

cooking

# TEST TUBE FOOD

CUISINE MOVES OUT OF THE KITCHEN AND INTO THE LAB

by Sabine Heinlein / GSAS '07

At a recent gathering of NYU's Experimental Cuisine Collective, chemists, nutrition experts, cooks, and food writers hesitantly poured a white powdery substance onto their hands and licked it. The freeze-dried coconut powder was a pleasant twist on its commercially popular, spray-dried counterpart and, being organic, lacked the chemical additives and soapy aftertaste. It's exactly the sort of product that can evolve from molecular gastronomy, a movement that draws on chemistry and physics to better understand food preparation—how to naturally transform what we eat, harness its nutrition-

trition, Food Studies, and Public Health at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. Together, they regularly conduct food experiments and gather industry figures ranging from a *New York Times* food writer to a neuroscience professor from the Mount Sinai School of Medicine to investigate such questions as why soufflés rise. "How can we control the properties of food substances?" Kirshenbaum asks. "How can we get something to taste good?"

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al properties, and provide radical alternatives to the standard fare that lines supermarket shelves.

Last April, chemistry professor Kent Kirshenbaum, creator of the coconut concoction, launched the collective along with chef Will Goldfarb, renowned for his technical innovations at Soho's Room 4 Dessert, and Amy Bentley, associate professor in the Department of Nu-

Apparently these queries interest more than just foodies. With adult obesity rates soaring to almost 33 percent in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, such culinary tinkering could shed new light on food processing and how it affects health.

"It's really important that the public understand what a trans fatty acid is," Kirshenbaum explains, "and how the incorporation of these molecules in their foods have health consequences."

The collective recently secured \$10,000 from NYU's Humanities Initiative and \$14,000 from the University Research Challenge Fund for ingredients and tools to test and produce new foods, such as a puffed onion ring created by famed molecular gastronomist Wylie Dufresne, who owns the Lower East Side restaurant wd~50. Dufresne's snack is firmer, with fewer artificial ingredients, and tastes more like pure onion than Frito-Lay's Funyuns.

While chefs have dabbled in science for centuries, the term "molecular gastronomy" was coined by Hervé This, a physical chemist at the French National Institute for Agricultural Research and the keynote speaker at the collective's inaugural symposium. Over the past quarter century, This has scientifically tested hundreds of old wives' tales, including how best to center the yolk of a hard-boiled egg (the key is not to simply plunge it in already boiling water, as most chefs believe, but to keep the egg rolling around

the pot for 10 minutes). After two decades of waffling between fringe movement and fad, molec-



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY RICK'S IMAGEWORKS



PHOTO © NBCU PHOTO BANK

THE ART OF MOLECULAR GASTRONOMY IS FIRING UP KITCHENS ACROSS AMERICA, AS SEEN ON BRAVO'S *TOP CHEF* WITH SECOND-PLACE FINISHER MARCEL VIGNERON.

ular gastronomy is infiltrating more U.S. kitchens, most notably among experimental chefs such as Daniel Patterson at Coi in San Francisco, Grant Achatz at Alinea in Chicago, and Goldfarb. But it also appeals to those who seek empowerment at home. "When I cook I want to know why I'm doing what I'm doing," says Patricia Gadsby, a contributing editor at *Discover* magazine, who attended one of the collective's recent events.

For now, however, most research takes place far away from trendy restaurants and homey kitchens because the work requires more elaborate equipment than a trusty frying pan. Kirshenbaum recently employed a powerful freeze-drying apparatus to develop a concentrated port wine "gum." "There are some very nice antioxidant compounds in red wine," he notes, "and we anticipate that those would be retained in these freeze-dried materials." So far, the process has preserved the wine's powerful aroma and eliminated its alcohol content, but also robbed it of elasticity, leaving a hard lump in the test tube. Port wine rock candy, anyone? ■

poverty

# For Richer or for Poorer

## NEW TOOLS REDEFINE WEALTH AND WELL-BEING

by Sabine Heinlein / GSAS '07

**O**n paper, Flushing, Queens, and Stapleton, Staten Island, appear to be in equal economic shape: Both

New York City neighborhoods report per capita incomes of roughly \$20,000 and poverty rates of around 15 percent. In reality, though, they are worlds apart. Flushing residents enjoy a hodgepodge of notable international cuisine—everything from Korean barbecue to Ecuadorian pastries—have run of the scenic 1,255-acre Flushing Meadows Corona Park and are just steps from the Queens Museum of Art, New York Hall of Science, and Shea Stadium. Meanwhile, those living in Stapleton have fewer food options and are more likely to be unemployed and die from HIV, diabetes, or violent crime.

"Income alone tells you very little about quality of life," says Walter W. Stafford, professor of urban planning and public policy at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. "You've got to put people in the context of their communities and the risks and barriers they face." In his newly released study, "In the Shadow of the UN: The Global North and South in New York City," Stafford added such context by applying the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index (HDI)—traditionally used to determine the level of

well-being and development in a country—to rank New York City's 59 community districts. "The goal was to use international tools to look at the UN's own backyard," says Diana Salas (WAG '03), an assistant research scientist with Wagner's Women of Color Policy Network, which authored the four-year study. Stafford and Salas hope that the report not only redefines the concept of domestic poverty but also offers a comprehensive database to help local government develop more informed intervention strategies.

The study, which considers a variety of indicators to establish a community's level of prosperity, divides the districts into areas of

"high," "medium," and "low" human development. Accordingly, within the medium category, Flushing registered a solid HDI of 0.5 out of 1.0, while Stapleton scored a 0.3. Among the nine districts rated the highest were Manhattan's Upper East Side and Upper West Side. East Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and nine other districts—almost all in the outer boroughs—fell into the low human development category.

Each neighborhood was first ranked according to residents' longevity, education, and standard of living. After that, the study gauged secondary variables, such as health, demographics, income, and environment, and, finally, branched out into more detailed considerations, including residents' immigration status, literacy rates, race, gender, educational achievements, and access to medical facilities, parks, and public transportation.

Last year, Stafford presented the study's preliminary results to Linda Gibbs, New York City's deputy mayor for health and human services, and continues to advocate that the government adopt the index as an annual review to gauge social and economic disparity, a measure Brazil and European Union members have used for years. Stafford and his team will bring their tools to the public in fall 2007 in a conference with leaders of nonprofit organizations. "We don't only want a political discourse," he says, "but also a civic one." ■



PHOTO © CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR/GETTY IMAGES

QUEENS RESIDENTS ENJOY THE WEALTH OF GREEN SPACE IN FLUSHING MEADOWS CORONA PARK.



the insider

# BEST OF NEW YORK

NYU FACULTY AND STAFF OFFER UP THEIR FAVORITES

by Janelle Nanos / GSAS '05

**AS THE FALL SEASON REVS INTO FULL GEAR, OUR EXPERTS SUGGEST THE BEST PLACES TO TREAT YOURSELF RIGHT-FROM COMEDIC HOLY GROUND TO A MEDITATIVE CORNER.**

**FARM FRESH**

As a clinical associate professor of nutrition and food studies at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, Lisa Sasson considers herself lucky to be so close to the Union Square Greenmarket. The venue offers a kaleidoscope of goods every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday, with regional farmers piling their wares on tables just fast enough to keep the eager foodies satisfied. But for a closer connection to what's on her plate, Sasson doesn't even have to leave campus. Every summer, she buys a share in the **WASHINGTON SQUARE COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE (CSA)** group that NYU sponsors, and each

week she receives fresh local produce directly from Norwich Meadows Farm in Upstate New York. "You can't get any fresher," she says. "The earth is still on the vegetables." And while it can cost a bit more to pay up-front, she swears it's worth it: "When I don't buy local produce, I end up spending less money but throwing out more food because it's tasteless." The CSA is open to anyone, and shares vary in cost depending on the amount of produce purchased.

**WASHINGTON SQUARE CSA, 212-998-5580; WWW.WASHINGTONSQUARECSA.ORG**

**QUEST FOR QUIET**

Amidst the cacophony of the city, it's often difficult to be alone with

your thoughts. But in his 38 years at NYU, Stephen Polniaszek (SCPS '84), coordinator of the campus's Spiritual Diversity Network, has uncovered dozens of urban enclaves of solitude among the city's museums, parks, and holy places. "Museums are sort of lay sanctuaries for the nonreligious," he muses. And "people don't always know about all the pocket parks that are around the city." (His favorite, and one of the smallest, is Sir Winston Churchill Square, which borders Sixth Avenue and Downing Street in the Village.) But the best place for a quick respite, Polniaszek says, is the **GRACE CHURCH**, especially during "Bach at Noon," a midday meditation offered Monday through Friday. Visit the beautifully manicured gardens outside the church before ducking into the huge Gothic revival building, as its high

ceilings engulf you in a cocoon of quiet. After 20 minutes of silent contemplation, the organist begins a 15-minute selection of Bach's finest works. "I have friends who go and read books through their lunch break," he says. "It's just a beautiful way to spend an hour."

**802 BROADWAY, 212-254-2000; WWW.GRACECHURCHNYC.ORG**

**PUNCH LINE PALACE**

"I was born to do comedy," says Barry Goldsmith, an Emmy Award-winning comedy writer who teaches a course on the history of humor at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study. Goldsmith spent his youth stoking the crowds on the comedy circuit, and now does "tumor humor" for cancer patients since recovering from "a bout of testicular cancer" 15 years ago. After seeing the city's clubs from both sides of the stage, his







COMIC STRIP LIVE



VAN CORTLANDT PARK

PHOTOS FROM LEFT: © NORWICH MEADOWS © STEPHEN FULLER © RYAN MCCORMICK © DON POLLARD

favorite is still the Upper East Side's **COMIC STRIP LIVE**, where Eddie Murphy, Jerry Seinfeld, and Paul Reiser, among others, got their start. The club, which celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, offers shows every night of the week, but its managers suggest showing up midweek (with a reservation, of course) to catch a glimpse of A-list performers tweaking their acts. "I've seen Chris Rock and George Carlin, my favorite comedian, perform. They've all been there," Goldsmith says. **1568 SECOND AVENUE, 212-861-9386; WWW.COMICSTRIPLIVE.COM**

**TAKE THE ONE TO THE FORE**  
Growing up in Brooklyn, Jeff Bernstein, assistant athletic director for sports information, used to traipse all over the metropolitan area as a teenager to hit the links. But he keeps coming back

to the 18-hole course at **VAN CORTLANDT PARK**, a wide expansive green nestled in the heart of the Bronx. "For historic value and for just a challenging course, you've got to go," he insists. "It has a lot of character, and it's well maintained." Founded in 1895, Van Cortlandt is the oldest public course in the country, and is still considered challenging by discerning locals. Luckily, mastering the hilly terrain requires little travel because it's one of the easiest courses to get to in the city, just off the No. 1 train. "People don't realize that you can live in New York City and play golf," Bernstein says. "I love seeing someone walking down 28th Street with a bag of clubs on his arm. Nowhere else can you take a subway to play." **VAN CORTLANDT PARK SOUTH, 718-543-4595; WWW.GOLFNYP.COM**

## TAX-BREAKING NEWS IN 2007

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