

The thrill of the grill

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The phrase 'chefs' toys' is an expression in the restaurant trade that has come to distinguish the invariably expensive tools professionals cook with from those that can be found in even the most committed amateur's kitchen.

Over the last few years the gap between the two has narrowed as manufacturers have cleverly induced us to believe that we can cook so much better if we have so much more. A display of Japanese knives, breadmakers, ice-cream makers and induction hobs are now de rigueur in many new homes, although a price tag of more than £3,000 ensures that the Swiss made Pacojet remains mainly in professional hands. This small, counter unit purees food in a frozen state and magically concentrates the flavour of the raw ingredients.

This toy is emblematic of a cooking style that manifests itself in mousses, foams and splodges of colour across the plate, a style that is currently moving out of fashion. Taking its place, and top of many chefs' current shopping lists, is the far more expensive Jospers.

A Jospers is a hybrid. It is first and foremost a grill but the secret of what it adds to whatever is cooked on it - whether steaks, chicken, fish, vegetables or anything enterprising chefs can turn their hands to - is that it has a front door which, when closed, ensures that none of the natural moisture or flavour escapes. More often than not, a Jospers is described as an oven, although grilling is its primary role. Burning top-quality charcoal, the Jospers is, in layman's terms, the hottest indoor barbecue available.

I encountered my first Jospers five years ago in Moscow at Goodman's, the steak restaurant. The meat was exceptional. One was subsequently installed in their London outpost.

Raphael Duntoy, the charming chef at La Petite Maison in Mayfair, was a very early enthusiast but confessed to me that he had made two elementary mistakes. Firstly, the dishes cooked on it have proved so popular with his customers that he knows now that he should have bought two, not one. And secondly, he joked, he should have asked the UK importers for a commission. Every chef who has come to his kitchen to watch it in operation has ended up buying one, despite a price tag of up to £18,000.

This is not surprising, for a top-of-the-range Jospers can accommodate about 30 pieces of fish or meat simultaneously. The bars of the very hot grill, at a normal setting of 300 °C (but this can go much higher), mark the meat or fish attractively and cook it swiftly; the closed door enhances the flavours; and the steam that emanates from the Jospers whenever the door is opened adds a touch of drama for the customers if it is situated in an open kitchen.

While all of these attractions appeal to us now, and particularly at this time of year when simply grilled food is so attractive, it is somewhat surprising to discover that the Jospers is 40 years old. It was created in 1970 by Josep Armangué and Pere Juli, who subsequently gave their names to the company, a year after they had opened their 1,000-seater restaurant Mas Pi in Pinedar de Mar close to the Mediterranean in north-east Spain, and became convinced of the need for a new solution to cook over charcoal in professional kitchens. The two adjustable draughts, at the bottom to draw air in and at the top to let the smoke and combustion gases out, operate in a similar fashion to the mechanism behind the Aga cooker, once the staple of the English country kitchen.

Jospers's UK importer reports that business is currently very brisk with about 100 ovens installed and orders from several high-profile restaurants on the books. These include the second branch of Hawksmoor that specialises in serving British meat, due to open in Covent Garden in October, and another for Heston Blumenthal's kitchen in the Mandarin Oriental, Knightsbridge, at the end of the year.

Quite how powerful these ovens are I discovered standing next to chef Mark Hansell-Dixon, pictured above with the Jospers in the open kitchen of The Akeman, a bright, modern restaurant in the market town of Tring, 35 miles north west of London.

On the tray by our side were a whole sea bream and a 28-day aged British sirloin steak, which were seasoned, anointed with olive oil and, in the case of the fish, covered with lemon juice. Opening the Jospers's door released the first blast of heat, a sensation that was to be repeated frequently as each item was turned promptly as the crisp grill marks appeared but before any part of the flesh could dry out. The fish was then taken to be finished off in a conventional oven for five minutes while the steak was put on the top rack of the Jospers, where the temperature hovers between 60 to 80 °C, and where it will rest until ready to be served.

Hansell-Dixon explained that it had taken him, an experienced chef, about a week to adapt to the Jospers's fierce heat and he showed me the burn marks on his arms to prove that accidents can still happen. He also used the phrase 'cremated' to describe what the Jospers can do if the chef is not paying attention.

But he was wildly enthusiastic about the Jospers's advantages and not just for the most obvious items. Grilling fresh sardines was a particular favourite and two items, slow cooked pork belly and oven roasted tomatoes, had found their way on to his menu simply from experimenting with leaving both on the top rack of the Jospers for up to twelve hours.

Opening the lower door, Hansell-Dixon showed me the V-shaped tray that holds the charcoal that is cleaned out every morning by a junior member of his team. 'This one', he added, tapping it with a pair of tongs, 'burns about 10 kg of charcoal a day. Over a year this comes to about £5,000.'

Peter Borg-Neal, the Akeman's owner, believes the Jospers is such an essential ingredient in his business of smart/casual restaurants outside London that he has installed a further two at The Old Post Office in Wallingford, Oxfordshire, and The Red Lion in Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire.

'It allows me to achieve two very different goals. Firstly, to use a cooking technique normally associated with the more expensive West End restaurants and secondly to use it to cook such a wide range of food. We even cook the chicken breasts on it for the chicken Caesar salad and they're the best I've ever tasted', he explained.

The Akeman, www.oakmaninns.co.uk

Jospers, www.jospers.es