

liver and savoury bubble tea with squid ink tapioca pearls (<http://up13.org>).

A chemical logic underpins Powell's odd blend of ingredients: one batch of gumdrops used raspberry, rum and ant venom because they all contain derivatives of formic acid, which has a strong, tangy taste.

After the dot-com bust, Powell trained in the kitchen of Heston Blumenthal, head chef of The Fat Duck in Berkshire, UK. Blumenthal founded his own research laboratory to refine such culinary techniques as sous vide, or slow cooking in vacuum-sealed bags. In recent years, a handful of molecular chefs — including Ferrán Adrià at Spain's El Bulli and Homaru Cantu at Moto in Chicago, Illinois — have used liquid

nitrogen, lasers and inkjet printers to expand the range of possible flavours and textures.

Ultramodern kitchen experimentation has largely bypassed the amateur because of the high cost of equipment, such as rotary evaporators or an 'anti-griddle' that chills to  $-34^{\circ}\text{C}$ . But vacuum-sealers and smoking guns are relatively cheap and, as food scientists such as Harold McGee and Hervé This have shown, there is also room for innovation using standard ingredients and appliances.

What sets Powell apart is his home-grown approach. He invites strangers to bring their own ingredients into his kitchen and hack alongside him. "I think food cooked at home is always better than what's cooked

in a restaurant," he says.

Plus, unlike many restaurant chefs who keep their recipes secret, Powell encourages 'open-source recipe development' (<http://wiki.foodhacking.com>). For when inspiration fails, his website program (<http://deliciouscorpse.com>) generates random recipes — such as 'grub-injected wasp caviar with salt-baked spider bun' — that can be tailored to the contents of your larder.

It remains to be seen whether the invention of such new dishes, as the French epicure Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote in 1825, "does more for human happiness than the discovery of a new star". ■

Jascha Hoffman is a writer based in New York.

## HACKING

# Toys, bugs and rock 'n' roll

### Joanne Baker

"I like listening to insects," says Thomas Truax. A nominee for Britain's 2008 Indy Music Award for best live act, Truax is making a name for himself by building his own instruments from gramophone horns and pull-string toys. He sings about ants, the ozone layer, the Internet and dogs howling at the Moon.

Truax grew up in Colorado and became fascinated with insect sounds. "I was at a camp in the jungle in Mexico and I heard this insect that sounded like a Volkswagen that couldn't get started," he says. Truax explains how he also records bat chirps near his home in London, editing them to make sample loops.

One of Truax's songs tells the story of an injured butterfly that has escaped being pinned to a specimen board by an entomologist. To evoke the sound of its wings, he plays the guitar with a hand-held rotary fan, creating fluttering arpeggios. To avoid working with difficult musicians, Truax builds and plays his own instruments, such as a drum machine crafted from spinning fly-wheels and tiny cymbals.

Other instruments are created from reclaimed junk. Truax is inspired by toys and simple experiments, such as the two-way 'telephones' kids make from string and paper cups. On stage, he sings down a gramophone horn that is wired up with a Slinky to distort his voice, or he amplifies the percussion of clockwork and the vibrations of a single string held taut by an audience member. "I want to make people think about what music is," he says.

"We are at a point in history where computers can do so much but people are losing touch with tactile things," he says. If electronic instruments and digital editing are depersonalizing sound, Truax is making his own noise. ■

Joanne Baker is *Nature's* Books & Arts editor.

**Thomas Truax's single *Stranger On A Train* is out on SL Records (UK) on 31 March, and will be online from 14 April ([www.thomastruax.com](http://www.thomastruax.com)).**



C. SAUNDERS

Thomas Truax crafts instruments from junk to create a new sound inspired by insect noises.