

Chefs high on low-temperature cooking's ability to streamline kitchen operations during service

BY JAMES SCARPA

Some chefs have moved beyond the age-old culinary practices of cooking meats directly over fire or in smoking-hot sauté pans. Instead, they favor lengthy low-temperature cooking with gear like cook-and-hold ovens, combi oven-steamers and immersion circulators, which they say yield moister, tastier and tenderer proteins.

In addition to improving the eating qualities of meats and seafood, low-temperature cooking can reduce labor needs and lead to smoother kitchen operations because much of the cooking can be done outside of meal periods, lessening the scramble at service time.

The use of low-and-slow cooking is quite a departure from the traditional way kitchens have been run, chefs say.

"If you were forced to get food out quickly and all you had was a sauté pan and an oven, you had to cook at really high heat because there was no other way," said Tony Maws, chef-owner of Craigie Street Bistrot in Cambridge, Mass. "But high heat seizes muscles and overcooks the outside of proteins pretty substantially to get the internal temperature you want."

By comparison, low-temp methods aren't nearly as drastic, he said, and "you don't have that gray ring of dry, overcooked meat."

At Craigie Street, "almost all" of the menu is produced at relatively low temperatures, Maws said, mostly sous vide-style with vacuum-sealed bags of food in thermal circulators, but Craigie Street also resorts to some olive oil poaching in cast-iron vessels on the range. High heat is reserved for briefly coloring and flavoring items before or after the low-temp process.

Maws said the new kitchen he is planning would not have conventional ovens, just cook-and-hold units, combis, circulators and a French top.

"It won't take nearly the amount of space that you once would need," he said.

About half of the menu at The Greenbrier Sporting Club in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., is low-temp in nature, prepared by sous vide, reported Jim Butchart, executive chef of DPS Club Management, which runs the private club on the grounds of The Greenbrier resort. However, in this operation, the tools of choice are combi oven-steamers. The club has a total of three, including one double unit.

"The biggest benefit as a chef is having peace of mind that a lot of the serious preparation and imparting of flavor can be done ahead of time," Butchart said.

For example, when the club's bakeshop finishes its work, its combi is loaded with 15-hour short ribs, leaving the kitchen combi free at dinner. For his Moroccan Spiced Venison Loin, Butchart sets the combi at 141 degrees Fahrenheit and vacuum-seals the loin in a bag with the temperature probe in place. The alarm sounds when the meat reaches an internal temperature of 117 degrees Fahrenheit.

The loin is chilled in ice water, portioned and resealed in sous vide bags, which are heated in the circulator bath at service, and browned in a pan to the guest's desired doneness.

Butchart prefers the combi for cooking sous vide because of its larger batch sizes. It holds six 2-inch-deep full-sized hotel pans, much more food than can fit in a circulator bath.

At the newly opened Elettaria restaurant in New York City, cooking pigs' trotters for 12 hours at 170 degrees Fahrenheit produces Crispy Pigs Feet, an example of chef and co-owner Akhtar Nawab's "spice-driven American cuisine."

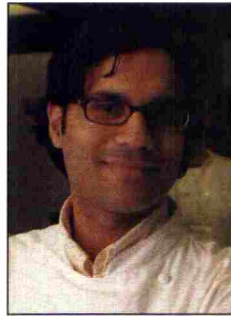
"The real benefit of the unit is that I know it's going to cook gently at a constant temperature," Nawab said. "The other thing is that I know I'm going to get nearly 100-percent yield from the trotters, which is critical."

The slow cooking leaves the skin of the



trotters intact. Then Nawab rolls the meat in the skin after removing the fat and bone and flavoring the meat with spices and herbs, prior to a final roasting.

“The longer some of these things cook, the better they taste,” Nawab said. “That’s my real key.” ■



Akhtar Nawab