

By Deanne Moskowitz

# something up your sleeve

## TECHNIQUES FOR MAKING KITCHEN MAGIC

**W**hen a carton of fennel enters Daniel Capra's kitchen, the executive chef of Paula LeDuc Fine Catering, San Francisco, doesn't just roast the bulbs or use them raw, he candies some and turns the fronds into powder.

Today's economy demands that every dollar spent be accounted for, so Capra constantly asks himself: "How many techniques can I employ to use every bit or extend the shelf life?"

There are lots of options: From headline-making, avant-garde methods to traditional techniques, back on the front burner.

Porcini mushroom tortellini with truffle essence and fried sage from Thomas Preti Caterers







**Above:** Main Event Caterers' bacon wrapped duck breast stuffed with apple  
**Below:** Sesame crusted salmon with forbidden rice from Paula LeDuc Fine Catering



### Old Tricks

One ramification of the recession is the pervasiveness of braising. It's ideal for producing the comforting dishes people crave now and for tenderizing tougher cuts of meat, which have gained acceptance because they're cheaper.

Margaret Chisholm, executive chef, Culinary Capers Catering, Vancouver, B.C., Canada, expects to sell more chicken cacciatore than ever this year. She's lengthening the seasonal life of chicken braises, too, sometimes freshening them with the addition of fruit. In order to control costs, thighs are replacing breasts in braises and on the grill.

On the buffet, Chisholm often swaps grilled flat iron steak (aka top blade steak) for once-essential tenderloin. One-third the cost, the flat iron is "tender and very delicious," adapting perfectly to all her best-selling tenderloin recipes.

At Main Event Caterers, Arlington, Va., tenderloin and chateaubriand represent only about 35 percent of event entrees now, down from 50 percent, says Joel Thevoz, chef/owner. Braised short rib, done with an Asian glaze, is one of his many successful substitutions.

Jerry Helminski, executive chef at the Hotel Galvez, a Wyndham Historic Hotel, Galveston Island, Texas, is responding to increasing demands for top-notch dinners at down-to-earth prices. Among the mix of techniques he employs in every meal, he likes braising and slow roasting for dressing up affordable cuts like short ribs and brisket. Wrapping redfish, an inexpensive regional favorite, around braised bone-in short rib, he roasts it, and serves it in Creole-style tomato sauce.

### Flavor Cards

Generally accepted in the food world now as the fifth taste, umami has been garnering attention lately from top restaurant chefs, packaged-goods manufacturers, and the press. Japanese for deliciousness, the word connotes a certain savory or meaty quality, neither salty, sweet, sour nor bitter. Convinced that most clients don't know the term yet but can probably taste the difference, some catering chefs are ramping up recipes with umami-rich ingredients (among them mushrooms, aged cheeses, and Asian sauces) and using umami-enhancing methods, including ageing, curing, fermenting, pickling and smoking.

At Thomas Preti Caterers, New York City, Ron Rando, executive chef, is a master



Crab cakes topped with asparagus royale with stone-ground mustard and lemon from Culinary Capers Catering

of umami punch. He gives duck legs a rub of salt, sugar, Szechuan peppercorns and lemon grass and lets it set for two days, before searing, and roasting them in their own fat at 275 degrees for six or seven hours. Combining the resulting confit with other umami ingredients, he produces such potent dishes as lasagna stacks, alternating pasta rounds and layers of sautéed cabbage, scallions, shiitakes, and soy sauce, and finished with duck stock reduction.

Other umami-rich preparations from Rando include: Porcini mushroom tortellini topped with concentrated mushroom broth, heavy cream, fresh porcinis, and fried sage; and smoked Divers scallops paired with pickled watermelon and pancetta crisp.

Helminski often grills using smoking papers, similar to cooking on a wooden plank but with paper-thin wood that can be wrapped around the food, permitting faster cooking and imparting subtler smokiness. He features it at the "non-smoker's smoking section," a playful interactive outdoor station, where guests watch their selections smoked on the spot.

Chisholm expects flavored popcorn wrapped in a paper cone to be a hors

d'oeuvre hit this summer. It's affordable, comforting and playful, with a hint of luxury in its sophisticated flavors including umami-heady tomato and manchego cheese and truffle and parmesan.

### Disappearing Acts

Healthfulness is becoming a bigger issue in menu planning, so chefs are turning to techniques that help their meals measure up in terms of nutrition and taste.

The spa at Hotel Galvez serves both serious dieters and weekend wedding guests who want to be pampered, so Helminski satisfies everyone with healthy but hardly stringent cuisine. He features fresh, organic ingredients; reduces fat but plumps up flavor with extra spices, and goes heavy on grains and vegetables but light on proteins. His "New Fashioned Chicken Soup," overflowing with vegetables not broth, stars surprisingly low-calorie, deep-fried rice noodles.

His parchment-pouch method is popular at the spa and for small catered dinners. Packaged with tomatoes, potatoes, preserved lemons, olives, parsley, and a touch of olive oil, sea bass or grouper roasted in parchment produces its own delicious,

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diet-friendly sauce.

Married to a Moroccan woman, Helminski appreciates the low-fat roasting and braising methods of African cuisine, which rely on vegetables, vegetable stocks, fruits, and an array of spices for flavor, instead of fatty sauces and excessive salt. Among his African-inspired creations is piquant roasted chicken with preserved lemons and olives, cinnamon, saffron, garlic, and ginger.

Rando sometimes draws from ethnic cuisines to add excitement to health-conscious menus. At a dinner designed to help diabetic women spice up their home cooking, he delighted them with Thai-style steak grilled with jalapenos and mint sauce, and grilled Yucatan chicken on whole wheat pita crisps with avocado tomato salsa.

Though Capra likes to balance a multitude of methods in very meal, he appreciates how steaming showcases high-quality, local ingredients. Two favorites are steamed halibut with Meyer lemon marmalade, and sesame-crusting salmon with steamed forbidden rice cakes.

Living in Vancouver, "the fittest town in Canada," according to Chisholm, health-minded clients reject hors d'oeuvres made with bread bases and fillers. To meet the challenge, the company custom-made acrylic molds, permitting the production of ultra-light fish cakes that are almost pure sablefish or crab.

### White Glove Cooking

Sous Vide (French for "under vacuum"), a process invented decades ago in France, is getting a lot of play again lately in professional American kitchens. One reason may be the publication of *Under Pressure: Cooking Sous Vide* (2008, Artisan, New York City), a comprehensive guide for chefs, by Thomas Keller, chef/owner of the French Laundry and Per Se restaurants.

Vacuum-sealing ingredients in plastic bags before cooking them in precisely controlled, low-temperature water, often for long periods, the process is prized for its consistency, and its ability to maintain the integrity of ingredients, magnify flavor without fat by concentrating natural juices, and achieve incredibly buttery textures without shrinkage. But caterers interviewed had postponed trying the method or had abandoned it, giving

reasons from the high cost of equipment to safety concerns.

Thevoz worked with sous vide for several years. He liked it mainly for producing supremely succulent tenderloins and keeping them magnificently pink throughout. He calls sous vide a "fantastic catering tool," but abandoned it when the city health department began insisting that he submit a separate Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) report for every vacuum-processed item, a request he considered infeasible with his constantly changing menu.

Capra obtained satisfactory small scale sous-vide results, using ordinary food-storage bags, double layered, and vigilantly monitoring the cooking process, armed with a candy thermometer. He isn't ready to invest in the equipment necessary to expand, however. Among his successful experiments was pork tenderloin for a crostini, finished with sundried tomato puree.

### Smoke and Mirrors

Molecular Gastronomy keeps catching fire in new locations, while fading in others. Some caterers call it chemistry, not cooking; others appreciate the drama, if the outcome is delicious.

An early experimenter, Thevoz says the approach didn't suit the conservative DC market or the scale of his business. Helminski thinks such ultra-modernism would be incongruous in a hotel nearing its centenary celebration.

Capra does a lot with dehydration. He revolutionized beet/goat cheese salad using dehydrated beet powder. Rubbing the cheese in the powder, he lets it penetrate for several days, and produces such beet-like cheese balls, it's difficult to differentiate them from the real beets.

Culinary Capers' chef de cuisine has had 'great results enhancing classical techniques with compounds such as agar, xanthan gum, and liquid nitrogen.' Among his show-stopping taste triumphs, are crab cakes with colorful, custardy crowns of asparagus gelee, and oysters bejeweled with mango and chili caviars.

A critical criterion in evaluating techniques is whether customers will care, and the answers may be changing for some trendier techniques. Umami is likely to appear increasingly on fine-dining menus, sous-vide equipment for home cooks will be introduced soon, and a sous-vide cookbook directed at home cooks is scheduled for publication this year. ●