

James City chef brings dining to molecular level

His recipes include a dash of science to alter texture of familiar favorite dishes

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WILLIAMSBURG

Bernhard Klinger's laboratory is the kitchen at artcafé26, a small, innovative restaurant in James City County.

Instead of a whisk or a grater, you might find him making pasta with a large syringe or infusing wood smoke into a duck breast with a small torch.

Since January, the young Austrian chef, encouraged by artcafé26 owner Sibilla Dengs, has been slowly introducing molecular gastronomy to patrons.

First coined more than 20 years ago by Hungarian physicist Nicholas Kurti and French chemist Hervé This, molecular gastronomy is the application of scientific techniques to cooking. The concept is better known in Europe but has its U.S. proponents, including Grant Achatz, chef at Alinea in Chicago. Some chefs dismiss it, others embrace it. Then there are chefs like Klinger who use it sparingly to give flair to traditional dishes.



In the world of molecular gastronomy, flavorless chemical compounds and other scientific techniques are used to give unfamiliar textures to familiar foods. Klinger's chocolate dessert plate might include a Chinese-style spoon filled with a substance that looks like chocolate sand. Pop it into your mouth and it dissolves into rich, creamy chocolate. The plate might also be sprinkled with raspberry caviar, beads of intense fruit that are formed with a small syringe.

A palate cleanser called Basiliquito always brings a smile when brought to the table. Served in a tall shot glass, the mixture is a foamy blend of basil, water, brown sugar and rum that's infused with xanthan gum, a type of emulsifier to keep the bubbles from deflating. He uses a natural substance called soy lecithin in another foamed dessert called raspberry air.

At artcafé26, these methods are used to enliven traditional dishes and surprise regular customers. Life is too



"If you're going to work in the kitchen, you have to do it because you enjoy it," says chef Bernhard Klinger of artcafé26 in James City County.

short, and people need to experience new things, says Dengs.

"I wanted to go one step further and offer this," she says. "You only have to make sure you don't do only molecular. You have to combine it with the normal."

Klinger is the latest of several chefs Dengs has featured since she opened artcafé26 three years ago. A native of Germany, she finds young cooks eager for the opportunity to work in the U.S. for three to six months.

Raised on a farm in southern Austria, 30-year-old Klinger decided at 8 years old that he wanted to be a chef. He trained in Salzburg, where he got interested in molecular gastronomy, then worked in England before coming to the Williamsburg area. He likes Virginia's weather and has traveled to New York and Washington, where he has been amazed at the size of the department stores. "You walk in and just stand there and say, 'Wow!'" he says.

Because molecular gastronomy is labor-intensive and Klinger is frequently the only one in the kitchen, Dengs caps her seating capacity at 20 when she's open for dinner, which is Fridays and Saturdays. She's trying to replicate the experience of a European restaurant, she says, where people sit for several hours.

So far, customers who have sampled some of Klinger's space-age cuisine have enjoyed the difference.

"The taste is fun, and with these tricks, it can be really different," he says. "When I find the time, I start to experiment with new things."

Klinger uses a line of products under the name Cuisine-tech he purchases from a wholesale foods company in Northern Virginia. His pea ravioli is nothing like the traditional stuffed pasta pie. Peas are pureed then mixed with a product called sodium alginate.

When spoonfuls are dropped into a water bath containing calcium chloride, the mixture forms a ball that's a gel on the outside and liquid in the middle. These raviolis are called spheres, and molecular gastronomists refer to this process as spherification.



Klinger also makes pea spaghetti in a similar manner, though the mixture is put in a large syringe and extracted into the water bath in long strands. He's talking about creating a Parmesan spaghetti as well.

"You have to have really exact measurements or it won't work," says Klinger. Using too much product also can affect the taste of the dishes, he says.

Though he's frequently alone in the kitchen, Klinger doesn't mind.

"I love this job, I do it with the heart," he says. "If you're going to work in the kitchen, you have to do it because you enjoy it."