



making magic

It's food, but perhaps not as you know it.

Victoria Wells meets one of the world's most famous chefs and finds Heston Blumenthal sees food very differently from the rest of us.

"We had the first demonstration for the magician a month ago. It's great, but there are too many things that we have to do to get it to work."

It isn't often the word "magician" crops up in conversation with a chef, but then this chef is Heston Blumenthal of famed British restaurant The Fat Duck, and so somehow it isn't surprising at all.

He is explaining his plans to introduce "magic water" to his menu. Wait staff will present a single bottle of water and ask diners if they would prefer still or sparkling – the same bottle will then "magically" provide both options. However, it seems there is still some way to go before the sleight of hand required to pull the trick off is mastered.

"It will work", he says enthusiastically, "but I can just see it being great for one table and going amiss for four. And that's the thing, it's got to be absolutely 'Wow!' – so yes, we're definitely still working on it."

'Wow' is somewhat synonymous with the Heston Blumenthal approach to food. Snail porridge, a sorbet that ignites and other dishes designed to intrigue and delight diners are all part of the phenomenon that has grown around the 42 year old chef and his restaurant in Bray, west of London.

When we meet in Melbourne it is the day after his master class, where around 300 people packed into a room to hear him talk about his approach to cooking. His delight at the success of the class is evident, and his apparent nerves at the beginning only endeared him to his audience. Not that he had anything to be nervous about. The self-taught chef opened The Fat Duck in 1995, and it earned its first Michelin star three years later. (It now holds three stars). It was named Best Restaurant in the World in 2005 and has been second to the restaurant of Heston's good friend, Ferran Adria of Spain's El Bulli, since then.

Heston launched his restaurant with his knowledge of French cooking learnt from books. Shortly afterwards he discovered a work by American author Harold McGee, which challenged traditional culinary practices. He credits it as the catalyst that started him looking at food and cookery technique in a more scientific way. He researched the elements surrounding taste, and resolved that the perception of taste is multi-sensory, and so sight, sound, aroma and flavour must all be engaged – an approach he has used ever since.

It is reflected in one of his most famous creations, "Sound of the Sea", where diners are presented with a seafood dish with ingredients representing elements such as sea spray and sand, and then offered a conch shell, from which protrudes a pair of earphones. As they eat the experience is enhanced by the sounds of waves and the cry of gulls, thanks to the iPod concealed inside the shell.

His food at The Fat Duck has been labelled "molecular gastronomy", referring to his scientific approach in the kitchen. However, the term became over-used in food circles, adopted by younger chefs and often

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applied to any dish using a foam or other innovative technique, and so Heston and a group of colleagues moved to clarify what they were doing.

In 2006 he joined with Harold McGee, and chefs Ferran Adria of El Bulli and Thomas Keller of The French Laundry to publish a statement in UK newspaper *The Observer* explaining their views on food and use of new technologies and ingredients, pointing out they were not pursuing novelty for its own sake. “We embrace innovation... whenever it can make a real contribution to our cooking.”

The kitchen at The Fat Duck may well have much in common with a science lab, but Heston likens what he does to moving on from cooking over an open fire. “We should embrace the technology available, but it doesn’t take away from the passion of cooking,” he says.

He also points out that science has been a key tool in managing the 45 chefs required to feed The Fat Duck’s 42 diners.

He explains his theory with the example of making a lemon tart: he knows it’s cooked the way he wants by its wobble, but another chef in his team might not recognise that. The solution is to test its temperature when it’s at the consistency he wants, and get the chefs to use that as their guide in future.

“That’s where I think some of the knowledge of the science of cooking really helps, it’s actually to get consistency in the kitchen, to train other people to do a dish day in and day out...it just gave me greater control around the kitchen.”

The Fat Duck’s elaborately designed menu is also a foil to its sparse surrounds. Heston recalls visiting a three Michelin-starred restaurant in

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Provence as a 15 year old and the impact of its outdoor environment – its location at the foot of a basalt cliff, the smell of lavender and the sound of crickets as he and his parents dined outside – has stayed with him ever since. Lacking a cliff or other dramatic landscape at his own restaurant meant Heston had to find other ways of creating an experience for his diners.

“Because the dining room was small and didn’t have an amazing view...it’s as if the dishes are replacing the noise and the smell and the sights (of that restaurant in France),” he says. “It’s as if the landscape is actually the food.”

The menu at The Fat Duck is undergoing a major change at the moment. The existing a la carte menu will be replaced by 20-30 new dishes inspired by ancient British cuisine.

It was sparked by his discovery of an historic recipe for a chicken dish and a chance meeting with two food historians from Hampton Court Palace (“They were in front of me in the queue for a lecture on baby food in the Ming Dynasty,” he grins). It started him on what was to become a two year road to creating the new dishes which will be rolled out on the menu over the next eight months.

Heston says once he started delving into the food of the past he was astounded at the wealth of untapped material.

“The last five or eight years in the UK we have been championing British produce, and so we should, but we have not been championing a heritage that actually we didn’t know existed. I just found it was a really big subject and something that was really exciting, plus it’s so rich in recipes. It isn’t about trying to replicate an old recipe, it’s just taking the inspiration from an old recipe. That’s the key.”

Cue dishes like lobster loaves (“which is a kind of bread and butter pudding with lobster”); chocolate wine; and buttered beer – “I love the name, but it’s proving quite tricky to get it to taste delicious.”

There is also a dish called ‘Beef Royal’ which was part of a menu for the coronation of George II, reputedly the largest feast dinner ever served in Britain.

“It was 170 odd courses,” explains Heston, “but some of the courses had 40 courses to them; so the dessert course was 40 different desserts. Beef Royal was the centrepiece for that meal. It’s basically beef with truffles and anchovies and sweetbreads and red wine and parsley and the kitchen sink. It was quite a complex recipe: you stuff the meat in a particular way with some of these different ingredients.”

There are some cross-overs with a series he did in the UK for Channel 4 called *Feast*, such as the edible tablecloth he found a reference to from Tudor times. Although that wasn’t exactly plain sailing. “It wasn’t a recipe, it was just describing the dish”, he says. “So God knows what it looked like and God knows what it tasted like.

“The Tudors loved doing foods that looked like other things, so there were two things inspired by that: one was an edible dinner service, so edible candle, cutlery, board and what looks like a pork pie but it’s actually a raspberry sorbet with yoghurt ice, so we’re basing a dish on that; and rice pudding which looks like bangers and mash because it was originally cooked in sausage casing.”

For those who prefer a more traditional British dish then Heston also has a pub in Bray, The Hinds Head is across the road from The Fat Duck and offers dishes such as Lancashire hotpot and potted shrimp.

Fans should also keep an eye out for Heston’s next project, a cookbook for those wanting to create Fat Duck-style meals at home. He is the first to admit the 2008 release *The Big Fat Duck Cookbook* (Bloomsbury/Allen & Unwin) was not designed for the home cook. “I had made the decision that it was going to be a window on The Fat Duck, it’s not a cookbook for home. Some of those sub recipes you can do at home, but I wanted it to be completely what we do at The Fat Duck. So the recipes are 100 per cent as per we do.” However, the new version will be in a much simpler form with step by step pictures and other tips.



No matter how complex his dishes, such as the igniting sorbet he created for a Christmas special, Heston remains adamant the crucial element is flavour.

“At the end of the day, all the dishes like that...I have to think they taste delicious. It’s no good having a sorbet you can set on fire if actually the texture of the sorbet is a bit funny.”

As he prepares to unveil his new menu to diners, after all the research and time in the test kitchen, how does it feel when his latest creation comes together?

“It’s brilliant,” he beams. “I don’t know if it’s the best feeling; the best feeling is when a customer might say something in response to a dish that was the same emotion that I had in doing it, and that’s when it’s just the best. But that feeling when you taste something and it just seems right, it just tastes right, it’s brilliant – especially if it’s taken two years.”

The magic water may get there yet. ●

Victoria Wells attended The Langham Melbourne Masterclass 2009 thanks to the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival. For information about the 2010 Melbourne Food & Wine Festival visit melbournefoodandwine.com.au