

UNDER VACUUM

Tom Shingler heads to L'enclume – Simon Rogan's critically acclaimed double Michelin-starred restaurant – to discover the art of sous vide cooking, before trying it himself in the comfort of his own home

Sous vide has a bit of a stigma attached to it. Expensive kit, bulky equipment and waiting an hour for an egg to cook doesn't really scream accessibility, and the method was a closely guarded secret of professional chefs for years.

However, it's been gaining momentum with home cooks across the UK and shedding some of the mystery surrounding it. But how does it work, and does it live up to all the hype?

To find out, I headed to L'enclume, voted the best restaurant in the UK by the 2014 Good Food Guide. The Mecca of amazing British food (a lot of it sourced from owner Simon Rogan's farm literally down the road) uses cutting-edge techniques to create mind-blowing dishes in terms of both taste and flavour. Fresh, natural dishes look like works of art and are like nothing you've ever eaten before – ingredients like apple marigold (a leaf that looks like parsley and tastes like an orchard), plump purple shiso cress and pumpkin seedlings are just a few of the rare herbs that Simon grows on his



farm to use in his cooking.

Joining me on the trip was Alex Shannon, founder of sousvidetools.com, one of the few British websites where people can buy the kit to start 'sous videing' at home. "The price has come down massively in the past few years, so it's a lot more accessible," he tells me. "A lot of our customers are obviously very into their gadgets and pretty accomplished cooks already, but we also have some who are completely new to cooking. What really surprised me were the bodybuilders who buy the kits, as cooking under vacuum seals all the protein and nutrients into food, so it's good for their diets."

When we arrived in Cartmel – a village that can only be described as idyllic – we were welcomed into L'enclume's development kitchen and

introduced to the team. Head chef Mark Birchall was manning the machinery while head of research and development Chet Sharma took us through the techniques and explained the science behind them in true scientist style; there were PDF presentations, petri dishes and plenty of charts and diagrams.

But this wasn't like any other science lesson. The session was peppered with miniature dishes which showed off everything sous vide can do – pork shoulder which genuinely melted on the tongue; perfectly pink duck breast with skin like puff pastry and an egg yolk with such an amazing texture I don't think I'll ever forget it. Everything was cooked in a water bath, which makes it sound easy – just season, vacuum-pack, submerge in the water and set a timer – but, as I had to keep reminding myself, we were in a Michelin-starred restaurant, eating the best British produce prepared by the country's best chefs.

The team had made it look easy and even helped me to understand the basic science behind sous vide cooking (chemistry was never my strong point at school). Now it was time to see if I could replicate any of it in my own kitchen.

All the beefiness had been locked into the meat and the peppery flavour had infiltrated every part of the steak

TEST 1: The Egg

I was told the amazing egg yolk I'd eaten at L'enclume was one of the easiest things to recreate in the sous vide. It didn't require any vacuum packing – you simply heat the water to 62°C and pop a few eggs in there for an hour. After waiting quite a while for the water to heat up (I have since discovered that boiling the kettle and giving the heater a helping hand is much quicker) I added my eggs, made a cup of tea and waited some more. It's quite a bit different from traditional cooking as there's nothing you can do except sit about until it's ready. Even with a slow-roast you can peer into the oven when you're feeling a bit restless, but sous vide is all about precision and time; the last thing you want to do is start messing about with it.

After the hour was up I fished the eggs out of the water and cracked them onto some (traditionally cooked!) buttered toast. The ghostly, just-set whites of the egg slipped out of



the shell and sat on the toast like little orbs, which looked very neat, but the real wow-factor came when I cracked open the yolk. Just a tiny prod with a knife meant all the yellow oozed out in slow-motion, tasting delicious and absolutely hypnotising to watch. I would have preferred them to be a little firmer myself, but that's the thing with sous vide – it's about experimenting and playing around with times and temperatures until you get food exactly how you want it. I increased the temperature by a couple of degrees and my next eggs on toast banquet was absolutely perfect.

TEST 2: The Steak

Now it was time to step up proceedings. If this went wrong, I wouldn't just lose a mere egg; I'd be destroying some very nice rib-eye steaks fresh from the butcher. I seasoned the steaks and placed them in separate bags with a little butter. Once they'd been 'vac-packed' I dropped them into the 58°C water for an hour.

When they came out they didn't look particularly appetising, but they still needed finishing off in a pan. After a flash fry of 20 seconds each side to sear the outside they were ready and looked a lot better. They were a little on the medium-well side (which is easily fixed with dropping the temperature by a few degrees) but tasted absolutely fantastic – all the beefiness had been locked into the meat, the flavour of the pepper had somehow magnified and infiltrated every part of the steak and the texture was the perfect balance between firm and tender. While the process lacked the primal enjoyment of throwing a slab of meat on a hot pan with all the smoke and smells of traditional cooking, the finished product more than made up for it and was one of the nicest steaks I've ever eaten.

KIT GUIDE



1 PolyScience Discovery Sous Vide Thermal Circulator

Heats and circulates water. It simply hangs over the side of a pot, is clamped into place and maintains a constant temperature. £250 from sousvidetools.com



2 PolyScience 150 Series Vacuum Packer

Used to seal food inside plastic bags by sucking all the air out of them. It can also help with marinating and pickling. £98.99 from sousvidetools.com



3 Sous Vide – The Art of Precision Cooking

You can learn a lot of basic recipes from the internet, but this book is great as it's the first one to be published with all the correct British measurements. £23.99 from sousvidetools.com



SOUS VIDE HOW IT WORKS

Sous vide literally translates to 'under vacuum' and is a catch-all term for cooking vacuum-packed food in precisely heated water.

1 Place your food (usually a nice piece of meat or some good quality vegetables) in a bag with any seasoning or other flavours you want it to take on.

2 Attach the bag to the vacuum sealer and let it suck all the air out and seal the bag with heat.

3 Once your immersion heater has reached the perfect temperature, submerge the bag in the water, cover and leave for however long the recipe requires.

4 Most meat will need a final flash fry in a pan to add colour and browning right before serving.

TEST 3: Marinating and Pickling

There was no need for the immersion heater here, so back in the cupboard it went. I sliced some cucumbers, added them to the vacuum chamber (basically a plastic box with an adapter that will attach to the sealer), poured over the pickling liquid and turned the machine on. It sucks all the air out – you can see little bubbles emerging from the cucumbers – which leaves room for the pickling juices to permeate the vegetables. It's incredibly clever and means you don't have to leave something to pickle for days in the fridge. The cucumbers look amazing too –

the pressure turns them translucent, which is incredible to watch.

The same principle applies to marinating meat – I took some diced chicken and covered it in a chilli and herb sauce, then flash-marinated. This wasn't quite as effective as an overnight stint in the fridge, but still significantly better than if I hadn't done anything to it at all. And it only took a few minutes!

Since my three experiments I've been getting better and better at sous vide – while it sounds very simple on paper, there is more of a learning curve than I first thought. It really does produce some fantastic tasting food, but it's the texture

that really impresses me. The way the vacuum sealer can marinate and pickle almost instantly is also an invaluable tool – something that actually saves time, instead of taking longer like the immersion heater. Whether it's going to become the new microwave (as Heston Blumenthal proclaims) still remains to be seen, but it's certainly a lot more accessible for home cooks compared to a few years ago. Alex told me a lot of people who buy equipment through his website use their kits at least two or three times a week – while I don't think I'll be that organised any time soon, I'll certainly be using it for dinner parties when I want to show off!