

# Molecular much more than a food fad

While the flamboyance and fluff are no longer as fashionable as they used to be, the fundamentals of molecular cuisine are still there. Aubrey Buckingham stirs the pot.



**W**ith the iconic Jade on 36 now serving classical fare and the molecular maestro himself, Paul Pairet, serving simpler, brasserie dishes across the pond at the newly opened Mr & Mrs Bund, it was tempting to declare the end of the molecular movement here in Shanghai and to welcome traditional cooking back to the fore.

Reports of its demise, however, were greatly exaggerated; one need only talk to any of the chefs versed in molecular gastronomy to understand that while the bells and whistles, the smoke and mirrors, the fluff, are no longer as fashionable as they used to be, the fundamentals are still there for just about

any kitchen hand to take advantage of.

Firstly, some definition of molecular gastronomy may be required. The term has been bandied about by wannabe foodies and pretentious chefs for so long the general public has become confused, as with the term "fusion," as to what the genre actually entails.

It doesn't exactly help that even the most prominent chefs who brought the wave to its head struggle to provide a convincing definition, and, in some cases, have gone so far as to denounce the term. "Nobody will agree on the molecular terms," says enigmatic Frenchman Pairet, who refused to paint his Jade on 36 repertoire with the same brush. "The kitchen has always been very technical and scientific, especially if you look at the research done in the 19th century. This is not new in itself, but (rather) a movement, and what you can take from the movement are the precision and investigation. This will never die."

Perhaps more convincing is Ferran Adria's attempt at a definition. Earlier this year, the Spaniard, whose El Bulli restaurant is consistently rated the best in the world by "Restaurant" magazine, together with molecular contemporaries Heston Blumenthal and Andoni Luis Aduriz, told the international culinary festival Madrid Fusion that "molecular gastronomy is the movement that studies the chemical-physical processes of cuisine." In other words, while science was previously limited to heating up food and adding color, molecular techniques now enabled chefs to look at how ingredients could be manipulated to affect the way they look, smell and, of course, taste.

The movement thus far has been centered on a few recognizable, trendy elements such as gels and spheres, using gelling agents that were deemed industrial before but are now managed better; foams made using Paco Jet and stabilizers; and ice creams which have been flash frozen with the use of liquid nitrogen, made from delicate flavors which would otherwise have been lost during churning.

Technique for technique's sake, however, has led to consumer fatigue, and chances



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are your average local diner will groan at the sight of yet another foam or ball. "From a chef's point of view, it's just exoticism but exoticism has been everywhere," says Pairet. "If it has no meaning, then (the trend) will die by itself. If you use alginate, for example, with meaning, because it enlarges the capacity to encapsulate liquids today, then in that case it will never die."

## Food sciences

French food scientist Dr Anne Cazor (who trained under the legendary Herve This) runs Cuisine Innovation, a company undertaking research, consulting and training in advanced food sciences. She explains that the fundamental techniques are applicable to all types of cuisine, even Chinese cooking. "Molecular cooking is more than what journalists used to say. It's cooking with scientific knowledge, and then using the latest techniques, products and materials you can find at the moment. Molecular cuisine is not just 'additive' cuisine, or 'nitrogen cuisine,' it's bigger."

She gives the example of creating an emulsion — to cool it down one can use cream, but one can also use avocado or orange juice, and from there get different recipes. "When they learn recipes they often do not understand techniques, and when they understand the scientific knowledge, they can do a lot of other things. That's why I love the job — I try to open their minds and they can do good art with that."

"I think there is potential to improve Chinese cuisine with molecular because there

is a lot of preparation in stocks, and there are different techniques I can teach them for different results like color, for example." Stocks change color depending on whether they are covered, and carry a different consistency depending on the time in cooking.

Many classically trained chefs are wont to dismiss molecular out of hand, but this is in part due to the aforementioned lack of understanding. El Willy's Willy Trulas, on the other hand, has first-hand knowledge, having worked on the research and development for El Bulli's Texturas kitchen kits and utilizing many of these techniques during his stint as a Torres China guest chef in 2007.

These days the jolly Spaniard is keener to prepare hearty fare at his wildly popular restaurant, although some molecular techniques are still indispensable. "My personal approach is food you can really taste. You can use some modern techniques, but I like my food to be based more on the flavor. I definitely use some new techniques like low temperature cooking, 65 degrees Celsius eggs (when cooked at this temperature the egg coagulates perfectly and the white sets like custard), agar agar (a gelatinous substance derived from seaweed used as a gelling agent) ... I use some of this stuff but I try to integrate it so people don't notice it."

Just as the much derided nouvelle cuisine of the 1970s still yielded valuable lessons for many a chef, it seems apparent that, while molecular may truly not be as trendy as it used to be, the movement is still very much intertwined with the modern kitchen and we would be foolish to ignore it.

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