

Sous-vide cooking builds up steam in the US

Amelia Levin looks at the European cooking technique with built-in economic benefits

Once considered a European phenomenon, sous-vide cooking is on the rise in restaurants across the US as chefs and operators seek to create consistent, high-end and delicious dishes for an increasingly discerning clientele.

“Sous-vide cooking has always been more popular in Europe, but it’s becoming trendy here in the States, from four-star restaurants to banquet facilities and golf courses, because of its consistency and precision,” Bruno Bertin, executive chef for Cuisine Solutions.

Popularised in 1971 by Bruno Goussault, sous-vide cooking combines pressure, heat and time with the technology of vacuum-sealing and water bath circulation to slow-cook meat, fish, vegetables and other foods at consistent times and temperatures without any physical cooking labour.

“Sous-vide cooking allows chefs to serve gourmet food virtually anywhere, at any time of day, with little preparation or costly equipment required,” says Bertin. At the QSR level, consistency is of the utmost importance. Sous-vide cooking helped one chain be able to “serve moist turkey the same way across thousands of locations without any bacteria that could occur from pre-sliced turkey,” he adds.

Consistent temperatures, in addition to preventing overcooking, also helps ensure the safety of the food in accordance with HACCP programmes. Sous-vide cooking can also extend the shelf life of certain

foods, says Bertin. Stocks or sauces cooked in this method will retain flavour and freshness even after 21 days of refrigeration, though most will be used before this time.

Increasing numbers of hotels and catering facilities have also caught onto sous-vide cooking, says Bertin.

Sous-vide cooking “allows a fine dining banquet facility to prepare high volumes of braised lamb shank or 72-hour short rib with very few staff,” says Bertin. Fewer staff are needed because of the consistent temperatures and timed cooking technology.

In addition to consistent cooking, sous-vide machines can also be used to infuse herbs and flavours into foods without the need for additional fat or salt. Similar to braising, the cooking method also helps tenderise and cook proteins without drying them out.

Some chefs will sous-vide meat to start, then finish off the food on the grill to sear and caramelize right before service.

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The Fat Duck in Berkshire, UK, has added sous-vide technology to its kitchen for this reason, according to Bertin. Some mixologists, such as Junior Merino, the “liquid chef,” use sous-vide cooking for cocktail ingredients, infusing fruits with alcohol or for intensifying flavours – like vacuum-packing a pear with cinnamon.

Sous-vide cooking works without the need for expensive hood systems, electrical systems or even extra labour. Typically compact in size, the machines also take up less space than other major equipment.

Barawine, a wine bar and restaurant in Harlem, New York, which opened this summer with Daniel Boulud protégé chef Francis Reynard at the helm, relies on sous-vide technology for its ventless kitchen, preparing six dishes this way.

The Culinary Research Education Academy (CREA) in Paris, founded by Goussault, recently partnered with Kendall College in Chicago to open the first training centre in the US. Its online curriculum includes self-paced courses centered on the history and science of sous-vide cooking, along with different time and temperature techniques.

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