



AHEAD OF THE CULINARY CURVE

ALEX TALBOT '92

BY LORI L. FERGUSON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PERRY SMITH

◀ Culinary whizzes Alex Talbot '92 and Aki Kamoza strike an "American Gothic" pose at their New Hampshire home.

The sunny yellow farmhouse sits nestled in an expanse of green, on a rolling country road in Bow, New Hampshire. One would never suspect that behind its walls two of the country's most creative, cutting-edge chefs are trying out new recipes that bring science and technology to bear on foods as commonplace as tomatoes and rib roast. This idyllic setting is the new home of Ideas in Food, the wildly successful blog, book and culinary consulting business owned by the husband-and-wife chef team of Alex Talbot '92 and Aki Kamoza.

Upon entering the couple's new home—they recently relocated to New Hampshire from Levittown, Pennsylvania, in search of more space—we head immediately to the kitchen, a warm and open space that's clearly the heart of the enterprise. From there, it's into the couple's two-car garage, which has been temporarily appropriated as a library *cum* storage unit,

complete with antique wooden farm table, row upon row of cookbooks, stacks of neatly labeled pasta dyes and an array of miscellaneous cooking implements. A few more steps and we're in Talbot and Kamoza's new food lab, a spacious room filled with moveable tables bearing beakers, dehydrators, a milkshake maker and other tools of their trade, stacked together in bunches. "We're still in the process of getting settled," Talbot says with an easy shrug. Relocating an enterprise such as this—together with a dog and a five-year-old in tow—cannot be easy, yet somehow Talbot and Kamoza make it look effortless.

It's much the same with their cooking. The couple makes their living tackling tough culinary questions and offering inventive methods for maximizing the flavor of food, whether you're a home cook or a classically trained chef. In fact, the title of their most recent book is *Maximum Flavor*.



▲ Talbot and Kamozaawa fine-tune a recipe at their Ideas in Food lab.

Talbot and Kamozaawa are constantly pushing the envelope of accepted culinary practice, testing and probing the boundaries of cooking to unite science and technique through the use of high-quality ingredients, modern equipment and innovative approaches. Employing everything from rotary evaporators to hydrocolloids (substances such as xanthan gum, pectin and starch that are used in cooking to stabilize, thicken and emulsify), these experimental chefs evaporate, blend, stabilize and extract in an endless quest to squeeze out every possible bit of flavor from the object of their attentions.

As a quick glance through their blog posts reveals, they succeed regularly, but like every cook, the two do have experiments go awry. “We make a lot of mistakes and we learn from them,” Talbot admits cheerfully. “We’re a failure-based operation—people pay us to fail so that we can show them the right way.” But for Talbot and Kamozaawa, failures are relative and usually lead to success. When asked to describe his

perfect day in the kitchen, for instance, Talbot pauses for a moment and then observes, “It’s a good day when you discover something or learn something new.” But, he continues, that good day may only emerge upon reflection: “While you’re in it, it may seem like a really bad day, but [later], you often realize that an experiment that seemed disastrous at the time has actually brought you closer to some new knowledge.”

And new knowledge is what Talbot and Kamozaawa are renowned for, by everyone from chefs and home cooks to restaurants and food service companies including the Institute of Culinary Education and Unilever. “We have a good following,” Talbot says, “but we’re on the fringe. We’re really ahead of the curve in the culinary world—so far ahead, in fact, that many don’t even know we’re there. We’re looked at as an idea source.”

Ideas proliferate between the two, and have since the couple began cooking together after meeting in the kitchen of Boston’s renowned restaurant Clio in 1997. They married in 2000,

Eager to see Alex and Aki in action and learn how to implement some of their inventive techniques in your own kitchen? The couple offers a variety of one-on-one daylong workshops such as *Making Cheese & Butter* and *The Complete Lobster*—and customized classes are another option. They also do a two-day sous vide/low temperature cooking class that explores a variety of recipes using fruits, vegetables, meat, fish and dairy, with sweet and savory applications and a two-day introduction to hydrocolloids that provides an overview of thickening ingredients.

and in 2004 they decided to begin sharing the work they were doing in their restaurant kitchen through a blog called *Ideas in Food*. Though at the time blogging was still a relatively novel mode of communication, the pair quickly developed a devoted following. The blog became a springboard for the couple’s burgeoning culinary offerings, and today is widely viewed as a benchmark for culinary blogs. Last year, in fact, *Ideas in Food* was named Best Culinary Science Blog in the *Saveur* Best Food Blog Awards.

As their following has grown, so, too, have the couple’s offerings. They now host customized classes that embolden home chefs to explore new ideas in the kitchen, teach fellow chefs to express their own culinary concepts more clearly and effectively, help restaurants develop and implement new menus, and consult with large companies on such topics as the future of food. They’ve authored two books so far—*Ideas in Food: Great Recipes and Why They Work*, and *Maximum Flavor: Recipes That Will Change the Way You Cook*—and a third, *Gluten Free Flour Power: Bringing Your Favorite Foods*

“star turn” while at Taft when he commandeered the apartment kitchen of current headmaster Willy MacMullen ’78, then an instructor in the English department. “A good friend of mine asked me if I could prepare a nice meal for him so that he could impress a date,” Talbot recalls with a grin. “He told me he wanted me to fix the meal and then disappear, and Mr. MacMullen was kind enough to let me use his kitchen.”

After graduating from Taft, Talbot went to Colby College, where he majored in English but continued to cook, at one point wowing family friend Tom Haas with his preparation of a multi-layered baked Brie. “Tom told me that if I was ever interested in cooking professionally, I should let him know,” Talbot recalls, “so after graduating, I gave him a call.” Haas helped Talbot land a job with the chef at the Shenorock Shore Club in Rye, New York, and he was off and running. From Rye it was on to New York City, and from there to Boston, where Talbot landed in the kitchen of renowned chef and restaurateur Ken Oringer. “My time at Clio was the biggest learning experience of

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Back to the Table, will be published by Norton in 2015. They also spread their ideas in forums that range from a guest column in *Popular Science* to presentations at conferences worldwide.

Yet for all the public acclaim he receives, Talbot’s demeanor and culinary roots are remarkably humble. “I started cooking when I was young by watching my parents and cooking at summer camp,” Talbot explains. He laughingly recalls a

my life,” Talbot says enthusiastically. “I was immersed in a knowledge base of cooking!”

Talbot has carried this immersion into the present, teaming up with Kamozaawa to share their collective knowledge in venues from private classes to public forums. “We do a little bit of everything, which is great,” he says. “The diversity keeps us fresh and sharp, and everything we teach provides us with more knowledge than we impart.”

Ideas in Food is truly a word-of-mouth business, Talbot explains, and as such is heavily dependent upon the couple's ability to strike a chord with readers and students. "We try to reach people through many different avenues," he explains. "We offer classes and workshops, we write books,

and we maintain our website and blog. We update the website every day, and while we never know who's looking at it, we hope that our posts ignite a spark of creativity in our readers. We've been very fortunate to work with a wide range of entities, from restaurants to multinational companies,

"We do a little bit of everything, which is great. The diversity keeps us fresh and sharp, and everything we teach provides us with more knowledge than we impart."



but it always starts with an individual, usually a chef or a food enthusiast, who makes a connection to something we've said or done. In the end, we're in the business of helping people."

To help professional chefs, for instance, Talbot and Kamoza provide offerings such as "dinner and a workshop," which includes a guest-chef dinner prepared at the restaurant as well as a workshop for the restaurant staff. They also offer recipe development for food companies, restaurants and cookbooks, and can even provide organizational and writing services for fellow chefs working on their own cookbooks.

Asked how the couple keep their own approach fresh, Talbot says, "We don't stop writing stuff down. We're always looking at our own practices, watching what people are doing in classes, reflecting on the questions people are asking and evaluating how our readers are responding to our offerings. We try to stay open, rather than getting locked into a specific belief system, because when you do that, you put up walls. And discovery comes without walls.

"Many people think that cooking is hard, but it doesn't have to be," Talbot concludes. "People don't want to just throw things on the table—they want to cook delicious things and they want to learn. Even if they're not cooking all the time, they want to know why and how to make the best food possible. And we want to help them." ■

Lori L. Ferguson is a freelance writer based in southern New Hampshire.

◀ Talbot with his state-of-the-art wood-fired oven.

KOREAN-STYLE CHICKEN WINGS

SERVES 4 TO 6

3 large **egg whites**

2 teaspoons / 10 grams
baking soda

1¾ teaspoons / 10.5 grams
fine sea salt

4 pounds / 1.8 kilograms
whole **chicken wings**

¼ cup / 65 grams
tamari soy sauce

3 tablespoons / 42 grams
apple juice

1 tablespoon / 16 grams
honey

1 tablespoon / 14 grams
rice vinegar

1 tablespoon / 14 grams
toasted sesame oil

1 teaspoon / 2 grams
Korean red chile flakes

1 tablespoon / 3.75 grams
toasted sesame seeds, chopped

1 **garlic** clove, grated

½ teaspoon / 2.5 grams
grated **fresh ginger**

1 **scallion**, finely sliced

Put the egg whites, baking soda, and salt in a bowl and stir to dissolve the salt and baking soda. Add the chicken wings and stir to coat evenly. Remove the wings from the bowl and lay them out on 2 wire racks, each set over a baking sheet. Refrigerate the wings uncovered overnight for them to dry out. Preheat the oven to 450°F (235°C). Put the wings, still on the racks on the baking sheets, into the oven and cook for 15 minutes. Flip the wings over and bake for 10 minutes. Flip the wings over again and bake until a deep golden brown with a crackling skin, about 10 more minutes. Take the pans out of the oven and let cool for 5 minutes. Meanwhile, in a small bowl, combine the soy sauce, apple juice, honey, rice vinegar, sesame oil, chile flakes, sesame seeds, garlic, ginger, and scallion. Pile the wings on a serving platter and serve the sauce alongside.

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