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Culinary freethinkers, we bring you the top ten international (magic) chefs

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Envelope-pushing. It's not a discipline on the syllabus at any regular catering college, but judging by the activity in the culinary world it's part of a young chef's job description these days. Now, we know that many of you are foamed-out jelly-averse, or sick of espuma, but the latest in the long line of culinary freethinkers are going way, way, further than a few showyoffy tricks. They're challenging every single aspect of the kitchen and the dining room, and pushing the limits of every ingredient and every technique

Here we bring you the top ten of international chefs who are all doing their crazy-ass stuff at the culinary vanguard. They're eccentric and provocative to a man - no question about that - but what they all have in common is a desire to push the boundaries of what's possible. Their derring-do may make you gasp, giggle or even gag but so what? You don't have to like it. They're just here to remind you that the chef's job can be fun, frustrating or just plain bonkers.

1. Seiji Yamamoto Ryugin, Japan

Seiji Yamamoto, the 37 year old Tokyo chef making waves worldwide for his uniquely Japanese take on avant garde cuisine, opened Ryugin his Roppongi restaurant in December 2003.

Cuisine: Techno-gastrowizardry, or modern Japanese if you're going to be boring about it.

Best known for: Using screen-printing techniques to create edible designs.

Yamamoto particularly enjoys printing reviews of Ryugin in squid ink or miso straight on to diners' plates. A good example of local saucing in action.

Then there are the 'hot towels' made from candy floss, and a nitrogen-frozen cinnamon apple that looks like a sunset-orange cherry with a spiralling chocolate stalk. How about a 'cork' made from gobo root, seared with a Ryugin branding iron and dipped in port sauce?

Favourite ingredient? Miso – it's everywhere from the screen-printing to the more traditional soup made from a tart red miso sourced from Yamamoto's home island of Shikoku.

Favourite piece of kit? His Japanese 'kataha' or singleedged knife and his 'Cryal Jet' – a liquid nitrogen siphon designed for dermatology (eg freezing off verrucas) which he uses to freeze the surface of dishes.

Influences: A dose of fine molecular gastronomer's humour, coupled with a strange Japanese mix of super-futuristic trendsetting, deeply traditional ritual and somewhat extreme gastrotetishism. This is seriously foxy, beautiful and downright bizarre food.

Most audacious creation to date: We're back to that squid ink again.

Yamamoto wowed the assembled gourmands at Madrid Fusion 2007 – no mean feat as these people think el Bulli is passé and snail porridge is just so 2003 – when he used his screen-printing technique to create a three-dimensional barcode (looking something like a crossword grid) that could be read by a mobile phone. Scan it and you get taken to a website that tells you all about Ryugin.

What can we expect next? He's trying to create a floating dessert using helium. "The dish is complete in my head but it has not yet been physically realized."

Address: Side Roppongi, BLG 7-17-24, Roppongi, Minato-ku, Tokyo, Japan +81 3 3423 8006, www.nihonyori-ryugin.com

2. Alex Stupak WD-50, USA

Fighting the pastry corner, we have Alex Stupak, Pastry Chef for the past year at the hotbed of culinary envelope-pushing that is WD-50 in New York.

Cuisine: Deferring in this matter to his boss, Wylie Dufresne, Stupak dubs it 'Research Cuisine.'

Best known for: Pliable ganache – a ganache that is 'plasticised' so it can be manipulated on the plate. Also, frozen capsules – sealed cylinders of ice with a liquid interior.

Favourite ingredient? "Anything I haven't mastered yet." So at the moment methylcellulose for heat gelation, the inverse of gelatine, that is, it's liquid when cold, jelly when warm.

Favourite piece of kit? His latest kitchen toys are a Gastrovac for deep-frying under vacuum, and a liquid nitrogen tank. "Others have had it for a while but we're only now delving into liquid nitrogen to see what we can do with it here."

A rummage around the kitchen will also unearth acetate and Scotch tape from the art shop for making frozen capsules, and a heat sealer (for sealing plastic bags for shipping) for making edible packages of fruit leather.

Influences: The chefs at el Bulli are at the top of the list, but rather than slavishly follow other chefs, Stupak seeks inspiration "from art, chromatography, nature". "I can't see that someone's doing what we're doing then go, 'Oh sorry, I didn't know.'"

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Most audacious creation to date: "I'm at the point where nothing is weird anymore." Not all of his guests agree, however.

A pineapple and Chinese sausage dessert was the tipping point for some. "I look at all ingredients equally then decide whether to apply salt or sugar, but I've had problems getting people to try both meat and mushrooms in desserts."

What can we expect next? Stupak is close to making a kind of Pomme Soufflé with water that he can then flavour any which way. A hot version of the frozen capsule is a 'huge Holy Grail'.

Address: WD-50, 50 Clinton Street, New York, NY10002, USA. +1 212 477 2900

3. Edward Voon Aurum, Singapore

The shock factor décor of Aurum in trendy Clarke Quay in Singapore invites accusations of style over substance, but Aurum's Head Chef Edward Voon wants to prove otherwise.

Cuisine: Voon's menu was created with the help of el Bulli alumnus, Paco Roncero, who is staying on as a consultant. Aurum's cuisine is a bit of a mouthful: New Age Asian Molecular Gastronomy.

Best known for: "Passion, creativity and a lot of nitrogen," according to Voon. "Gimmicky cooking that's an insult to revered traditional methods of cooking," according to his more conservative detractors.

Voon's cutting-edge cuisine is rivalled by Aurum's downright odd décor. The reception area is modelled on a morgue and the restaurant itself has no tables. Instead, diners sit in gold wheelchairs at steel surgical tables. It's a bling-bling Holby City meets high-concept cuisine, all executed with surgical precision.

Favourite ingredient? For someone who likes to 'break the rules' and 'push the boundaries', it is somewhat surprising that Voon passes over edible titanium foil or the essence of some rare Malaysian jungle orchid in favour of humble, though versatile, olive oil. There's nothing he likes more than hunching over beakers of mysterious bubbling liquids creating little balls of olive oil caviar like some gastro-Frankenstein.

Favourite piece of kit? Voon treasures the siphon that he uses for many of his dishes. He uses it for his foamy, aerated creations.

Influences: Molecular maestro Ferrán Adrià of el Bulli and traditions of South East Asia.

Most audacious creation to date: Reverse Shark Fin Soup. Traditional ingredients are jellied and sprayed with gold essence – and Tim Sum Insanity, with dumplings made of yogurt and olive oil instead of flour and water.

What can we expect next? "Cuisine of the 21st century. Cuisine that focuses on details, precision, and artistic flair, that offers a daring experience beyond explanation, that is controversial and experimental." More of the same then.

Address: Aurum, Block C, The Cannery, River Valley Road, 01-03, Clarke Quay, Singapore, 179022, + 65 6887 3733

4. Daniel Puskas Oscillate Wildly, Australia

Daniel 'Pussy' Puskas, Head Chef, Oscillate Wildly (yup, named after the Smiths' track) earned his spurs at Tetsuya's and Marquee in Sydney, and at stages at Alinea in Chicago and WD-50 in New York

Cuisine: A cuisine that's so new that the taciturn Puskas hasn't come up with a name for it yet, saying only, "it's sort of contemporary".

Best known for: His way with foam. It's been around for a while now and any chef wanting to up his creative credentials wheels out frothy concoctions of mushroom, vinegar or tomato. But frozen or burnt foam, now that's another matter.

Favourite ingredient? The South American tonka bean. Better known for its use in snuff (the sort you inhale, not watch) and anti-coagulant drugs, it's got a spicy fragrance reminiscent of vanilla, cloves and cinnamon and is banned by the Food and Drug Administration in the US.

Favourite piece of kit? "My blow torch," he says with a sinister laugh. "I use it to burn all sorts of things, especially foam."

Influences: Wylie Dufresne of New York's WD-50 and Grant Achatz of Alinea in Chicago.

Most audacious creation to date: "Broken Sponge Pumpkin Ice Cream and Honey. Using techniques I learnt from Wylie for soyabased proteins, I make a honey whip, then I crumble in some plain sponge cake and add pumpkin and chocolate ice cream."

What can we expect next? "Because we're a small bistro, I can't have all the equipment I want. I'd like a bigger restaurant so that I could do more extreme things. I know quite a bit that I can't implement here," Puskas muses. Get there quick before he moves away from the local goths of Newtown.

It's innovative cooking and costs a fraction of what you would pay anywhere else. The Sydney Morning Herald reckons that eating there now is like watching The Beatles in the Cavern Club.

Address: Oscillate Wildly, 275 Australia Street, Newtown, Sydney, Australia, + 61 2 9517 4700

5. Quique Dacosta El Poblet, Spain

We've already heard all about the Basque and Catalan vanguard, so it's time for a shout out to the culinary stars elsewhere in Spain. Step forward, Quique (pronounced Kiki) Dacosta of El Poblet in Alicante, a self-taught chef who started aged 17 at El Poblet, and has gone on to become a popular fixture at Madrid Fusion.

Cuisine: Cocina de Vanguardia. Dacosta calls his exploratory, investigative menus 'Universo Local', with dishes inspired by local terroir, including The Other Moon of Valencia and the local swamps or 'poblet'.

Best known for: His mastery of rice cooking, he has (literally) written the book on the subject in his 'Arroces Contemporáneos'. He even does a tasting menu of seven different paellas.

Favourite ingredient? Rice, of course. And 'embryonic vegetables' i.e. germinating seeds, sprouts, and micro-vegetables.

Favourite piece of kit? He has six different models of Thermomix Influences: Inspired by the nature surrounding him, whether that's the moon, granite, lichen or 'the hoarfrost produced on nut trees during cold nights'. Try 'The Living Forest' a Dacosta classic that 'represent perfumes, textures and products that we find on a walk around one of our forests.' 'Go into it.' He urges us.

Most audacious creation to date: Anything using 'mineralisation' like his signature Oysters Guggenheim Bilbao or the Hen that Layed the Golden Egg. Use of titanium, silver and gold lend a luxury touch.

What can we expect next? Use of natural sweetening agents like stevia rebaudiana and gelling agents like aloe vera.

Address: Ctra Les Marines, km.3, +34 96 578 4179 www.elpoblet.com

6. Inaki Aizpitarte Le Chateaubriand, France

One for the ladies, judging by the panting write ups in Elle and Libération, 35-year old Basque chef Inaki Aizpitarte is the poster boy for the Parisian 'neo-bistro'. Now at the hip Chateaubriand restaurant, self-taught Aizpitarte made his name at Transversal restaurant at the contemporary art museum in Vitry and La Famille in the 18e following an inauspicious start as a dishwasher in Tel Aviv.

Cuisine: Bistro-experimental.

This one-time landscape gardener's 'cuisine and transcendence' won him a Les Palmes award from the latter-day culinary iconoclasts of Le Fooding. "We opted for freedom: we do what we like to do" he told France Today.

Best known for: His 'miniatures' menus back at La Famille featuring up to 20 courses in miniature form are still legendary. The 'happening'-like events were renowned for lasting long into the early hours.

Favourite ingredient: Beetroot, ideally from cult organic producer Joël Thiébault, for example in Lardo with Beetroot and Pomegranate.

Favourite piece of kit? The lab is in his head; his kitchen at Le Chateaubriand has barely changed since he took over the legendary old bistro.

Influences: His travels around the world, to Israel, Egypt, Asia and Central America inform a cuisine uncluttered by geographical boundaries.

Most audacious creation to date: Brittany Oysters with Fulvio Pierangelini's Lardo.

What can we expect next? Aizpitarte has joined Gelinaz! a chef's 'band' that includes such names as Italy's Fulvio Pierangelini and Davide Scabin. At their 'gigs' each member recreates the mostcopied dish of one of the members live on stage. The next event will tackle René Redzepi's Goat's Milk Ice Cream with Sorrel Granité in Copenhagen in December.

Address: Le Chateaubriand, 129 Avenue Parmentier, 75011 Paris, France. +33 (0)1 43 57 45 95

7. Davide Scabin Combal.Zero, Italy

Piemontese renegade Davide Scabin of five year old Combal.Zero at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Turin has broken away from the pack in Italy by virtue of his forward-compatible, interactive cuisine.

Cuisine: His signature menu may be dubbed 'creativo', but the artistic bent is secondary to his rigorous approach to food design, as opposed to 'art'. He prides himself on having fed 1,500 operagoers during a 45 minute interval, and teaching industrial design at the University in Turin.

Best known for: His muchimitated 'Lingua Brasata al Barolo' (veal tongue braised in Barolo) was the starting point for an event by motley culinary 'band' Gelinaz! at the Omnivore Food Festival in Le Havre last year (see Inaki Aizpitarte)

Favourite ingredient? A true Piemontese, Scabin comes into his own during truffle season from October.

Favourite piece of kit? "Little spatulas from art shops and catalogues. I want a water laser but they're ≈200,000. You can work like a sculptor with them. I have to wait until the prices come down like I did with my P.C. Or get a sponsor [hint, hint].

Influences: "I live like a hermit. I haven't eaten in anyone else's restaurant since 1994."

Most audacious creation to date: His whimsicallytitled dishes including 'Harry Potter' (a bag of sweets), 'Cyber Eggs', 'Virtual Oyster', most of which are served with bespoke utensils. 'Kulaworld' his dish inspired by an early Playstation game has yet to be realised.

What can we expect next? Further investigations into GM foods and the ergonomics of eating. He's also being tailed by a documentary film-maker, and has big plans for Madrid Fusion next year.

Address: Combal.Zero, Piazza Mafalda di Savoia, Rivoli (Torino). +39 011 956 5225 www.combal.org

8. Simon Rogan L'enclume, England

Simon Rogan, Chef/Proprietor, of L'enclume in the Lake District has been dividing critics and customers up north since 2003, and is set to do the same in the south when he opens his new place in Henley in early 2008.

Cuisine: Rogan prefers the term 'avant garde'. "That gets to the crux of what we're doing. You're not going to get a normal meal."

Best known for: His poetic bent, combining wordplay with mystery. 'Melting fig fondant, cassia bark, icy fennel, spice' moved Giles Coren to observe "I don't mind when a chef cooks better than I can, but when he writes better than I do, I feel funny." Rogan has since moved on. "I've toned that down a bit. It's not 'what the hell is it?'"

Favourite ingredient? On the science side, Rogan is loving Methocel, a form of vegetable cellulose, and sugar substitute, Sorbitol.

Favourite piece of kit? "The Gastrovac. Cooking in an active vacuum chamber, you can create quite funky flavour combinations. And we're waiting on delivery of an Anti-Griddle, which works like a griddle but at -40°C. That's quite cool."

Influences: "When we opened, the work of Marc Veyrat and Pierre Gagnaire floated my boat. Hopefully, I've developed my own style and niche now."

Most audacious creation to date? Rogan cites Egg Drop Hot and Sour Soup, in which the egg, mixed with Methocel, is squirted from a syringe into hot soup to form noodly swirls. But he's also excited by L'enclume's bespoke serving-pieces, like silver tripods. "The whole avant garde thing doesn't stop with the food."

What we can expect next? Rogan's Henley customers can look forward to trying the new fragrances and essences currently being developed.

He's looking at new ways of communicating between the kitchen and the dining room, which could see guests contacting the kitchen via interactive television screens.

Address: Cavendish Street, Cartmel, near Grange-over- Sands, Cumbria, 01539 536362

9. Alex Atala D.O.M, Brazil

Alex Atala, the former DJ turned chef owner of D.O.M in Sao Paulo has given contemporary cuisine a Brazilian spin by going to extra lengths to source

Cuisine: Brazilian gastronomy – a marriage of French and Spanish techniques and the mutant wonders of Brazilian produce: cows with humps perfect for slow cooking, Brazil nut cheese, and a magical spice that preserves food.

Best known for: Lowtemperature cooking using a Roner Digital Thermostat for ultra-accurate temperature control in a bain marie. Atala uses it to create a meltingly tender dish from the hump of the local Zebu cattle. And, trivia fans, Atala is also apparently famed for his uncanny ability to imitate birdcalls.

Favourite ingredient? Tucupi.

To make this, Atala boils the highly poisonous extract of manioc root, a by-product of making manioc flour, with local herbs and garlic for over 20 hours. He leaves the result to ferment in the high heat and humidity of the Amazon, leaving him with tucupi. "It both preserves and flavours dishes like a magical spice," he says.

Favourite piece of kit? The Roner and his knives. "I have this one knife that I get very emotional and very jealous about – I've had it for 20 years."

Influences: The Slow Food movement. Atala uses only locally sourced foods, many from his own farm in the Amazonian state of Amapá.

And when the jungle throws up electric cress that makes your lips tingle and a fish big enough to make spare ribs from, who needs liquid nitrogen?

Most audacious creation to date: "I used the crest of a cock to make a hollandaise without eggs." Atala says with relish. "I served this with embryonic [unlaid] chicken eggs, because they have no white."

What can we expect next? "We are working with the fermentation process to make fake cheese. I made one with Brazil nuts and water. The flavours are both creamy and sharp."

Address: Rua Barão de Capanema 549, Jardim Paulista, Sao Paulo, CEP: 01411-011, Brazil. 00 55 11 3088 0761

10. Fredrik Andersson Mistral, Stockholm

Fredrik Andersson, chef/owner of tiny, 14-cover Mistral and co-owner-cum-maitre d' Björn Vasseur, Andersson, whose experience amounts to little more than a stage at Le Chantecler at the Hôtel Negresco and the launch of Gösslingen in Stockholm, works with just one other in the open kitchen.

Cuisine: "We work in the tradition of French gastronomy, but if you want, you could call it modern cuisine. I'm a free-thinking chef."

Best known for: Local produce, mostly organic. Thanks to the menu, guests are on first-name terms with the farmers, fishermen and gardeners they work with. Try slow-cooked parsnip 'grown by Sonja and Harald in Gnesta'.

Favourite ingredient: Langoustines and cucumber – at the moment: currently served with the former raw, the latter marinated, along with pickled onion and last-of-the-season celeriac, slowly braised with seaweed and anise.

Favourite piece of kit: Sous-vide machine: "I don't want to damage ingredients with a lot of stress."

Influences: He cites three 'great chefs' - Andoni Aduriz, Alain Passard and Michel Bras.

Most audacious dish to date: He eschews culinary acrobatics for a Tom and Barbara approach: "We just want our guests to feel as joyful as we do when we cook."

What can we expect next? "Late winter in Sweden. It's a depressing time," says the otherwise chirpy Andersson. "We want to get more involved with the growers, to get earlier spring vegetables and some traditional Swedish root vegetables – such as old-style beetroots and carrots – that will store well to give

us a longer season."

Address: Mistral, Lilla Nygaten 21, Stockholm, +11 46 8 101 224

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