

CUT TO THE taste RUSSIAN RILLETTE, ANYONE?



Are creative restaurant cooking and the ready-meal side of the retail industry converging? Is kitchen technology making top-end food available to anyone with a microwave and a grill? And can most of the food-buying public tell the difference between the hand-crafted efforts of a top chef and the ingenious creations of a supermarket research kitchen? *John Radford asked The Food People*

I once saw a sticker on the windscreen of a lorry: "Truckers make the best lovers... But the Japanese make them smaller and cheaper": a manifestation of the rule that what the hand of man can make, another man can copy, and this is increasingly true in the ready-meal aisles of the more up-market food stores.

Introductions first: The Food People is a collection of former chefs that acts as a consultancy for food manufacturers and processors to bring new ideas to both retail and restaurant kitchens. I spoke to Wayne Edwards, who worked under Raymond Blanc at Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons and won junior chef of the year in 1992, and Charles Banks, one of the partners in the company. Their stated objectives are to "sell the creative spirit into the trade", spot food trends and encourage chefs to experiment with the latest technology to "use science to add value to the food experience."

Yes, but... In so doing for the retail trade aren't they working against the independent chef? Taking new ideas from the most creative kitchens and helping retail behemoths construct low-cost clones of them to sell at knock-down prices on the supermarket shelves?

"Yes, but..." says Wayne, "look at the labour-saving devices available to the professional kitchen: sous-vide baths, the Thermomix, the anti-griddle and the smoking gun have been featured in this magazine, and there are many more, quite a few of which are within the price-bracket of the enthusiastic amateur foodie, given that an AGA or Rayburn domestic cooker is likely to set you back £2,000-plus these days."

"That's the whole point", adds Charles. "At the Restaurant Show last October there were stands offering such as 'instant basil foam' and other high-end garnishes and dressings, the sort of thing that only the greatest chefs were producing just five years ago. If these are now available to establishments which are, shall we say, more in the mainstream of the catering trade, then how long before those products are available to the general public? How long before every hostess in the Home Counties is offering snail porridge as a starter (and, perhaps, pretending that she cooked it herself)?"

So are they suggesting that the average diner really can't tell the difference between the work of a leading-edge chef and something off-the-shelf from Waitrose?

"That's a very good question," says Wayne. "Obviously there is a constituency of diners unconnected with the restaurant trade who eat out regularly at quality establishments and know their stuff, as well as trusting their favourite restaurants to keep coming up with something new, creative and exciting." I begin to get the idea. But how many of these aficionados are there? What percentage of the dining public do they form? Nobody knows, of course, but trends are pervasive. A chef comes up with a new idea, and creates it for the restaurant, usually after a lot of bloodletting with the kitchen brigade, FOH and management

teams, it catches on. Six months later teams of journeyman chefs at Waitrose, Selfridges and Sainsburys are recreating it in DIY form, and a year later it's on the shelves and everybody's cooking it.

Is this a good thing? Is it stealing and rehashing trade secrets? "Yes" and "No" say The Food People. "Yes" it's a good thing because it raises the game for enthusiastic home cooks who want to aspire to something special and who, as a result, may very well graduate to visiting quality restaurants themselves to suss out the trends before the retailers get hold of them. And as for the 'trade secrets' argument: well, "No", that's a bit 19th-century. To use one of the oldest clichés in the book, creativity in any field – art, music, literature, cooking, interior design – never stands still. Like Alice Through the Looking Glass you have to run just to keep up with the landscape. If you want to get anywhere you have to run twice as fast.

There have always been leaders and followers and, the way things have panned out, the restaurant trade provides the leaders, and the retail trade the followers. No sooner has a chef

come up with a great new idea than copycat versions will start to appear. There's nothing you can do to stop it happening... Except to keep coming up with more new ideas. It sounds like a big call, and it is. But that's what sorts the men from the boys in the kitchen.

Early warning – this is what The Food People are predicting to be the next big things in off-the-shelf DIY retail cookery: "The mega trends for 2008 include British and nostalgia foods such as pies and fish and chips making a real comeback, as well as the chefs of Spain continuing to push the culinary boundaries of what is possible in food. Japanese and oriental food will continue to rise in popularity with ingredients such as miso, wasabi and mirin, as well as sushi and bento all on the increase."

Well, that's their view of the situation. What's yours?

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