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A Saucy Tale



Buttered beet splat from Atelier Restaurant. Photo by Miv Photography.

By Leslie Wu, editorial director

Whether it's a signifier of a chef's self expression or an homage to formal methods, sauces can be the highlight or the bane of a modern kitchen.

"I think sauces are a big, big part of any kitchen. The common person doesn't realize that the sauce position in a restaurant is probably the premier position; one of the most important in the kitchen," says Jason Bangerter, executive chef of Cambridge, ON-based Langdon Hall. Sauces are near and dear to Bangerter's heart: as a former saucier at Mosimann's in London, England, he knows the labour and concentration needed to hold that station.

At Langdon Hall, the saucier is responsible for up to 20 different sauces plus a number of stocks and, on top of that, 10 soups. "There's an awful lot that goes with that position, and it's not just about putting ingredients into a pot and simmering away and voila," says Bangerter. "It takes skill and technique and flavours in every single stock, sauce and soup need to be layered, so each step is important in the finished product. It's a very challenging but exciting position."

Whether your kitchen contains a saucier or not, sauces can be a time consuming but fun way for chefs to express their inner flow and involve their team in creating something new. From the intricacies of gels to the mechanics of using a duck press, nine chefs share their best tips, tricks and techniques when it comes to saucing.

Sauce and sensibilities: current trends

At Toronto's Canoe restaurant, former saucier and current junior sous chef John Fornier makes eight sauces daily, split between lunch and dinner, which translates to between 10 and 12 litres of sauce.

"Diners are looking for something lighter," he says. "The traditional sauces are delicious but they're pretty heavy and gelatinous and you can only put an ounce or two on a plate because it's such a concentrated thing. When you move into these more lighter style sauces, you can have more variety of





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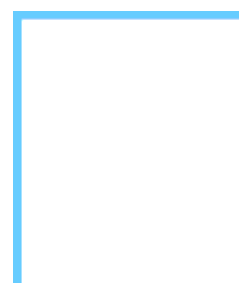
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flavour to it, because it's not just going to taste like the veal or chicken or whatever you're using; it's going to be fresh and really pop that flavour." Fornier sees more chefs moving to natural pan juices and citrus vinaigrettes for main courses.

"It's considered a little bit old school to do a thick sauce," says Yves Moscato, corporate chef at Produits Alimentaires Berthelet. "Jus is considered to be a more natural product."

Veal stock-based sauces, once a hallmark of sauce repertoire, can be time and labour intensive, clashing with the restrictions of a smaller kitchen and crew.

"I think there's a lot of people moving away from traditional veal jus-based sauces, due to the manpower and labour that it takes to make the stock," says Fraser Macfarlane, chef/owner of Quatrefoil in Dundas, ON. "After it's reduced down to what you want, it's pretty staggering the yield you actually get. A lot of people are surprised when you explain the whole process and how a 16 litre bucket will get reduced down to 5 or 6 litres at the end of the day."

In addition, a health conscious consumer may, however erroneously, equate a lighter sauce with a lower calorie count. "This thing about fat and the notion of sauce as obscuring something under it is just wrong. It's the opposite: a sauce should enhance and magnify," says James Peterson, a New York-based restaurant owner, chef instructor and author of *Sauces*. "I get very aggravated when I see people complain that there's a bit of butter in their sauce, when they've had four tablespoons of butter in their dinner entrée and ice cream for dessert."

At Blacktree Restaurant in Burlington, ON, chef/owner Matteo Paonessa uses juices from vegetables and fruits in his sauces, as well as coconut milk for dairy-free options. With the wild game found on his menu, he likes to pair items such as red deer, an extremely lean meat, with red berry for a tart note.

"When you're eating a piece of meat that doesn't have that beautiful fat in it, I don't want to bring in more fat," he says. "We like to use a nice pungent berry to wake you up a bit."



Humboldt squid with caribou moss, clementine and sea buckthorn from Langdon Hall.

Laying on the sauce: plating perspectives

The question of whether to sauce over the top of a protein or underneath is a divisive topic among chefs. At the heart of the matter lies the ability to control how the diner is interacting with the plate.

If the meat is carved, it's essential to sauce over top, in Fornier's opinion. "We have a duck breast on the menu and it's sliced very thin. As soon as it's sliced, the sauce absorbs in, and helps improve moisture and the plate eats better," he says. "If it's something that's just going to be picked up on the fork and eaten, it definitely needs to be sauced over top."

For a protein meant to be cut at the table, such as a beef tenderloin, Fornier feels the plate can be sauced, since the diner will get sauce on the food through the act of cutting into it.

Other chefs prefer to sauce under or around the plate to avoid hiding the protein.

"I'll very rarely dump a ladle of veal jus directly on top of the protein. For certain things like grilled tenderloins, I'll put a small spoon to glaze the top of the steak, but generally, I'll sauce around it," says Macfarlane.

Although dots of sauce remain popular, some chefs feel this technique has had its day. "The dots of gels that you see on plates these days are so common, it's gotten to the point where I'm starting to tell cooks, 'no more dots'," laughs Lepine. For Atelier's herb purées and pestos, Lepine takes disks or ring molds and stamps them into the sauce and onto the plate to get a circular pattern. Another technique Lepine enjoys is using a spoon to splat



thick items such as a beet and butter puree on a plate. "It looks streaky and kind of wild," he says.

When plating, the advantage of a gel-thickened sauce is that it doesn't dry the same way a gelatin-enriched reduced stock sauce does, so it can be plated five or 10 minutes ahead and retain its shape, says Lepine.

At Canoe, Fournier prefers schmears for the control over the dining experience.

"The smear is good for a good pop of colour, and if you get a good smear on the plate, you can plate inside of that purée," he says. "It's forcing the diner to eat how you want. You'll never get someone sending a plate back with a giant dollop of sauce on the side that they didn't eat, which would have been incredible on the dish."

To get these effects onto the plate, chefs are moving beyond the squeeze bottle. "I'm seeing a few newer techniques evolving from schmears and swipes: people are using different styles of paint brushes and pastry bags with flat edges for thicker purees to enhance the presentation," says Lepine.

Some chefs are also playing with a split sauce, traditionally considered a saucier error, as a technique to add texture when plating. At Langdon Hall, Bangerter adds oil and vinegar to a classic brown pigeon jus. "It becomes this sort of bubbly vinaigrette that's been bound by pigeon jus on the plate so that it looks completely different and adds a different element of flavour," he says. Colour can also be changed up through contrast. "If you use a coloured oil with parsley so it's bright green and then you've got a dark jus colour and a little bit of yellow cold pressed olive oil, it's a very dramatic presentation."

Boiling points: tips on technique



From the manuals of chef school to shouted instructions from a chef during service, there are many ways to make (and break) a sauce.

Thinking about the entire dish and tasting throughout is a basic, but crucial step. "Oftentimes, chefs think about building sauces and taste it and like it, and put it on steak, chicken breast or vegetables, but the sauce can taste flat, because they didn't account for space on palate that those items occupy," says Hunter.

One of the easiest mistakes that can be made is boiling, which can affect more than just taste. "If you're boiling a sauce, it's going to emulsify the fat back into it and it's going to transfer more of your sauce back into the meat and vegetables that are in there, giving you a lower yield," says Fournier. "So, where you would have gotten a litre and a half of sauce, now you'll get a litre and a quarter." Boiling the sauce can also create other issues of clarity and mouthfeel. "If the fat gets emulsified back in, it will coat the tongue and you won't be able to taste the rest of what else is on the plate," says Fournier.

Another issue with boiling is the potential for over reduction, which Macfarlane warns can produce a sauce that can be too acidic or tannic, especially with red wine sauces. "You've got to taste and adjust throughout, but that last minute before service is really important," he says.

When making a sauce, be very careful to recoup the liquid that gathers

under the protein and deliver it back into the sauce, delivering that central flavour back into the dish, says Peterson.

Making sure that you're constantly skimming the impurities and the fat that's rising to the top of that sauce is going to be a big part of how that sauce ends up turning out in the end, says Bangerter. "Every step that you take, whether it's sautéing mirepoix in the beginning and adding your roasted bones, and doing your first reduction of wine or alcohol: each step should taste good enough to serve. It's not just following steps and saying at the end, 'oh, it's great.' You have to take the time all the way through to make sure that at the end, it's the best that it can be."

MAKING YOUR BONES

Although roasting off bones for stock is a tried and true method in sauce making, a couple of chefs are taking bones to a whole new level, enriching both the sauce and the tableside experience.

At Langdon Hall, Bangerter's wildflower smoked pigeon, with champagne blackberries, swiss chard and jus de caisson is prepared using a Japanese smoking method. Equal parts dried flowers and herbs, a little citrus with sugar, salt and uncooked rice are caramelized in a pan and raw pigeon sits above it. The caramel as it cooks out creates a "beautiful aromatic, floral, sweet and savoury smoke that the pigeon takes on," says Bangerter. Once the pigeon is cleaned and butchered, the smoked bones goes towards a jus, where wildflower tea is steeped and added to the stock to add another floral note.

The dish, plated tableside, consists of a whole pigeon leg with talon attached, where the flesh is pounded out and the leg is used as a casing for a hand-cut brunoise sausage of bacon, pigeon and foie gras.

"As servers pour the sauce tableside, they're talking about all the components of the dish and how the sauce was made," says Bangerter.

The duck press at Toronto's Edulis restaurant is a special item for four people available on a by order basis, says chef/owner Michael Caballo. "The duck press method is all about the sauce; it's the perfect canvas. The blood gives richness and thickens the sauce," he says.

Starting with a duck killed in a specific way to preserve the blood in the body, and aged to the restaurant's specifications, the bones are cut up and placed in the press tableside, crushing the bones and extracting the blood and marrow. Chef Tobey Nemeth then starts the base of the sauce with a duck stock and an apple eau de vie with some shallots on a burner next to the table. As the duck stock is reducing, the duck blood and carcass juices go into the pan, which immediately starts to thicken. The sauce is adjusted with vinegar and some sweetness and, at the very end, a final whisking of foie gras is added.

The tableside elements and understanding the nature of blood and its actions in a sauce can create challenges. "You can easily walk away and come back to a scorched sauce, because it will coagulate quickly," says Caballo. Constant whisking is required, as well as straining through a fine strainer to remove the grainy bits that accumulate as the blood coagulates. "It doesn't taste bloody like a puréed liver, or challenging or harsh. It's more elegant," says Caballo. "It's simply a sense of richness, velvety and thick." Caballo enjoys the traditional aspect of offering the duck press to select guests, adding flair to tableside presentation. "When you're doing something like this, there's a show to it and a sense of being connected to history and the ingredients," he says.

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