

Wylie Dufresne: What a Chef Can Teach Us About Innovation

“**W**e as chefs really don’t know what we’re doing,” confessed Wylie Dufresne on stage during the 2012 World Perfumery Congress (wpc.perfumerflavorist.org).

In the culinary world, he explained, so little is known about why things are done the way they are or how it is that techniques work the way they do. Dufresne, whose unofficial motto is, “Whoever dies with the most information wins,” gained fame and a Michelin star as the chef and owner of wd~50 on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, a playful, inventive space where he and his staff whip up cutting-edge dishes such as mackerel nigiri with salsify, seaweed and sesame; lobster roe with charred lemon, green grape and coriander-brown butter; or amaro yolk with chicken confit and peas and carrots. Each dish plays off of notions of tradition and novelty—a result, Dufresne said, of a focus on informed innovation.

During his presentation, Dufresne was asked about the tension between bringing newness to customers while reconciling with diners’ affection for the familiar. “The starting point has to be delicious,” the chef declared. “If we hit ‘delicious’ on the head, we can ask a little bit more from our diners.” Using a trope familiar to flavorists and perfumers alike, Dufresne noted that his creations typically work on a theme of delivering new things in familiar forms or vice versa.

In opening wd~50, Dufresne wanted to create a place where he and his staff could continue their culinary education, building on the chemistry-related hows and the whys that traditional culinary educations didn’t address. For many of these answers, he reached beyond traditional culinary sources to food scientists and others. This approach, Dufresne stressed, doesn’t take the soul or individuality out of cooking: “It’s about being informed, not about undermining creativity.”

Dufresne’s explorations have led him to infuse udon noodle dishes with pine oil; create a mock egg using coconut and carrot juice; aerate foie gras into a mousse-like state using agar agar, xantham gum and a low-tech sous-vide device he saw advertised on late night television; and to attempt to poach the perfect egg-in-the-shell using a thermal immersion circulator once used by the US Navy to circulate motor oil.

“Interesting things happen when you misuse—not abuse—pieces of equipment or ingredients in ways you

This conversation brought to you by:



We make it happen . . . together.



“If we hit ‘delicious’ on the head, we can ask a little bit more from our diners,” said Michelin-starred chef Wylie Dufresne, pictured with one of his signature off-beat dishes.

“Interesting things happen when you misuse—not abuse—pieces of equipment or ingredients in ways you wouldn’t normally.”

wouldn’t normally,” he noted. In this way, Dufresne continued, he knows more now than when he began—but he hasn’t yet answered all of his questions.

“When you have information from the past, equipment from the future, understanding of cooking processes, and individual preferences, I believe you really have an environment for innovation,” said Dufresne. He added, “No great creative endeavor ever was the product of one person.”

To develop new ideas, Dufresne gathers information and brings it to his small team. From there, concepts are built out cooperatively, though the chef warned, “Creativity isn’t linear . . . it can’t just happen on Thursdays.” And so he regularly dedicates time to focus on new concepts. At the same time, as a leader, he said he creates an environment for free thinking and receptiveness to new ideas, which often come outside the kitchen. As Dufresne said, “It’s more often that creativity comes to you than you find your way to it.”

The chef noted that senior staff tends to be more open to sharing ideas on a regular basis and that part of managing an innovative team involves drawing feedback out of more reticent members of the group. At the same time, he regularly dedicates a tiny fraction of his staff to “working to push ideas.” He called this resource “expensive and necessary,” adding, “It’s not always understood by diners when [innovation costs] show up on the check.”

Dufresne concluded that his innovation was a key component of his life’s work: “When a chef leaves [my restaurant] and someone asks, ‘What was it like working at wd~50?’ I want them to say ‘It made me think, it made me ask questions.’”