tapioca powder, infused with flavour. “We do our own crackers, infused with saffron. We’ve also added dehydrated berries, lemon zest. We use it to garnish or serve with hors d’oeuvres.”

He took a page from Mugaritz restaurant where he cooks on his vacations and makes gnocchi with arrowroot flour, truffles and pecorino cheese. “The arrowroot makes it creamy, not chewy at all. We reheat the gnocchi under the salamander and add a hot broth,” he says.

He employs his trusty Thermomix (cooks, cools, chops, all in machine) to make a bed of “soil” for one of his dishes, using olive oil and black olive powder and bread crumbs. “It looks like a garden,” he says.

“People come here for experiences they’ve never had before and we work every day at it. Cooks are willing to come in early to work at something, even on their days off because they want to learn. They are free to be creative and learn without getting yelled at. Every now and then, we try too hard and it doesn’t work,” he says. “A foodie city like Vancouver has been waiting for this.”

#### MODERNIST CUISINE IN PERSPECTIVE

Molecular gastronomy. Who but a dweeb would have come up with such a term? Well, it was actually a physicist and a chemist, back in 1992, in an application for research funding on the science of cooking.

The term came to refer to experimental, cooking techniques developed in kitchen labs of some of the world’s most revered, avant garde chefs including Ferran Adria of El Bulli and Heston Blumenthal of Fat Duck.

Blumenthal even engaged sound, equipping diners with an iPod to eat his Sound of the Sea dish with “sand,” seaweeds and seafoods; his snail porridge became a foodie sensation.

And then, the movement began to embarrass its early practitioners as ambitious young chefs began emulating badly them, like kids with new chemistry sets. Chefs played with liquid nitrogen (to flash freeze), maltodextrin (to turn high-fat ingredients into powder), lecithin (to stabilize foam), hydrocolloid substances (to gel and thicken and make lovely little “caviar” beads), water baths (for cooking sous vide), “deconstructing” familiar dishes, using anti-griddles (for cooking and freezing with the same appliance) and edible printed paper as food. They made sweet what was savoury and made savoury what was sweet.

They were breaking the number one rule of traditional chefdom, which was to follow rules like the French “king of chefs,” Auguste Escoffier, codified in the early part of the last century.

In 2006, Blumenthal, Adria, and Thomas Keller (of the French Laundry) wrote an open letter in The Times (London), divorcing themselves from the cult of molecular gastronomy – a “we do not pursue novelty for its own sake” declaration.

However, when the world’s top-rung restaurants (annointed annually as the “50 best” in the world in Restaurant Magazine) are known for their avant garde techniques, these techniques aren’t going to be banished any time soon. Adding more fuel to the fire is Nathan Myhrvold’s The Modernist Cuisine, published last year, the mother of all bibles for kitchen science and ultra-modern cookery. In an effort to normalize their methods, Blumenthal, Adria and Keller simply called it “our cooking” and “a new approach to cooking.”

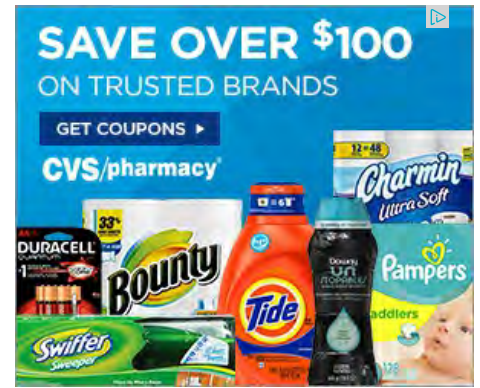
Hamid Salimian, Diva at the Met chef, incorporates some of these modern techniques as a matter of course, and sometimes, for the wow! “Ten years ago, this was new and exciting,” Salimian says. “Chefs were turning peas into liquid ravioli, foie gras into powder. Then time passed and it’s become another element of cooking. It’s changed the way chefs think. It’s just modern cuisine.” He tells his chefs to read authors like Harold McGee and Herve This, who wrote about the science of cooking, as they explain what happens to food in the process of cooking.

At Northwest Culinary Academy in Vancouver, one of the owners, Tony Mnichiello, says students are definitely intrigued and interested in modernist cooking, especially the young guys. “I have two camps now. I have the young male modernists and slightly more mature females who want to do what grandmas used to do, to get their hands dirty in the garden, to use the mortar and pestle, to do artisan cooking.” He doesn’t like the use of plastics (in sous vide) nor chemicals used to transform ingredients.

“Of course, if you look at [Restaurant Magazine] awards, the young chefs know if they don’t do any of this [modern] stuff, they’re not going to get awards. When The Modernist Cuisine was published, the guys went crazy for it. The women, in general, did not.”

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Mnichiello is not a huge fan of modernist cuisine but acknowledges it's here to stay. "I see that cooks always need something to get excited about because it's such a hard industry."

At Northwest, he says, they've upped "molecular" classes from one to two days and incorporate ideas throughout the term. "I had a student who made balsamic vinegar pearls last term but he was bright and advanced in how to apply these techniques. Modernist cuisine has produced a lot of failed cooking and Ferran [Adria] will be the first to admit that. At the same time, it can be mind-blowing."

Mnichiello had a meal last year at Arzak in San Sebastian, Spain, a three Michelin-starred restaurant known for its innovative techniques, and loved it. "The chef is the greatest I'll ever meet. The food never said it was all about her. It was humble but incredible. There was something from the past and something contemporary on every dish."

Looking back to this era of experimenting and inventing, the new techniques (some of them have been around for a long time in the food processing industry) will be but a continuum in the world of cooking. When you think of it, leavening with baking powder, aerating egg whites and making frozen ice cream were revolutionary at one time, as was the concept of blenders and food processors.

The most magical cooking I witnessed was at an open-air restaurant in Vietnam in a small town along the Mekong delta. A cook at one of the stations placed rice balls into hot oil in a wok and, with just a wire mesh strainer for a tool, twirled them until they inflated into perfect crisp, golden balloons, both small and large. Wonder if Heston could do that?

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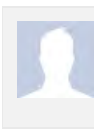
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