

Food Wars CUISINE TECHNIQUES THURSDAY, JAN 29, 2009

The [Stratford Chef School](#) has reached its 25th year. If you're not familiar with the name, you'll probably recognize some of the school's stellar [alumni](#). This week I joined in their quarter-century celebrations with a cooking demonstration and luncheon. (Did you know that from my job, I can see heaven?)



The experience set off a battle for my belly's love. Which cuisine would reign supreme? (If I divided cuisine into two broad categories, that is.)

In this corner, representing Molecular Gastronomy and Complex Layering: Chef Nuno Mendes

[Chef Mendes](#) has worked at [El Bulli](#), a molecular gastronomy mecca and record four-time topper of the [The World's 50 Best Restaurants](#) list. His pedigree showed; even though the menu listed no more than three ingredients in each dish, I had notes that added at least five more (including foams, agar agar, "crumbs" and gelees). Scroll down for photos and a description - for now I'll just say it was a delicious party in my mouth. It reminded me of some of the brilliant meals I've had at [Colborne Lane](#) by Chef [Claudio Aprile](#). I consider myself pretty talented in the cooking department, but there's not a chance in Hell's Kitchen that I'd think to put together grilled mango and foie gras (and not stop there...). The descriptions of the techniques were just as intimidating. Chef Nuno, you had me at hello - you lost me at 5mg/Litre of Sodium Alginate cooked at 65 degrees in immersion circulator for 8 minutes. Um, ya. I'll get right on that.

In this corner, representing Fresh Ingredients and Simple Flavours: Chef Geoff O'Connor

I've already [told you that I LOVE Nota Bene](#). So when I was seated next to the restaurant's Chef de Cuisine, **Geoff O'Connor** and Sommelier **Otta Zapotocky** I didn't miss my opportunity to act like a 12 year old girl at a Jonas Brother's concert. I really enjoy listening to chefs describe their philosophy on food (thank you, [Food Network](#)), and I agreed with all that Geoff said in praise of really good, fresh ingredients, a balance of simple flavours, and basic techniques. (I mean basic to a Stratford Chef School alumni - no chemistry kit required.) I'd go to war for a slice of my [favourite pizza in Rome](#), a combo of dough, tomatoes, salt, oil and basil. It's still a party in my mouth, I'm just keeping the guest list down to a few best friends.

The final verdict? I could eat fresh and simple every day, but I'd be bored without an infusion of new and complex every now and then.

Without further ado, here's my latest infusion:

You can't see the sphere of onion buttery goodness that burst open in my mouth, but you can make out the oyster with port wine gelee sitting atop a thin caraway bread cracker with brulee-torched Parmigiano and slow cooked leek crisp.



Foie gras cooked sous vide for 8 minutes at 60 degrees was paired with grilled mango, a chunky miso and fennel paste, red wine caramel, chive oil, almond oil, apple, lemongrass foam and ginger crumbs.



Seared squab was served with snap peas, edamame puree, beet caramel and garlic crumbs.



For dessert we had moist chocolate cake with porcini (yes, the mushroom - cheers to umami!) and hazelnut milk. Unfortunately the dessert did not survive long enough for a photo.