

What's green and slimy and could revitalise hospital food?

Valerie Elliott Consumer Editor

Heston Blumenthal has tempted the nation's palate with bacon-and-egg ice cream and snail porridge. Now the Michelin-starred chef is hoping to excite the appetites of older people in hospital by feeding them food flavoured with seaweed.

Blumenthal has allowed researchers from the University of Reading into the laboratory kitchen of his Fat Duck restaurant to show them the use of Japanese kombu seaweed to add flavour to stocks, sauces and meat dishes.

He accepts that it may be an uphill struggle to make seaweed popular but he told *The Times*: "It really works. Seaweed flavour makes a meat pie really meaty. It brings out the best flavour. Seaweed has a difficult image with the public but it is an imaginative ingredient which gives an exciting burst of flavour. We need to enliven meal times in

hospitals and for old people to get excited again about their food."

Blumenthal, named this week as the "Chef's Chef" in the San Pellegrino world's best restaurant awards, uses seaweed in his dish Sound of the Sea, but thinks that it could be used in any meat casserole or to flavour a steak.

He is acting as a consultant to staff at the university's Food Biosciences department to identify the best possible combination that can be cooked in hospital kitchens and will entice elderly patients to regain their appetites after surgery or other treatment.

Seaweed may not yet be the food of choice in the Western diet, but in Japan, China and Korea it is a staple, and many species of seaweed are grown and harvested for food. It is also a food rich in *umami*, the Japanese word for delicious and savoury, which enhances flavour in foods.

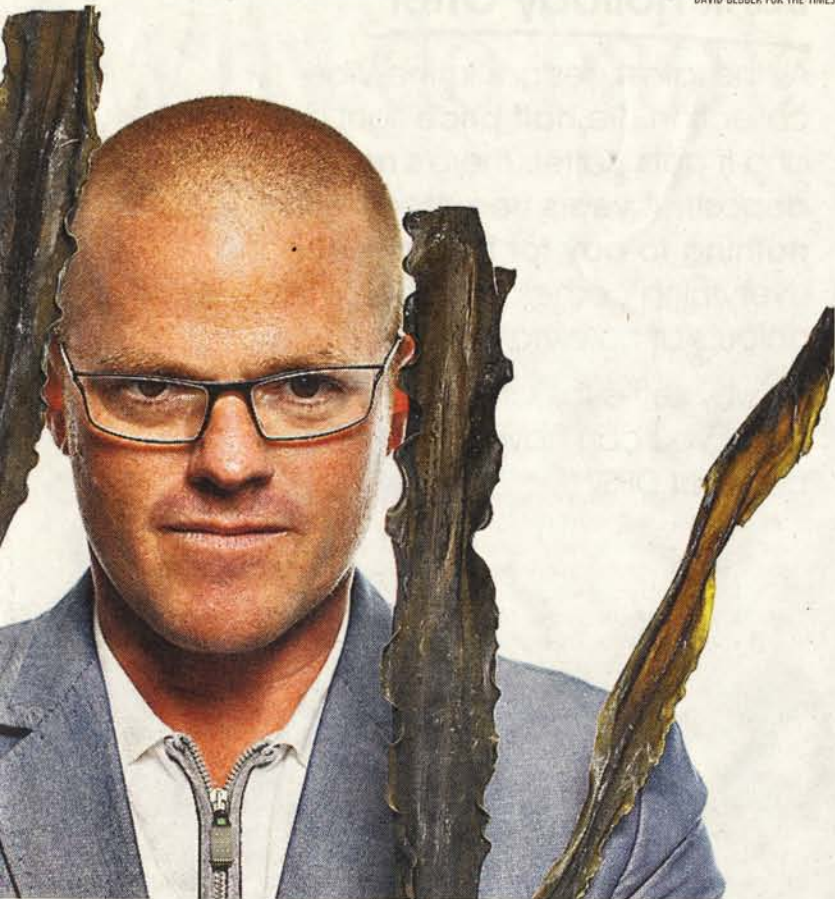
Dr Lisa Methven, a flavour chemist

Heston Blumenthal says that seaweed

and lead researcher on the project, has therefore decided to find out whether seaweed or other umami foods such as tomato, soya sauce and shiitake mushrooms can pep up a typical meal prepared in hospital kitchens. Her work is being funded with £140,000 from Age



DAVID BEBBER FOR THE TIMES



can help elderly patients to regain their appetites and has been working with Dr Lisa Methven, a flavour chemist

UK. The aim is to prevent and treat malnutrition in elderly people in care. Many have poor diets because they are turned off food. But this often delays recovery from surgery or infection and prolongs hospital stays.

She dabbled first with seaweed as

‘Seaweed is thought of as a rotting mess on the beach and it’s hard to get people to accept it’

stock for minced beef, a staple in dishes such as shepherd’s pie, spaghetti bolognese and lasagne.

“As people get older their taste buds fade. This can be down to old age, illness, medication or a lack of zinc in the diet,” she said. “Sense of smell is also de-

‘I’d love it if I could get my appetite back’

Case study

Michael Corcoran, 85, a former builder from Newbury, has been in and out of hospital this year suffering from leg ulcers and swollen knees and has had to use a walking frame (Valerie Elliott writes).

He grew up on a farm in Co. Mayo and has always had a hearty appetite, but three weeks ago lost his taste for food: “I just don’t feel like much at all,” he said. “I had steak and kidney pudding at lunch but left quite a bit today. They are trying to get me fit and so I have to

eat and then maybe I will be out within a week,” he said.

His bed is in a pleasant corner of an elderly care ward at the Royal Berkshire Hospital in Reading. Meal times here are sacrosanct and medical rounds are not allowed. The idea is to create an ambience that encourages patients to eat and drink on their own. The ward has adjustable, mechanised, beds to put patients in the best position for eating and small plates are used to tempt them to eat. Mr Corcoran said that at best these days he could

only manage a boiled egg with some bread or leek and potato soup, jelly, yoghurt or some Angel Delight.

Mr Corcoran said: “If they are going to do something to help us eat more that is wonderful. It would also stop the waste.

“I would really love it if I could get my appetite back because I love bacon, I love steak and chips and fish and chips.

“I also used to like a whisky but I take a lot of tablets and am not allowed to drink it now. But I do like my tea and best of all is cold water.”

BEN GURR FOR THE TIMES



pleted. Flavour can be enhanced by use of monosodium glutamate, but our approach is to find a natural source for improved flavour.”

The combinations were tested in clinical “blind” tastings by a panel of “super tasters”. These are people, such as Tracy Brooks, with acute senses of taste and smell. She was chef to the late Queen Elizabeth the Mother and is used to cooking for older people. “The Queen Mother really enjoyed well-cooked strongly flavoured foods such as kedgeree and lasagne,” Ms Brooks said. “In my view the seaweed-flavoured mince was definitely the tastiest. I would use it in a stock.”

Local pensioners who tried the mince were not satisfied, however, and found it “bland”. Researchers are now experimenting with combinations of different seaweed extracts. The seaweed used is commonly found around the British and Irish coast and includes

kombu, or kelp (*Laminaria*), nori (*Porphyra*), wakame (*Undaria pinnatifida*) and dulse (*Palmaria palmata*).

Seaweed is already known to help to lower cholesterol, reduce blood pressure and promote healthy digestions.

Sarah Hotchkiss, a scientist at Cyber-Colloids, an Irish company, who is supplying the seaweed extract for the research, is convinced that it can add flavour to meals. “The main problem is that people conceptualise seaweed as a rotting, slimy, stinking mess on the beach and it is difficult to get people to accept it,” she said. “I am looking at lots of ways seaweed can be used to promote health and wellbeing.”

It will be another year before the Reading team is ready to test new seaweed-flavoured dishes on patients at the Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust. It is possible the seaweed formula could eventually be used in a new range of healthy ready-meals.