



For its 95 units, Bertucci's works closely with suppliers to offer beloved slow-cooked flavors in menu items like Shrimp and Butternut Squash Risotto.

# SLOW

## But Simple

Creative partnerships and new technologies are speeding up slow flavors

BY DEBORAH GROSSMAN

In the age of Twitter and Facebook, slow cooking is the equivalent of snail mail — comforting and reliable, but oh, so outdated and laborious. Might stir fries and panini relegate stews and roasts to relic status? From a flavor viewpoint, chefs cry out, “Not so fast!” Advancements in technology and creative kitchen methods are assisting a revolution in deeply flavored, long-cooked proteins and sides in restaurants.

Chef Josef Jungwirth’s staff prepares 250,000 meals a day over a fleet of 22 Royal Caribbean and two Azamara cruise ships. Slow-cooking is key to his kitchen strategy.

“When you slow-roast, slow-braise or prepare meats under sous-vide, you achieve a great product. Complementing the proteins with fresh aromatics like celery, carrots, parsnips, onion, garlic, and other flavor agents like wine, spices, fresh and dry herbs, boosts all the flavors and contributes to a perfect marriage,” says Jungwirth, director of culinary for Royal Caribbean International.

### RISOTTO RISING

When fishermen haul in the catch off California’s Marin County coast, the demand for crab risotto soars at Nick’s Cove in Marshall, Calif. Executive Chef Austin Perkins donned his thinking toque to speed up the service of classic risotto during crab season. Perkins punches up the flavor of the risotto with Parmigiano-Reggiano rind-infused stock. He cooks rice to “chewy” doneness, and then quickly cools it in the walk-in.

The 10-minute service time consists of sautéing the rice with water, and garnishing with grated Parmesan, a dash of salt and the warmed crab body and leg. The summer’s sweet-corn risotto and year-round mushroom, spinach and vegetable versions are also popular.

But are the intensive labor and prep time for risotto an option for Bertucci’s, a brick-oven-centric group of 95 restaurants in the Northeast?



TRI-TIP GRILL

At New York City's Tri-Tip Grill, steak undergoes a laborious five-step flavor-building process before being prepared in sandwiches like the Bacon-Cheddar Buck, in just five minutes' time.

Jeff Tenner, Bertucci's VP/executive chef, introduced his risotto recipe in partnership with supplier Joseph's Gourmet Pasta, a unit of Nestlé.

The company launched its risotto line last fall. "This is an ideal slow-cooked product for us to produce," says Pete Iwanicki, manager, national accounts for Joseph's. "We studied a multi-step, long-simmered base with a long cook and can offer consistency of portions, quick service and high flavor." The risotto kits — in seafood, wild mushroom and butternut squash flavors — are packaged in portions of both rice and broth. With his culinary background, Iwanicki carefully developed the broth. "We built a strong flavor backbone in our kettles with lobster and clam broths, fresh leeks, Chablis wine and lemon," he says of the seafood broth. Tenner uses Joseph's risotto packs and prices the Shrimp and Butternut Squash Risotto at \$17.99, well within Bertucci's profit-margin range.

"People know and love risotto, yet most don't cook it at home while the family is hungrily awaiting dinner," says Tenner. "Risotto is a great vehicle for us to showcase seasonal products such as grilled scallops with lemon basil. With a short ticket time, this product is a home-run."

### EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS

Baked pasta dishes are another restaurant favorite that diners often choose not to cook at home. Overseeing 44 restaurants, Keith

Brunell, senior director of culinary at Maggiano's, partners with a supplier to produce their popular stuffed raviolis and tortellacci. But Maggiano's baked pasta entrées — lasagna, baked ziti and baked rigatoni — are made in-house.

"Who's going through a laborious, multi-step recipe for lasagna just for two people on weeknights?" asks Brunell. He builds the lasagna in a large pan and bakes it for an hour and a half. Portioned into round gratin dishes, the lasagna is topped with fresh herbs, more cheese and sauce, and baked for 10 minutes upon order.

"We 'wow' them with the melt factor of cheese. The visual 'string pull' factor as the cheese unfolds and comes to life makes an emotional connection with the diner."

Maggiano's serves housemade fillings for manicotti and cannelloni made from batched crêpe shells. Brunell obsesses over warming the serving plates before the final bake to expedite cooking, and adds, "The bubbling sauce atop the manicotti and cannelloni gives another emotional connection that Nonna might serve this just for your family."

Over the years, the food industry has made quantum leaps in producing efficient, time-saving flavor products. Consider the miracle of concentrated stock bases. Now, says Paul Fiorentino, Ventura Foods' VP of culinary and operator support, their culinary bases speed up slow cooking and their line of finishing sauces such as Ventura balsamic glaze flavor up slow-cooked foods like braised veal shanks.

### SLOW-COOKED MEATS

For Dave Zino, executive chef of The Beef Checkoff, slow cooking beef makes sense. "You can't make a beef stew in ten minutes. Slow cooking breaks down the connective tissue of muscular cuts such as chuck and round which sets the animal in motion."

But the concept of large-scale production of slow-cooked beef dishes is relatively new. Zino recalls the 2004 Awards Luncheon of the Research Chefs Association in Savannah, Ga. Working with a shoulder roast recipe from chef Jacques Pepin, ConAgra delivered the sous-vide prepared beef in vacuum-pack bags. The pot roast was re-heated and served in a fraction of time normally required for a

slow roast. “The rich flavors that derived from a phenomenally small amount of prep caused quite a stir for members of the emerging Culinology movement,” says Zino.

The revolution in slow cooking is in full-force in all areas of foodservice.

Applebee’s uses a variety of proprietary ways to menu slow-cooked foods. “Slow-cooked flavors can’t be mimicked; there are no short cuts,” says Shannon Johnson, Applebee’s VP of culinary and menu strategy. “Processing technology and great equipment have made volume slow cooking safer and more efficient, but you only get those deep flavors from the ‘slow’ part, which, of course, is time and attention.”

To serve slow-cooked proteins on board dozens of cruise ships, Jungwirth takes full advantage of equipment advances. The galleys are equipped with cook-and-hold ovens from Alto-Shaam and low-temperature and high-tech combi ovens which have super-heated steam/roast functions.

Jungwirth also installed Elro pressure cookers in all galleys. “We can cook stew tender in 30 to 45 minutes depending on the individual piece size,” he says. “This equipment magically helps achieve a tender and flavorful product and helps the financial bottom line, both from lower labor costs and 20 percent less shrinkage than conventional ovens.”

For the specialty restaurants on board, Jungwirth purchases custom sous-vide braised short ribs and osso bucco.

### SOUS-VIDE TSUNAMI

One of the largest scale sous-vide processors and prepared-meat suppliers is Ed Miniat. Executive Chef John Draz notes that the company began selling cooked meats to foodservice in 1986 and currently processes 61 million pounds of meat annually. The most popular products are beef short ribs, pot roast and pork carnitas; the newest item is roasted sirloin top butt cap (culotte).

Tenner wanted to add more slow-cooked meats to the menu at Bertucci’s, but he wondered, “If we’re great at preparing pizza and pasta, why attempt to make pork shanks?” He realized the challenges of consistently executing such a product across 95 units.

## SLOW-FOOD Standouts

Chefs share their best-loved slow-cooked dishes.

Escoffier’s two-day recipe for cassoulet and duck confit.

JEFF TENNER  
VP/Executive Chef, Bertucci’s

Osso bucco served with creamy polenta — a true favorite.

JOSEF JUNGWIRTH  
Director of Culinary, Royal Caribbean International

Braised short ribs served with couscous, butternut squash and chard with herbed cheese and bracirole, traditional rolled beef, on pappardelle.

KEITH BRUNELL  
Senior Director of Culinary, Maggiano’s

Cassoulet is my at-home, cold-winter’s-day meal. I enjoy the process of making duck confit first, and then sausage, and combining them for a slow-cooked finale. Tip: Use Madeleine Kamman’s duck confit spice-mix recipe.

SHANNON JOHNSON  
VP of Culinary and Menu Strategy, Applebee’s

Beef bourguignon and coq au vin — the way you learn it in cooking school — and simple pot roast.

AUSTIN PERKINS  
Executive Chef, Nick’s Cove

Braised short ribs, slow cooking on a wintry Sunday afternoon.

DAVE ZINO  
Executive Chef, The Beef Checkoff

Chef Austin Perkins’ Venison Osso Bucco is a slow-cooked favorite on the menu at Nick’s Cove in Marshall, Calif.



NICK’S COVE



BARILLA

In some applications, time and labor savings can be achieved by looking to quick-cooking stand-ins. Orzo saves about 40 minutes of cook time in this risotto-inspired Orzotto with Prosciutto and Mushrooms.

Currently in the R&D stages, Tenner is partnering with a manufacturer for a vacuum pouch with the fully-cooked shank in his aromatic tomato sauce. Individual orders will be placed in a casserole and heated in the brick oven where caramelization will occur from the naturally occurring sugars in the sauce.

“Given an approachable price point, we expect great perceived value for this upscale shank with artisan appeal,” adds Tenner.

### SLOW METHODOLOGY

The proliferation of sous-vide foods with custom recipes has helped revolutionize many multi-unit menus. Yet some operators developed precise methodologies for slow cooking applicable to quick-service concepts.

At the Tri-Tip Grill, which recently opened a second unit in New York City, Owner Dave Kassling is obsessed with the flavor profile of the meat and the commitment to deliver a 6-oz. tri-tip sandwich for \$7.99 within four minutes. Kassling staked the concept on a dish that normally takes over an hour to prep and

roast. He relies on a multi-step process to build layers of flavor: After a dry rub and wet marinade, the Angus Certified Beef is flame-charred and then smoked over wood chips for two hours. At this point, the meat, cooked to raw, can be refrigerated for several days. Based on demand, the tri-tip is pulled from the walk-in and roasted at 375 degrees for 30 minutes in a conventional oven and held in a warming drawer for slicing to order.

What led to quick customer allegiance to the fast-casual concept? “The crust holds in the smoke flavor and charred bits from the yellow-flamed grilling. These smoky, charred ‘flavor crystals’ mingle with the medium-rare meat, creating an appealing textural and taste sensation,” says Kassling.

At the Daily Grill group of 21 restaurants, VP of Culinary Phil Kastel prides himself on preparing everything from scratch at each property. The short ribs, braised for four hours nightly, are top sellers. But the Daily Grill’s Chicken Pot Pie is proudly menued with the words, “Please allow 12 minutes” — the only item with this caveat. “The keys to our delivery standard are communication and mis-en-place,” he says.

Chickens are roasted and cut into chunks. Onions, garlic, peas and mushrooms are sautéed, and a béchamel sauce is prepared. The pie crusts are pre-made, measured and cut into the shape of the serving bowls. Upon order, the cold base is heated in a sauté pan and ladled into the bowl. The pasty is sealed on top and the pie is cooked at 500 degrees for 12 minutes.

“There’s nothing wrong with buying chicken stock, pre-roasted chickens and cut vegetables, but we believe there are no shortcuts to the flavors of this signature dish,” says Kastel.

As many chefs continue to nurture the flavor development of hands-on slow cooking, advances in technique and technology are bringing these rich and rewarding flavors to a greater number of operators and their appreciative customers. ☺

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## Take-Away TIPS

**SLOW SUPPORT:** Develop supplier-partnerships for proprietary recipes of slow-cooked dishes or products.

**TELL THE STORY:** Capitalize on the marketing potential of beloved slow-cooked dishes, highlighting the culinary attention to time and technique.

**BE WARNED:** For longer-cooking dishes, caution customers to extra preparation time; this also adds to the appeal and flavor expectation of such dishes.