

Dining by Design

Spain's "hypermodern" cuisine has crossed the pond, and the Northeast's most creative chefs are diving in

BY ELIZABETH JOHNSON

Sitting at a table for two in Manhattan, I squeezed a plastic bottle filled with white liquid into a bowl of miso soup. As the gel squiggled through the nozzle into the toast-brown broth, liquid turned to solid: I had noodles. First I laughed; then I took a spoonful. It was smoky and meaty and satisfying, just as a good miso soup should be.

I was dining at wd~50, one of a growing number of restaurants embracing an avant-garde style of cuisine some call hypermodern. The food is cutting-edge, to be sure, and the kitchens of these restaurants are more laboratory than hearth. The chefs tinker with the molecular makeup of their ingredients, changing liquids to solids and solids to dust, or better yet—to air. And the dining experience plays off the idea that



Top to bottom: Some of Chef José Andrés' inspired creations, including organized Caesar salad; Cigala, a.k.a. Norway lobster or Dublin Bay prawn; baby corn, tomato seed "filet" and quail egg.



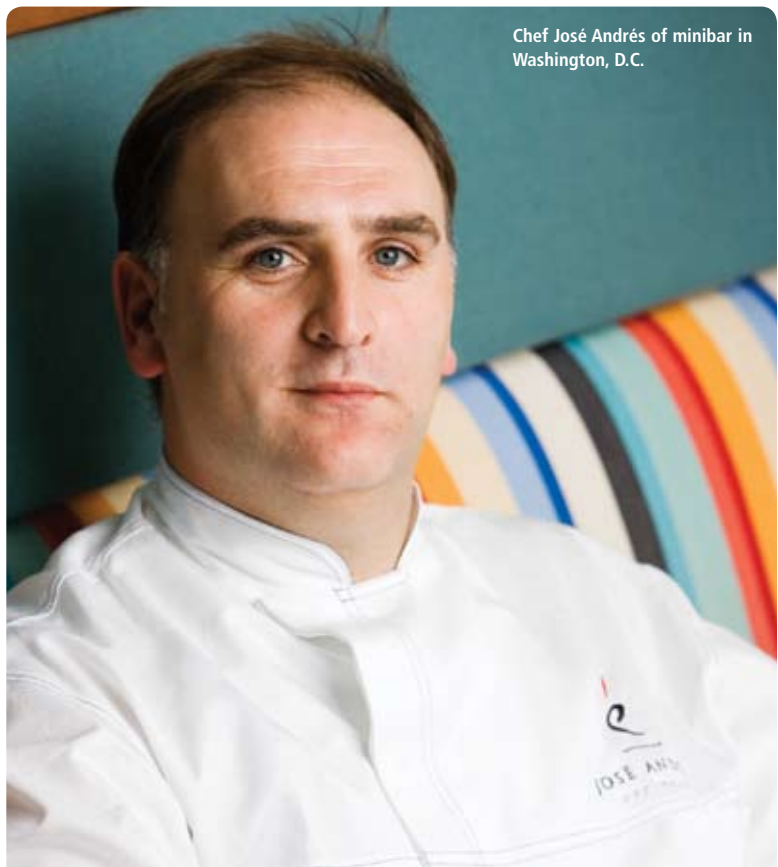


anyone who's ever been on a chat board knows is here to stay: interactivity.

The night I played with my food in New York, diners at Alinea in Chicago were leaning over the table and using their mouths to pluck orbs of pineapple-lemon-menthol marshmallows off long, thin skewers called antennae. At Moto, also in Chicago, they were squirting liquid salad into their mouths with a syringe and chewing edible paper colored with organic dyes. And in Washington, D.C., diners at minibar were eating the Light Bulb of Flavor, a flashing blue bulb made of sugar filled with air.

FEEDING ME WITH SCIENCE

Sounds extreme, but these chefs—Grant Achatz at Alinea, Homaro Cantu at Moto, José Andrés at minibar and Wylie Dufresne at wd~50—say they're not out for shock value. They want to make a good meal that you'll have fun eating, while forging a new understanding of the way food behaves. To do that, they're willing to try new gadgets that might not fit in at home next to your Magic Chef range, like a Cryovac machine for vacuum-sealing food in



Chef José Andrés of minibar in Washington, D.C.



mint and grapefruit. Andrés created the dish for wine critic Robert Parker, inspired by the language Parker uses to describe white wine.

And at wd~50, each element of the pickled beef tongue dish, served with tomato molasses and fried mayonnaise (yes, fried: in cubes) arrives separated on

a single, gleaming white plate. But when you put a mouthful together on your fork, it tastes like a terrific hamburger.

Wd~50 is “a research-driven restaurant,” Dufresne says. “Cooking is a science—biology and physics, but mostly chemistry. We’re trying to understand the idea behind the chemistry of cooking.”



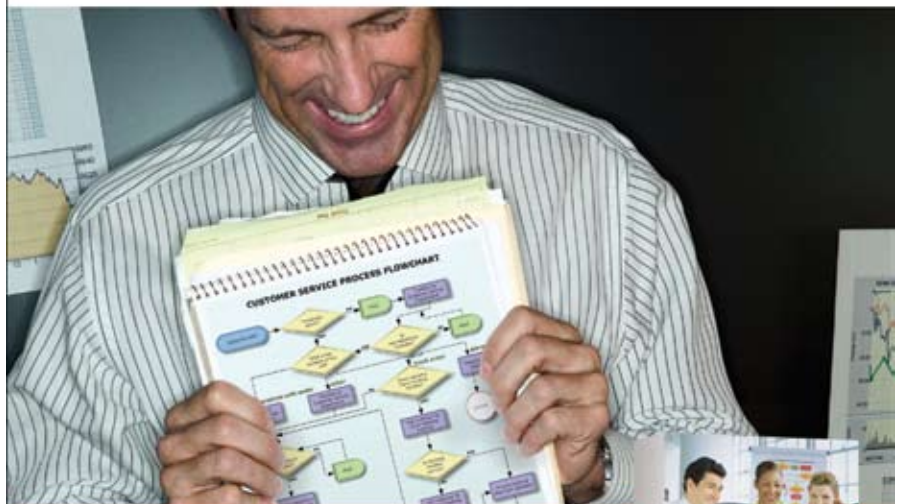
Top: Feta linguine. Bottom: Chef Andrés' raspberries, not to be confused with the grapes he used to create Deconstructed Glass of White Wine, which he concocted for the legendary wine critic Robert Parker.

plastic, or a centrifuge to create a sphere out of juice.

The chemistry behind Cheetos might wind up next to your foie gras in the shape of dehydrated peas. A technology used for commercially packaging food—sous vide, or cooking in that vacuum-sealed bag—could be used to prepare your duck breast. The science behind liquid nitrogen might chill your ice cream very, very quickly.

These chefs are also willing to take food apart. One of Andrés' signature dishes is Deconstructed Glass of White Wine, grape juice touched with gelatin and spread along a plate, topped with morsels of flavors you might taste if you were drinking it in a glass, like apple,

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So that explains the noodles and the fried mayonnaise, as well as another course: the carrot-coconut “sunny side up.” Dufresne uses industrial gums to manipulate the textures of white coconut milk and orange carrot juice so they form the shape and color of a perfect sunny side up egg. Except, of course, it’s not.

EDIBLE EXPERIMENTS

At first, I thought this kind of food sounded like too much work. But diners with an adventurous spirit will find themselves amused with the novelty while appreciating the craft. For example, John Sconzo, a doctor from upstate New York, counts Alinea, wd~50, minibar and other avant-garde restaurants among his favorites. One hypermodern meal in particular was “the meal of his life.”

“That gets to the crux of the matter—the food has to be delicious,” says Sconzo, who is also a host of eGullet.org, a culinary Web site where the hypermodern movement is dissected in detail, and where Achatz chronicled the opening of Alinea in real time.

“I like to think I’m somewhat cerebral about what I eat, but the bottom line is that I have to enjoy it,” Sconzo says. “If it’s fun, if it’s fascinating, if it’s intellectually stimulating as well, then it starts becoming magnificent, especially in an environment where people make you feel welcome.”

The meal of his life “so far” was at El Bulli, the restaurant outside Barcelona where Ferran Adrià has been cooking—or rather, creating—hypermodern food for nearly 20 years. Adrià, who has been called the mad scientist of the culinary world, is the field’s trailblazer. If you’ve eaten in a high-end restaurant in the past five years, you’ve likely seen an imitation of his best-known dish: foam.

But his creations are ever evolving. Nowadays, Adrià—who spends the six months of the year that El Bulli is closed in his laboratory, developing new dishes for the next season’s menu—is playing with the enzyme transglutaminase, bonding proteins so he can contain liquids inside a jiggling membrane:

faux olives made of olive oil; “caviar” made of tiny bubbles of melon.

Trompe l’oeil is part of the reason that hypermodern cooking is so much fun: It’s surprising. And surprise is a very important element in the cuisine, Andrés says. So important that he prefers diners at minibar to space out their visits. He doesn’t want to see the same person three times in one week. If diners come too often, “then we take away the surprise of eating something for the first time,” he says.




To see what’s in Jose Andrés’ kitchen, go to arrivemagazine.com.



THE JOY OF QUELLE SURPRISE!

I know what he means. I've been following along with the development of hypermodern cuisine since about 2001, and things that I used to find bizarre (Andrés' organized Caesar salad, for example) simply don't faze me anymore. Then again, I haven't yet been to Alinea, where Achatz serves crispy bacon on a swinging trapeze and pheasant tempura with smoking oak leaves.

"Surprise is an emotion we hope to get by default," Achatz says. The restaurant commissioned 30 service pieces unique to the restaurant. (That tempura is served on a metal whisk-looking contraption called a squid.) "If you dine here you're never going to see food presented like it is here."



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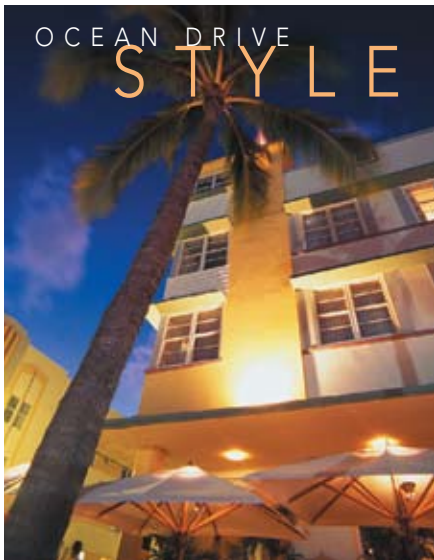


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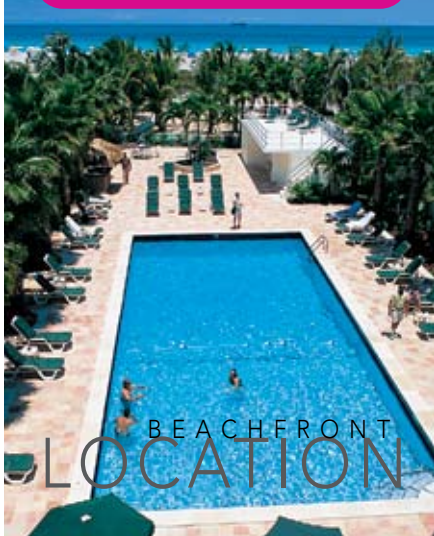
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CAFÉ CHATTER

Sometimes it's a bit too surprising. When Carol Hamburger, the sister of a friend of mine, dined at Alinea, the man at the table next to hers ran screaming from the dining room when his burning oak leaves course came along. He was terrified of fire and allergic to smoke.

But even if your meal is served on a plate, it can still catch you off guard. The foie gras terrine at



Ruben Garcia works with Chef Andrés at minibar. Here he puts the finishing touches on this hypermodern version of a Philly cheesesteak. Bon appétit!

wd~50 stands vertically on one end, like a flat tire shaped like a hockey puck. Wispy beet tendrils perch on top, looking like a dragonfly just landed. A mound of green dust (dehydrated peas) sidled next to the terrine. In it were tiny studs of brown candied olives.

I sliced open the terrine, and warm beet juice red as blood rushed out of the center like lava. I couldn't help but giggle.

After a few bites, I wasn't laughing; I was cooing. I started plotting my next culinary purchase: a dehydrator so I could re-create those candied olives. Hypermodern? Interactive? Avant-garde? Progressive American? Sure—all of the above. But add fun and delicious, too.

After Places

These sweet-tooth restaurants specialize in the last course, but they're more than just desserts

Hypermodern cooking may be on the forefront, but it's already finding its way into a niche: the dessert restaurant.

One pastry chef alum from wd~50, Will Goldfarb, opened Room 4 Dessert in Manhattan last year, and another, Sam Mason, left last fall to start his own restaurant in SoHo, which had not yet opened at press time.

And though you might find savory elements or bits of molecular gastronomy in some, not all dessert restaurants are avant-garde. Consider the Viennese cafe, the patisserie, or even the ice cream shop where you might stop after a date to the movies.

"We're the after place," says Paul Conforti, the president and co-founder of Finale, which has three locations in Boston and plans to go national. "After dinner, after the movies, the theater, shopping—anything."

Here's a rundown of "after places" to cure your sweet tooth.

ChikaLicious, 203 E. 10th St., Manhattan; 212-995-9511; chikalicious.com

Two signature dishes at ChikaLicious are the fromage blanc island cheesecake and the warm chocolate tart with pink peppercorn ice cream. But husband-and-wife team Don and Chika Tillman set up their restaurant so you wouldn't have to stop there. You choose among six desserts on the menu, then watch as Chika and pastry chef Safia Osman prepare you a three-course dessert menu from behind the bar. Don pairs the wine or helps you



select coffee or organic tea. And you'll get out for under a double sawbuck: The prix-fixe meal with wine pairing is \$19.

Finale, Mass.

Three locations: Finale Park Plaza, 11 Columbus Ave., Boston, 617-423-3184; Finale Harvard Square, 30 Dunster St., Cambridge, 617-441-9797; Finale Coolidge Corner, 1306 Beacon St., Brookline, 617-232-3233; finaledesserts.com

With a dessert-plating stage in the center of the room, Finale is as much theater as restaurant. Desserts are American with European-style presentation. The menu changes seasonally, but two mainstays are molten chocolate cake with coffee ice cream and vanilla crème brûlée. There's also a bakery with a takeout area for cookies and pastries.

P*ONG, 150 W. 10th St. (at Waverly Place), Manhattan; 212-929-0898

Pichet Ong, the former pastry chef for Jean-Georges Vongerichten at Spice Market and Perry Street, whose Thai Jewels dessert with tapioca was named best dessert in *New York* magazine in 2005, opens

his own restaurant with snacks, and savory and sweet dishes this winter. Ong says pastry chefs opening their own places is a natural progression. "The new generation of chefs has turned to the pastry kitchen for inspiration. You see a lot of techniques or compositions of dishes that are pastrylike: crisps, coolis, tuiles and sorbets." He says his menu incorporates some of the hypermodern trends, but "I also like cheeses."

Hence, a dish like Roquefort Soufflé with twice-cooked walnuts and maple syrup. His opening menu also leans on fall fruits and tropical flavors: Concord Grape Tapioca Float, or Sour Cream and Hawaiian Ginger Soda, for example.

Dessert, 806 S. Sixth St., Philadelphia; 215-923-9733.

Greg Pastore and JoAnn Greco have what you might consider a Viennese cafe in Philadelphia. But the quaint, 27-seat restaurant also leans more classic American, with dishes like tiramisu, apple pie and chocolate hazelnut bread pudding.

"We are a little more traditional," says Pastore. "People are very happy for dessert and coffee—they just don't need a once-in-a-lifetime dessert for \$13 and a \$5 cappuccino."



Finale's desserts include the seasonal sampler (left); Fantasia (top) and Boston Cream (right).

