

FOLLOWING IN FERRAN'S FOOTSTEPS

Molecular gastronomy as a culinary movement – aka deconstruction cuisine – informs the preparation and presentation of many top chefs. Susan Reynard reports.



RESTAURANT MOSAIC © DYLAN SWART



FERRAN ADRIÀ

Ferran Adrià is considered the father of molecular gastronomy. His cuisine had its heyday in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Fast forward to 2018 and many chefs have come through this era with more than a nod to Ferran's brilliance, bravery and bold approach to recipes in their own culinary repertoire. Deconstruction cuisine, the preferred term, requires a solid basis in the basics of cooking before play can begin.

DECONSTRUCTION

Award-winning chef Richard Carstens from Tokara Restaurant outside Stellenbosch is a huge fan of Ferran. He was fascinated by the techniques and learned all he could about the cuisine as it was unfolding overseas, buying Adrià's original cookbooks in Spanish plus a dictionary to unlock the secrets in the recipes. He explains, "I read about Ferran Adrià in the late 1990s, about savoury ice cream, blurring the lines between savoury and sweet. My restaurant manager and sommelier at La Provençal and Lynton Hall, Germain Lehodey and I worked together for about nine years. He saw the whole beginning of my journey with deconstruction cuisine. My first savoury ice cream in 1999 became a signature of mine: gorgonzola ice cream with poached pears,

honey and walnuts. We tested and offered tasting samples to people before we served it as a dish."

Richard recalls another signature dish, "Five ways with trout", in which the fifth element is a smoked salmon ice cream. A variation of this dish is served in his restaurant almost 20 years later, proving that Ferran's futuristic take on cuisine remains part of the diner's current lexicon. Gorgonzola ice cream is now made with honeycomb, walnut crumble and yoghurt. Smoked salmon ice cream has evolved into "Baked Alaska of rainbow trout", with citrus salsa, cucumber, rainbow trout caviar and a ginger soya mirin sauce.

"The first foam we made was a pinotage foam out of a cream gun served with ostrich at Lynton Hall. That's when I started exploring and doing a degustation menu that changed every single night. Foams, airs, alginates, calcium lactates – people thought it was all chemicals but these are all plant based, so not that Frankenstein!" says Richard.

He was transfixed by transforming the shape and texture of ingredients. He and his team examined the science of the process but also how to really distil the essence of an ingredient. "It's not deconstruction and reassembling, like the philosopher Derrida discusses, but a freedom of creativity and a free flow of ideas.

MICHELIN MAN OF MYSTERY

Ferran Adrià is the chef who is most associated with the molecular gastronomy movement at his restaurant in Spain, El Bulli. His mantra is "creativity is not copying". He took the then brave and risky decision in the mid 1990's to move away from traditional French and nouvelle cuisine into what later became known as molecular gastronomy. Ingredients were subjected to all manner of experimentation and scientific analysis as he sought unexpected sensations, evocative flavours and innovative textures. He pioneered foams and spherification in foods that were equal parts science and whimsy. His restaurant, which achieved three Michelin stars, closed in 2011 as he moved closer to the research and development side of this type of cuisine.

The BBC reported at the time: "The restaurant was unconventional in many respects - it was shut for lunch to give staff time to develop new dishes - and reservations in the 50-seat venue were acquired mostly by lottery. Dinner consisted of a set menu comprising some 40 small dishes costing about 250 euros (£220) [at the time of closing]. It was five times named best restaurant in the world by the San Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants produced by *Restaurant* magazine, based on the opinions of some 800 chefs, critics and industry experts. The accolade though was not one with which Mr Adrià entirely concurred. 'It is not the best restaurant in the world because that does not exist, but it is today the most influential place in the world in terms of cuisine, and especially when it comes to creativity.'" The BBC reporter added, "The restaurant, which specialised in molecular gastronomy, opened for only six months of the year and, despite its reputation, never turned a profit." >



CHEF RICHARD CARSTENS



CHANTEL DARTNALL, RESTAURANT
MOSAIC AT ORIENT BOUTIQUE
HOTEL ©LISA HNATOWICZ

What Ferran Adrià wanted to create was a new language of food," Richard notes. He recalls cauliflower couscous, sea-flavoured emulsion thickened with Ultra-Tex, pickled ginger with coconut air. By the end of 2003 he served his first air: "I used to love beautifully plating a dish and then covering it with an 'air'," he adds.

Richard's cuisine has evolved and while he still maintains a modernist approach to dishes, he does look at how he can produce a purer flavour of an ingredient. He recommends young chefs master the art of proper emulsification, thickening, gelification and how to distil the essence of something after they have mastered classic cuisine.

BOTANICAL

Chantel Dartnall, another multi award-winning chef/patron of Restaurant Mosaic at Orient Boutique Hotel outside Pretoria. Her cuisine is as beautiful as it is innovative. "I would say multi-sensory cooking is the term that best describes our food and menu philosophy at Mosaic, but when it comes to molecular cuisine it is important to understand that there is a continuous reinvention, not only in cuisine but also in other disciplines because mankind cannot stagnate and must have evolution," explains Chantel. "This was the case when Ferran Adrià created el Bulli and a new way to look at food and cuisine emerged. As with all things in life, the newness is less bright and the concept of molecular gastronomy is declining across the globe. I truly can't say that we practice molecular gastronomy at Mosaic, although my kitchen brigade is comfortable to implement and use any of the molecular philosophies.



ALCHEMISTS INFUSION, RESTAURANT MOSAIC © DYLAN SWART

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I still believe that the encompassing term that we prefer in describing us and the cuisine that we represent is 'botanical', which embraces a respectful approach to nature and the fullness of what nature has to offer - even down to the beneficial properties of an individual ingredient."

Chantel says her core focus is

to represent "Nature's natural nuances" and in every menu they create, this is always the driving force. They continuously explore new methods and techniques to bring out the purest flavours of the ingredients. She notes, "Everything new is a challenge, not only because of the newness but also because of the

uncertainty of success, but if you are attune to yourself and you are confident and centred in your beliefs, any subject becomes one with your philosophy and it all becomes easy, as if the cosmos itself provides you with a continuous stream of broadband ideas."

Although Chantel doesn't cook in a molecular fashion, she does use spherification as a culinary process on the current menu, where sodium alginate and calcium lactate are used to shape a liquid into a beautiful sphere. This requires minimal equipment and they use a silicone mould to shape the spheres and a slotted spoon to remove these liquid droplets from the algin bath. >

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BAKED ALASKA, TOKARA RESTAURANT

TREND WATCH

Chantel shares a few key trends in cuisine from her extensive travels to watch out for:

- **"Botanical Bliss"**: Internationally, more chefs are moving back to a more botanical approach and away from molecular techniques. Many of the chefs well-versed in botanical cuisine continue to push the boundaries of innovation.
- **"Personal Perfection"**: A lot of chefs are really personalising their style of cooking and this is becoming more prominent in the diversity of food that is

currently on offer on menus around the globe. Chefs are allowing their true creativity to be featured on the plates and also focus on the essence of ingredients: it's all about incredible, memorable, unique experiences.

- **"Smoke and Mirrors"**: Chefs are using a lot of smoking, scorching and barbecuing on open flames techniques, in some cases even at the table (smoke captured in a little cloche which is opened at the table as it infuses a sliver of tuna or carrot carpaccio);

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Some of the ingredients and equipment used to create modernist cuisine:

- Agar-agar
- Gelatine
- Alginate
- Calcium lactate
- Soy lethicin
- Kappa carrageenan
- Immersion stick blender
- Immersion circulator (sous vide cooker)
- Siphon
- Liquid nitrogen
- Pacojet (if you can afford one) >