



Clockwise from left: Korean-style braised short rib, crispy scallion pancake, kim chi, and sesame crème fraîche; strawberry-gorgonzola Napoleons with watercress and candied pecan; heirloom tomato salad, burrata cheese, olive oil cracker, and basil pudding; pistachio-crustured fromage blanc cheesecakes with red wine-poached pair.

Avant-Garde Eats

Swapping stewed for sous-vide. | *By Robin Wilkey* |

Ethan Mantle, executive chef and owner of Componere Fine Catering, bristles at his reputation as a molecular gastronomist. “The term ‘molecular gastronomy’ makes people think of foam and chemicals,” he explains. Instead, Mantle focuses on marrying rustic, ingredient-driven menus with contemporary, avant-garde techniques for “I do”—worthy wedding dinners.

“Our clients want a food experience, and that experience should be a reflection of who they are—not just filet on potatoes,” says Mantle. “Contemporary techniques open the door to creativity.” He isn’t bluffing. Creativity takes form in hors d’oeuvres like his cucumber caviar. Using agar agar—a gelatinous substance derived from seaweed—Mantle condenses cucumber juice into dark, tiny beads. “They have the snap and texture of caviar, but it’s such a surprise to bite into them and taste cucumber.” Chemistry also allows Mantle to gain control of the elements. Using a few drops of liquid nitrogen, he can serve perfectly chilled champagne in 100-degree heat or make boozy mojito sorbet with all the kick of the real thing. And sous-vide cooking—a slow-cooking method using vacuum-sealed plastic bags—affords him a tremendous level of quality control, even with very large parties. “You can cook 200 pieces of fish and have them all turn out perfectly,” he explains. “It’s literally the end of bad

wedding food.”

But while his kitchen oftentimes looks more like a chemistry lab, Mantle still subscribes to one underlying philosophy: If it doesn’t taste good, who cares how you made it? “It’s essential to think about the ingredients first and the method second,” he explains. “One method will absolutely not work for every dish.” Though he is known for procuring caviar beads and below-zero sorbet, Mantle will also spit-roast a whole pig over wood chips. “It’s important to consider the venue and the wedding guests. Many of my clients are serious foodies, but that doesn’t mean their friends and family are comfortable with avant-garde food.” What to do with a meat-and-potato crowd? “The hors d’oeuvres hour is a good place to be adventurous,” he says. “Then you can offer something more traditional at dinner.” But traditional doesn’t mean boring—hanger steak with artichoke pesto and slow-poached prawns with fennel and Meyer lemon can stand on their own two feet. And his thoughts on traditional methods? “Yes, we sometimes use liquid nitrogen. But the tool I use most is my mortar and pestle.” ●

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