

The sleuth in the kitchen

BY RUSS PARSONS
LOS ANGELES TIMES

It wasn't so long ago that we learned to cook from an authority figure — our mother, our boss, Julia. They showed us how to do something, and we did it — without asking questions or demanding answers. But these days, the thirst for explanation is bottomless, either to help in actual cooking or to use as ammunition in online arguments.

Stepping into the fray this month is J. Kenji Lopez-Alt, whose new book, "The Food Lab" (W.W. Norton), is a lavishly illustrated, 950-page, 6½-pound exploration of how science works in cooking that's sure to be one of the big books of the fall cookbook season.

Lopez-Alt will already be familiar to many. After graduating from MIT (with a degree in architecture), he worked at Christopher Kimball's Cook's Illustrated magazine, the monthly missal for the explanation-obsessed. For the last six years, he's been the author of the Food Lab column on the Serious Eats website, billed as "unraveling the mysteries of home cooking through science." The book is a compilation of those columns, plus lots of new material.

"The Food Lab" is loaded with fascinating information, all of it pegged directly to explaining how the basic processes of cooking work. This is an important distinction, as kitchen science is most valuable when it's rooted in practice. (Full disclosure: In 2001 I published a book on kitchen science called "How to Read a French Fry," which Lopez-Alt credits in his acknowledgments.)

"The Food Lab" falls somewhere between the pure science of Harold McGee's elegant essays in "On Food and Cooking" and the geeky excursions in Nathan Myhrvold's "Modernist Cuisine." Lopez-Alt gives you enough science for the explanations to make sense, but everything is still firmly rooted in practical home cooking. While it could be read straight through, thanks to Lopez-Alt's breezy conversational style, it's probably most helpful when you want to learn about a specific topic.

Maybe the most valuable thing science can contribute to cooking is its method of inquiry — theories are worthless if they can't be verified. This is where "The Food Lab" shines, when in addition to offering the theoretical explanation of what's hap-

pening, Lopez-Alt grounds his findings in experimentation he's carried out. When should you salt a steak? Lopez-Alt tested half a dozen different timings and found that salting either an hour before or just before cooking was best.

When do you salt a hamburger? Or a sausage? The answers are different because the desired results are too. Lopez-Alt found that you want a looser, more crumbly texture for a hamburger, so you're better off salting just the outside of the formed patty right before cooking — salting earlier will create protein linkages that will turn the burger dense. You prefer that kind of texture in a sausage, however, so you salt earlier. To make his point, Lopez-Alt dropped a Dutch oven on each hamburger sample and observed how it splattered. Science does not need to be dull.

Granted, the search for the perfect cooking technique sometimes leads to unnecessary "MacGyvering" — torturing a process so a simple task winds up being needlessly complicated. To hard-boil an egg, Lopez-Alt drops it into boiling water for 30 seconds, adds ice cubes to stop the boiling, returns the water to exactly 190

degrees and then cooks for 11 minutes.

But that's not unexpected in this kind of book, and it may even be desirable — Cook's Illustrated has built a million subscribers doing just that kind of thing.

The book is also studded with hundreds of recipes, mostly the sorts of dishes that adapt so well to the home kitchen. There is a lot of ground beef (hamburgers, meatloaf), but there are few trips into molecular cooking (sous-vide is limited to what can be done in an ice chest, no exotic thickeners here).

The Peruvian-style roasted chicken was terrific (rubbed with spices, spatchcocked and cooked at high temperature to get a really crisp skin). Even better was Lopez-Alt's simple technique for roasted potatoes. He uses bakers rather than boilers, simmers them until they're almost tender, then tosses them in a pan with fat and to rough up the edges (to set up the best crust). After roasting at 450 degrees for an hour, these were the crispest, lightest roasted potatoes I'd ever made.

It may be, as he says, just a matter of building up a coating of dehydrated gelatinized starch, but these potatoes were seriously delicious. Which is, after all, the whole point.

Peruvian-Style Roast Chicken With Spicy Jalapeno Sauce

Serves 3 or 4

Sauce
2-3 jalapenos, seeded and roughly chopped
1 cup chopped cilantro leaves
2 cloves garlic, minced or grated on a microplane (about 2 teaspoons)
½ cup mayonnaise
¼ cup sour cream
2 tablespoons aji Amarillo paste (optional)
2 teaspoons fresh lime juice (1 lime)
1 teaspoon white vinegar
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

Combine the jalapenos, cilantro, garlic, mayonnaise, sour cream, chile paste, lime juice and vinegar in the jar of a blender, and blend on high speed until smooth. With the blender running, slowly drizzle in the olive oil. Season to taste with ½ teaspoon salt and ½ teaspoon pepper, or to taste. This makes about 1 cup sauce, which can be stored in a sealed container in the refrigerator for up to 1 week.

Chicken
1 tablespoon ground cumin
1 tablespoon paprika
3 cloves garlic, minced or grated on a microplane (about 1 tablespoon)
1 tablespoon distilled white vinegar
2 teaspoons kosher salt
1 teaspoon freshly ground

black pepper
1 tablespoon oil
1 (3½- to 4-pound) chicken, butterflied
Peruvian-style spicy jalapeno sauce

1. Adjust an oven rack to the upper-middle position and heat the oven to 450 degrees.

2. In a small bowl, combine the cumin, paprika, garlic, vinegar, salt, pepper and oil, and massage together with your fingertips.

3. Dry the chicken thoroughly. Separate the chicken skin from the breasts. Spread the spice mixture evenly over the chicken and all under the skin.

4. Set a wire rack on a rimmed baking sheet lined with aluminum foil. Position the chicken so that the breasts are in the center of the baking sheet and the legs are close to the edges. Roast until the thickest part of the breast close to the bone registers 160 degrees on an instant-read thermometer, 35 to 45 minutes.

5. Transfer the chicken to a cutting board, tent loosely with foil and let it rest for 10 minutes, then carve and serve with the spicy jalapeno sauce, if desired.

NOTE: Adapted from recipes found in "The Food Lab" by J. Kenji Lopez-Alt. Aji amarillo paste can be found in select gourmet and Latin markets, as well as online.



KATHLEEN PIERCE | BDN

A new tasting room at Ricker Hill Orchards showcases the farm's new line of Maniac hard ciders in cranberry, blueberry and maple varieties.



Cider

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relegated to the press room. There they are mashed into a pulp. Next the cider is pressed and yeast added. The juice then ferments in stainless steel tanks, where it turns into hard cider.

"We start with real apples. Not concentrate," said Andy Ricker, who gives tours of the process to guests.

The orchard has 15 acres of traditional hard cider apples spread from Auburn to Farmington. Varieties such as early American gold russet, bitter-sweet Dabinett apples and sweet sharp Wickson apples make up the sophisticated Mainiac Black cider. The dry and tart cider is only available

on site. On the other end of the spectrum, their popular Mac blend is sweet and available in cans for mass appeal. Next year Andy Ricker says they will have more hard cider apples to experiment with.

And more venues to knock some back.

Wallingford's Orchard in Auburn added a Mainiac cider tasting stand this season.

"We've had a very good response. It rounds out the overall experience and is another option for people who don't have children," said Peter Ricker, who runs this nearby orchard.

While beer and wine may suggest a tavern, cider speaks farmhouse — a no-frills drink sans snobbery. What's the best way to enjoy it?

"Any way you like it," said Andy Ricker.

Caron

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gether. People matter. The people you are with matter.

And this weekend, don't stress when your friends come over for game day. Maybe you won't tuck away the phones, but consider it. And plan a menu that will let you be in the moment, enjoying their company and whatever game you toss up on the screen.

Perhaps even make these sandwiches.

A crispy roll. Bright pesto. Sweet roasted red peppers. Salty bacon. Creamy cheese. Meaty turkey. These party sandwiches have a little of everything and serve a crowd with minimal fuss. Better yet, the flavor is incredible.

Sarah Walker Caron is the senior features editor for the Bangor Daily News and author of "Grains as Mains: Modern Recipes Using Ancient Grains." For more delicious recipes, check out Maine Course at mainecourse.bangordailynews.com.



BDN FILE

Malcolm Bedell will move his food truck operation 'Wich, Please indoors for the winter.

Truck

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downtown Rockland a warm, vibrant place year round."

"These kinds of partnerships are rare in our industry," said Comida owner Lisa Laurita-Spanglet. "But we believe that sharing the resources we have, especially during the slower off-season, is a fun and innovative way to contribute to the success of both businesses. Our intent is that this collaboration could exemplify a creative, new approach to small business."

Bedell raised nearly \$30,000 in startup funds for the food truck through the

entrepreneurial website Kickstarter. Depending on how much they pledged, backers received items such as bumper stickers, Twitter shoutouts, free sandwiches, signed copies of Bedell's cookbook and permission to cut to the front of the line at the sandwich truck.

He purchased the concession trailer — outfitted with a grill, refrigerator and a deep fryer — in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Bedell has placed the food truck up for sale on Craigslist for \$13,500.

He said if the truck sells, he wants to use the proceeds to open a bricks-and-mortar restaurant. If not, he will return to Buoy Park with the truck next year.

Oliver

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Got tomatoes? I chunk them up, put them in a zipper-closing bag, lay them flat in the freezer to solidify, then stack up to store. They are perfect for soups, sauces and stews. Alternatively, freeze them whole on a tray, then knock them into a plastic bag to store, a trick I learned 40 years ago. My friend and seasonal neighbor Kay Wood used to skin tomatoes, and put them separately into plastic bags with a bread bag closer between each one, and select one to use to chop or slice when partly thawed.

Got peppers? Chop or slice, freeze them on a cookie sheet, knock off into a zipper-closed bag and freeze. When you need some, shake out the desired amount.

Got a few green beans? Ditto above.

Got zucchini? Quickest way to get rid of this stuff is to grate it, and spoon it into zip-closing bags and freeze them flat. If you have a favorite zucchini bread or cake, measure out the amount of zuke you need into the freezer bag, and that way you can thaw a premeasured amount to use. I dump



SANDY OLIVER

Corn Relish.

grated zucchini into spaghetti sauces, chili and soups to veg it up a little where it seems to melt away. Alternatively, roast chunks of zuke or summer squash dribbled with olive oil (and seasoned with garlic) in an oven at 425 for hardly any time — say 15 minutes — then freeze them in plastic bags. Rewarm as a fast veg for supper.

Got corn? Slice it raw off the cob into a bowl, spoon into a plastic bag, zip it closed and freeze flat. Pull out for a side for supper or as an ingredient wherever cut corn is needed

(like corn chowder or succotash).

Or you could make one good corn relish. I was visiting my friend and island-neighbor Sharon Daley, who was making salsa and had more tomatoes than she wanted but was willing to share. She makes salsa to mix with corn relish to serve. I never thought I liked corn relish but Sharon gave me a taste of hers, which I thought was wonderful, and she said, "I knew I could convert you!" I went home and made a batch. Here is the recipe, easily doubled if you wish.

Corn Relish

7 half-pints

5 cups of corn, cut off the cob
1 large red pepper, diced
1 large green pepper diced
1¼ cups of celery diced
1 medium onion chopped
¾ cup sugar
2½ cups white vinegar
1¼ tablespoons salt
1¼ teaspoons celery seed
1¼ tablespoons mustard seeds
½ teaspoon turmeric

Mix everything together, bring to a boil, reduce the heat and simmer for 5 minutes.

Fill your sterilized jars, close with lids and rings, and process for 15 minutes in a boiling water bath.

Send queries or answers to Sandy Oliver, 1061 Main Road, Islesboro 04848. Email sandyloliver47@gmail.com. For recipes, tell us where they came from, list ingredients, specify number of servings and do not abbreviate measurements. Include name, address and daytime phone number. And make sure to check out Sandy's blog at taste buds. bangordailynews.com.

Acadia's 20th Annual Oktoberfest
October 9, 10 & 11, 2015

Friday: 4pm - 8pm
• Wine Tasting with Cheese & Hors D'oeuvres 4-6pm
• Music by the Crown Vics downtown 5-8pm
• Demonstration Pumpkin Carving by the 11th Hour Farming
• Artists during the afternoon

Saturday & Sunday: 12pm-5pm
• Craft Beer Tastings
• Special Infusions Table
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Must be 21 or older to enter Beer Tent, unless accompanied by an adult or legal guardian. No strollers or unattended children!
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