



Total Immersion

A HOME *SOUS VIDE* SYSTEM CAN TURN EVEN THE HUMBLEST OF COOKS INTO A FOODIE-SCIENTIST. BY ADAM BAER // ILLUSTRATION BY RODRIGO CORRAL

ATTENTION, PADMA LAKSHMI: I have been turning out Michelin star-quality food at home for a month now. Why hasn't anyone from *Top Chef* called?

Relax, Padma, no need to apologize. How could you have known? After all, until recently I was just a decent home cook whose food never really got beyond "rustic." Then I discovered the space-age *sous vide* (pronounced "sue veed") system, made famous on shows just like yours. French for "under vacuum," *sous vide* is a simple system. It

requires a vacuum sealer to remove the air from the thick plastic pouches chefs use to package the raw food; a large pot filled with water; and an "immersion circulator" with a built-in pump to heat and move water so it stays at a set temperature when the sealed food enters the little Jacuzzi.

Spurred along by the technique's ubiquity on TV shows and in the open kitchens of America's most *haute* restaurants, I've endeavored to test some precision gadgetry that

promises exquisite results. Not to trample all over Grandma's low-and-slow recipes, but this techno-cooking style leads to superior consistency and flavor without having to heat up anything but that pot of water. In the past year, home-kitchen-friendly ways to *sous vide* have become available, so I tested two leading products: the \$800 Sous Vide Professional, a true immersion circulator with digital LCD thermostat that clamps onto and sits in a pot of water, made by PolyScience

**TONY MAWS' SLOW-ROASTED CHICKEN**

1 chicken, 3-4 pounds
3 Tbsp. rendered chicken or duck fat
Salt and pepper to taste

BRINE

2 liters water
6 grams salt
6-inch sheet of kombu kelp
1 star anise
1 Tbsp. fennel seed
1 Tbsp. coriander seed
1 Tbsp. black peppercorns
1 clove
1 tsp. chili flake

Cut chicken into five pieces: legs and thighs, breasts on the bone, and back. Reserve the back for future use. Brine the other four pieces for two hours in the refrigerator. Remove and pat dry.

Season the chicken with salt and pepper. Place the legs and thighs in one bag and the breasts in another. Add a tablespoon of fat to each bag. Seal bags on medium high and cook at 151° F until internal temperature of the breasts reaches 148° F—approximately an hour and a half. Remove breasts and raise the temperature of the water to 169° F and cook until legs and thighs reach an internal temperature of 158° F. Heat a cast iron pan on medium. Remove chicken from bags and gently pat dry with paper towel. Add one tablespoon fat to pan and quickly sear chicken pieces, skin down, until well browned.

(the manufacturer preferred by the pros); and the \$450 Sous Vide Supreme, which looks like a stainless steel rice cooker and doesn't circulate its water, although its digital display tells you that it keeps it at a precise temperature.

Of course, there are also various home *sous vide* "hacks," as food geeks would call them, which involve things like beer coolers and candy thermometers. But I want to see how the experts do it, so I stop by the highly regarded Craigie on Main in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Award-winning chef Tony Maws runs a casual high-end eatery, helped along, in part, by some serious *sous vide* strategy.

"Remember dropping that bag of Green Giant frozen vegetables in a pot of water?" Maws asks me. "That wasn't about paying attention to exact temperatures the way we do today, but it *was* preserving color and flavor and finding ways to cook food prepped and vacuum-sealed ahead of time."

Maws trained with French *sous vide* pioneer Bruno Goussault, a food scientist who worked with chef Joël Robuchon to adapt the method for the train from Paris to Marseille. Like other chefs, Maws treats *sous vide* as just one tool in his arsenal; it's a way, say, to slow-cook pork shoulder (24 to 48 hours at 154 degrees) before crisping up the skin in a pan so that it looks and tastes better than something rotating on a spit in Sardinia.

Without a professional chef's vision, time and planning resources, it's unlikely that a home cook could produce something of Maws' caliber. When I unwrapped my *sous vide* machine, I figured I could at least get a simple tenderloin done medium-rare, wall-to-wall, so it wouldn't have that gray-brown-red color gradation you'd get from a grill.

I followed the directions, ensuring my fillet was well seasoned and drizzled in oil before vacuum-sealing it, then I dropped it

into a large pot fitted with the Sous Vide Professional. While I waited close to 45 minutes for the water to heat, the machine blew a fuse in my apartment. So I turned off the air-conditioner, lights and television and sat, sweating and hungry, illuminated by my battery powered laptop, for another 45 minutes. When it was time to remove and pat dry the very gray, positively ugly hunk of cow muscle (*this* cost \$26 a pound?), I ripped the machine's plug out of the wall and gave each side of the fillet a nice sear in a hot pan, setting off my smoke alarm—and improving the slab's aesthetics considerably.

The result? A perfectly medium-rare piece of meat that was a deep pink-red from edge to edge. It tasted great. Had I grilled it—which would have been much faster and easier—I'd have had to settle for one or two centimeters of the steak's perimeter cooked closer to well done and a center of straight-up red rareness.

The more affordable Sous Vide Supreme wasn't as consistent, although it was slightly easier to use; I didn't have to buy a big pot or tank, or clamp anything to it. This device took a little longer to heat the same amount of water, though, and the meat came out less perfectly done. Undeterred, I dried and seared it, and guess what? It tasted like a nice, tender steak too.

Head to head, both machines expertly tackled short ribs, corned beef and *coq au vin*, with the PolyScience product often producing slightly better results, but I can't say that I felt right about leaving the house empty with something simmering away, or that I was able to focus on much more than my cooking experiments during those few weeks I played with the technique.

"*Sous vide* isn't the be-all end-all," Maws tells me when I describe my experience. "It's just another technique." He likes it best for tough cuts of meat that take a long time to cook. "If the internal



BOILING POINT The Sous Vide Supreme, front, and Sous Vide Professional.

temperature of cooked meat is a hundred twenty-four degrees Fahrenheit, and if you braise it for three hours at three-hundred degrees in your oven, you're still overcooking it. There are still delicious reasons to braise—it's a classic technique. But with *sous vide*, the meat stays moist and very flavorful. You get the best of both worlds."

Progress? Sure. But as a rustic home cook, I'm just not certain I have enough time in my life to plan regular meals that take 48 hours to cook. I can see how *sous vide* would elevate a special dinner to another level, and I respect that food-science geeks love the democratizing power of technology—to say nothing of buying all their protein at

once, each week, portioning it out, vacuum-sealing it and having perfect, flavorful, inexpensive and often low-fat meals every night. But I'm *already* under pressure, living and working in this hectic universe at a somewhat consistent internal temperature of 98.6 degrees, 24 hours a day. Moreover, I guess I'm just a simple country boy at heart.

If my home-testing taught me anything, it's that I'm grateful for the Mawses of our world. So, with that, I leave the technique to them. But Padma, if you're still reading, I'd be happy to give your *Top Chef* contestants some pointers. ■

L.A.-based writer **ADAM BAER** can make a mean salmon in minutes—in a pan.