

## CATERING

*Special to PAX International*

# Sous Vide Returns

By Chef Gerard Bertholon

I KNEW IT WAS SIMPLY A MATTER OF TIME. AS A CHEF FOR more than two decades, I'll be the first to admit we don't like to change our ways in the kitchen. We are trained to uphold a high quality integrity that we adhere to throughout our culinary profession. For many chefs, that meant rarely using pre-prepared food.

But, safety, consistency and labor issues have had a tremendous impact on the large volume foodservice industry. Unemployment in the United States is at its lowest in years and threats of new foodborne pathogens are on the rise. And, consistency continues to remain a challenge when feeding thousands of people a day.

As a result, airline chefs and their caterers are discovering the benefits of sous vide cooking. Despite its poor introduction in the U.S. just over 10 years ago, sous vide is back.

The story behind sous vide began in France in the early 1970s. Chef Georges Pralus discovered that by placing foie gras in a sealed pouch and slow cooking it with a precise temperature, he could obtain greater yield and better flavor. In the mid-1980s, when haute cuisine became famous on the French railway, quality became the No. 2 issue for chefs and caterers. That's when Bruno Goussault, also known as one of the founding fathers of sous vide, refined the cooking parameters and the relationship between time, temperature and shelf life. Sous vide quickly became an accepted cooking method for top chefs through-

out Europe. And still it is true today that respected chefs in Europe, including Joel Robuchon, Alain Ducasse and Antoine Westermann, employ the sous vide cooking technique in their notable Michelin-starred restaurants.

The introduction of sous vide cooking in the United States was at best "poor" in the early 1990s. The misunderstood technique was labeled "boil-in-a-bag" and unfortunately not adopted as a preferred cooking method as in Europe, until recently. If the process was defined correctly and thoroughly explained the chefs, I think we all could have enjoyed the benefits sooner.

Sous vide is a cooking method whereby fresh ingredients from the land or sea are placed in a sealed, protected environment and slow cooked at a low, precise temperature to achieve maximum flavor, texture and quality. During the cooking process the food is also pasteurized and all forms of vegetative bacteria are destroyed. Once the food is cooked and pasteurized, the package is quickly chilled in nearly freezing water, then flash frozen in liquid nitrogen. Flash freezing minimizes crystallization, and therefore eliminates the deterioration of the food when it's frozen.

For years, chefs in the on-board services industry have had a choice of pre-prepared products, but because they were all delivered in a frozen state, many chefs placed these products in the same "frozen" category. But not all frozen products are created equal. Today's frozen products are generally cooked using one of three methods:

- **Hot Fill:** Cooking food at high temperature then vacuum packing while it's still hot which results in instant pasteurization. (Often used for soup or sauce)



Chef Gerard Bertholon

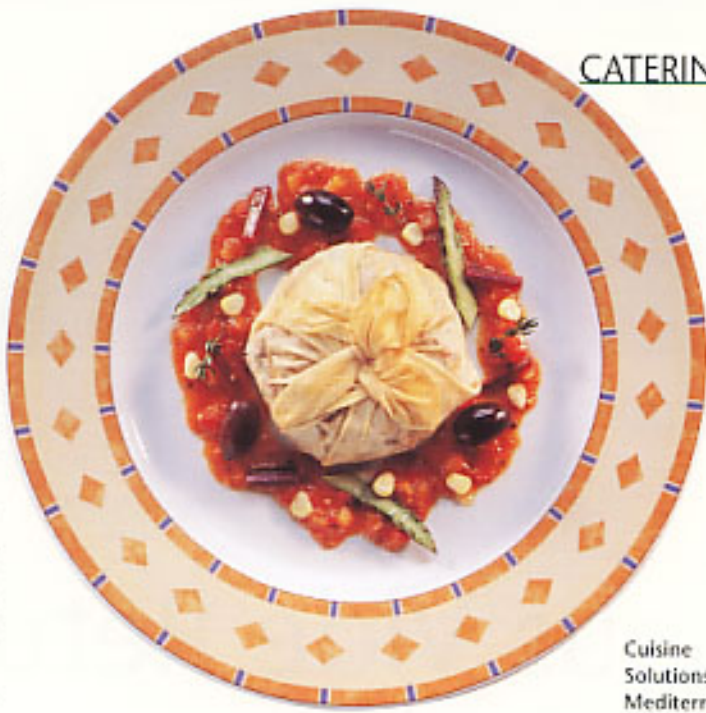
• **Cook-Chill:** Packaging fully cooked food, then pasteurizing it. Since the product is fully cooked prior to entering the package, the food does not receive the benefit of cooking in its own natural juices and retaining maximum moisture.

• **Sous Vide:** Cooking method whereby raw or 95 percent raw fresh ingredients are hermetically sealed, slow cooked and pasteurized at low temperatures under precise temperatures/time.

Like frozen food, not all sous vide products are created equal. Airline chefs and caterers should ask suppliers key questions to ensure they are getting the highest quality products available. A few questions I would ask are:

- Does your company have a team of experienced chefs creating your products?
- How long has your company been in the sous vide business?
- Can I standardize my menus worldwide with your products?
- Is recipe customization available?

For the airline caterer, sous vide products offer great advantages, including reduced food waste, ability to handle last minute changes (i.e., full flights, decreased flights) and the ability to be creative in the kitchen with the same staff. Because sous vide products arrive fully cooked, chefs and their staffs have more time to be creative with signature side dishes and other components of the meal. The laborious tasks of chopping, mincing, boning and skinning are completed by companies like Cuisine Solutions so chefs and caterers can focus on creating delicious menu combinations. Most importantly, airline caterers can relax and explore their culinary talents knowing that the products are guar-



Cuisine Solutions' Mediterranean purse and vegetarian fire-roasted pepper sauce.

anteed safe and completely consistent. These upscale center-of-the-plate ingredients and sauces have enabled airline caterers to greatly expand their menu options quick and easy.

The airline chef can enjoy reduced travel with the security of knowing he can "spec" one item and his customers on every flight will enjoy the same high quality product from flight to flight around the world. Other chefs enjoy the ability to customize recipes with sous vide products.

I joined Cuisine Solutions eleven years ago with the idea that I would help them develop high-quality recipes using their sous vide cooking process before heading back to the upscale New York restaurant scene. What I discovered during my first year was a new passion, one that is enabling me to help lift the quality benchmark of food served in the large volume setting. I realized the renowned chefs in Europe with restaurants seating less than 100 guests are not using the sous vide cooking technique to make more money. They use sous vide cooking to enhance the quality and consistency for their guests. Sous vide is the only technique available to bring high quality food to the large volume industry.

Worldwide menu changes with one phone call. Recipe customization and proprietary menu development. Perfecting the cooking times for every type of protein. It's all fascinating and extremely rewarding. I'm thrilled today's airline chefs and caterers are discovering sous vide. As a result, everyone in the large volume industry will enjoy high quality cuisine. ●

Cuisine Solutions' Chilean sea bass and Orrechiette pasta with creamy roasted pepper sauce.



—Chef Gerard Bertholon Vice-President of Culinary Services, Cuisine Solutions and a member of the Continental Airlines Congress of Chefs.

## The Quality Solution

*Chef Daniel Boulud Endorses  
Cuisine Solutions for Large Events*

*By Michele Brier, Director of Marketing*

New York, NY, Sept. 13, 1999 -- Nearly 70 people filled the special occasion room at DANIEL, the posh upper-East side restaurant for "Food Quality in the Year 2000," a celebrity chef event sponsored by Cuisine Solutions.

Attendees included chefs, general managers, food and beverage directors and executives from the large volume foodservice industry. Featured speaker and owner of DANIEL, Chef Daniel Boulud, educated guests on the importance of food quality for every event and recommended Cuisine Solutions for large volumes.

"I'm fascinated by the fact that Cuisine Solutions can make 5,000 portions of salmon perfectly cooked, identical, perfectly seasoned and sized," Chef Boulud said. "It's something neither I or other chefs like me can do with such precision."

Guests enjoyed a sampling of food prepared by Chef Daniel and his staff using key ingredients from Cuisine Solutions. The menu included Sea Scallops Ceviche with Salsa Cruda and a Cilantro Dressing, Grilled Salmon, Spiced Sea Bass Provencal, Roasted Rack of Lamb with a Chanterelle Crust and Eggplant Caviar, Duck Breast with Red Berries and more.

"What I'm trying to demonstrate tonight is that with the adaptation of our basic recipes using Cuisine Solutions



products, you can make something taste wonderful and serve hundreds, even thousands of people," Chef Boulud noted.

The chefs at Cuisine Solutions employ a special cooking technique known as sous vide to create their high quality fully cooked entrees and sauces. The sous vide cooking method maximizes a food's flavor and moisture by cooking at precise temperatures for a long period of time in a hermetically sealed package.

"I'm fascinated by the sous vide technology employed by Cuisine Solutions. This sous vide technique has been embraced by my peers in Europe, including many well-known, respected chefs, such as Joel Robochon," said Chef Boulud. "I utilize the sous vide technique for certain dishes – such as classical duck confit, braised shank of lamb or braised beef. I cook the food at low temperatures for 10 or up to 20 hours. I obtain high quality because of the concentrated flavors that result when cooking meat in a contained and protected environment." ☛

**A**lthough they are well known for expressing their individuality, chefs share common views regarding the banquet business. Whether they are serving 10 or 10,000, most chefs agree that quality is the most important aspect of any meal. But today's chefs face a two-fold challenge making it more difficult to reach that common goal.

Labor reductions are transforming the banquet business. Banquet affluent areas and cities known for their large meeting facilities such as Las Vegas, Los Angeles and Chicago are reporting extraordinary low levels of unemployment.

Related to the labor deficit is the ongoing threat to the culinary pro-

*monella* and other bacteria that have existed for decades are nothing new. What is new is the public awareness of these pathogens due to increased media coverage illustrating the threats and dangers of food preparation. Hudson Foods, Odwalla, Jack in the Box are a few of the companies that made headlines the past few years. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 7 million illnesses and 7,000 deaths occur each year from food poisoning in the United States. The National Center for Health Statistics estimates nearly 10,000 deaths per year. What's important to remember is that one fatal incident—one bad banquet meal—can severely damage or

close a business as experienced by Hudson Foods.

If left unsolved, these issues will further threaten the banquet business. What are needed are new solutions for foodservice providers.

One company, recognized as the banquet specialists, is offering a new solution that effectively tackles today's banquet challenges. The pioneers of a special cooking and pasteurization process in the United States, Cuisine Solutions provides chef-created, fully cooked, fully prepared banquet ingredients to many of the top hotels in the country.

President Stanislas Vilgrain described how he started Cuisine Solutions. "I was in France where foodservice was having problems meeting customer expectations in banquets. Labor is very high there. I attended a one-week course on *sous vide* technology in France. The food was so different, so good, I was impressed," he said. Although *sous vide* has been widely used in Europe for years it was not being done in the United States so Vilgrain realized an opportunity was at hand.

Cuisine Solutions has chosen chefs from the best culinary schools to create banquet ingredients that preserve the same high quality chefs require of their own creations. "We

fession: recruiting and retaining chefs. Many graduates from culinary schools today frequently leave the profession within five years as a result of financial issues and the pace of the career. Turnover is high at hotels and restaurants because movement often means advancement for chefs. And although the Department of Labor forecasts a healthy job outlook for chefs in the future, the majority of these opportunities stem from replacement needs. Banquet business is not consistent in many locations. A hotel may serve 200 one day and 2000 the next. How can the executive chef train and staff a banquet department that is financially justifiable on slow days and able to produce on busy days? The result is that chefs have less staff to help deliver the higher quality expectations demanded by today's banquet customers.

Secondly, food-borne bacteria are a growing concern among foodservice providers. *E. Coli*, *Sal-*



Stanislas Vilgrain, President Cuisine Solutions

## Banquet Specialists Offer High Quality Solution for Today's Challenges