

# Over Easy



BY GENEVIEVE KO

Cooking eggs is often considered the basic measure of a cook. (See page 8 for Wolfgang Puck's two cents.) Famously, André Soltner's interviews for aspiring cooks at Lutèce didn't involve a resumé. It required eggs and butter and dexterity, because there are two kinds of cooks—those who can competently make a French omelet and those who can't.



## **BÁNH XÈO**

From Jimmy Tu



## **TAMAGOYAKI**

From Michael Anthony

The omelet is an exacting dish to cook, but has no limits in its variety. Anyone who's been trained in French kitchens—or watched Julia Child—has been told that an omelet must never brown. But the mark of a great Japanese *tamagoyaki* is the lines of golden brown between the tissue-thin layers, like the rings on an old oak. And the best part of the Vietnamese egg crêpe, *bánh xèo*, is the nearly burnt crisp edges. And even if there isn't one “right” way to cook an omelet, there is a right way to cook each type of omelet.

As I watched each of the chefs prepare his omelet for this feature, I witnessed the intensity good eggs require. Even though Jimmy Tu makes his *bánh xèo* a hundred times a night, he never takes his eyes off the pan. The ever-humble Michael Anthony began by emphasizing how his *tamago* can't compare to those made by many Japanese chefs. Daniel Boulud seemed haunted by the memory of learning the *omelette farcie*. He recalled cooking it for competitions as a young chef, and how harshly the judges critiqued the eggs. I wanted to know if he thinks a better omelet exists, if there's a newer, improved form of the French omelet. He mentioned the thermoblender and siphon, then thought about it some more. Gesturing toward his omelet, he said, “Could this ever be improved? If I did it ten more times, then it'd be really perfect.”

## DANIEL BOULUD'S OMELETTE FARCIE

MAKES 1 OMELET; SERVES 2 TO 4

**D**aniel Boulud is not happy. Someone forgot to bring his omelet pan—the black steel skillet he's seasoned over decades, flipping out thousands of eggs. Boulud had prepped every last detail of this omelet demonstration, even though he's just flown in from Asia, launched his redesigned Manhattan restaurant DB Bistro Moderne, and promoted his new cookbook within the last five days.

“I did this with Craig Claiborne twenty-five, thirty years ago,” he recalls.

Boulud's brow remains furrowed when he starts setting up his bowl and whisk and explaining why his is the perfect omelet. It's about the fat-to-eggs ratio, and to get more fat into the omelet, he fills it with creamy scrambled eggs. And more butter. It's a classic omelette *farcie*, but the *farcie* is more eggs.

“This is an affair with a partner,” he says of the wet, hot scrambled eggs stuffed into the taut omelet. “When they meet...”

He trails off when he starts whisking his scrambled eggs in a *bain marie*. Pulling the pan on and off the crazy-hot flat-top to control the heat, Boulud keeps warning everyone that this will take thirty minutes. Maybe twenty,



**OMELETTE FARCIE**  
From Daniel Boulud

but it can't be rushed. His handlers check their watches. Boulud's focused on the bowl, watching for curds. Despite the fact that he has more than a dozen restaurants around the globe, Boulud now seems as intent as a teen-aged apprentice on perfecting his scramble.

He was fifteen when he first made this omelet as an apprentice in Lyon. All the young chefs had to demonstrate the technique before judges to advance their careers.

"You don't want any part of the eggs to curdle before they can all curdle together at the same time. See how it's starting to foam and thicken? This is basically like making a custard without cream, milk, or fat."

The time- and labor-intensiveness is why Boulud doesn't make omelettes ten times a night, or serve it at his restaurants or regularly make it for himself at home. When he does, he says he likes it with warm buttered pain de mie, crème fraîche, and smoked salmon. Or caviar.

Once the foam dissipates and the eggs get a little shiny, Boulud sets a substitute omelet pan over another flame. He pulls the barely set scramble from the heat and

whisks in cold butter to stop the cooking. He puts them aside, then butters up his hot pan, and pours in more beaten eggs.

Up to this point, Boulud's been whisking with a steady rhythm as mellow as a straw broom sweeping a patio. Now, he's all *Stomp!*, striking the fork through the eggs with near violence while shaking the pan. He slams the skillet against the grate and says, "Now you tap!" His palm flies against the base of the handle, as if he's trying to kill a fly. The round disk jolts and rolls. Boulud taps again, then once more. The egg's rolled three-quarters of the way and he quickly spoons a line of the custardy scrambled eggs onto the remaining unfolded egg before flipping the omelet onto a porcelain plate.

Boulud drapes a spotless linen napkin over the omelet and tucks in the sides with gentleness usually reserved for sleeping babies. He uncovers the perfectly symmetrical torpedo and slits it down the center and stuffs it with more scrambled egg. He lifts up the plate, examines it from every angle with the intense glare of a judge, and declares, "That is why I'm Daniel Boulud."

**1 Beat 5 eggs with a fork to blend**, season with salt and pepper, and beat again to mix. Don't beat any foam into the eggs. Set aside.

**2 Bring 2 inches water to a steady simmer** in a saucepan that will hold a large metal bowl snugly.

**3 Whisk 3 eggs in the metal bowl to break**, then whisk in a pinch of salt and a twist of pepper. Set the bowl over the simmering water and whisk continuously, adjusting the heat to keep the water just simmering and to prevent the eggs from curdling too fast. The

eggs will foam on top, then the foam will subside and the

eggs will start to thicken and become opaque and creamy.



This process will take 20 to 30 minutes. You will whisk them steadily and constantly the entire time.

**4 Once the scrambled eggs coalesce** and form tiny curds—they'll resemble a loose porridge—remove the bowl from the saucepan and immediately add 2 T cold butter to slow the cooking. (Boulud added in more butter than he originally planned because "extra fat brings sexiness." If only that were true about my waistline, too.) Whisk in the butter until melted, then fold in the chives. Set aside.

#### INGREDIENTS FOR OMELETTE FARCIE

8	large eggs	3 T	cold unsalted butter, cut into ½" cubes
+	kosher salt	3 T	chives, super finely sliced, plus more for garnish
+	freshly ground white pepper (for better presentation)	+	clarified butter



**5 Heat a 12-inch black steel omelet pan** or nonstick over medium heat

until hot. Add enough clarified butter to the omelet pan to coat the bottom and the

sides, then add the remaining 1 T butter. As soon as it melts, add the reserved beaten eggs. Swirl to coat the bottom and ½" up the sides of the pan. Let stand until the edges are just set, then immediately pull in the edges with a fork and beat the eggs by moving the fork in a circular motion while vigorously swirling the pan in the opposite direction. When the eggs are barely set but still runny, slam the pan flat against the stove grate.

**6 Use an open palm to forcefully rap** the pan's handle near where it meets the pan. The egg should slide and roll a bit. Repeat the tapping

until the egg has rolled three-quarters of the way. Spoon a line of the scrambled eggs onto the open flap, leaving 1" on all sides. Tap the pan again for the final roll, then flip the omelet onto a dish, seam side down.

**7 Drape a clean kitchen towel over the omelet** and gently encourage it into a torpedo shape. With a sharp knife, cut a slit down the center, leaving 2" uncut on both ends. Use the tip of the knife to carefully open the slit an inch wide, and spoon the remaining scrambled eggs in and on top of the slit. Garnish with chives and serve immediately.

## JIMMY TU'S BÁNH XÈO

MAKES 1 CRÊPE; SERVES 1 OR 2

**B**unker is like a hipster food fantasy: seasonal authentic Vietnamese in a may-never-gentrify industrial border town straddling Queens and Brooklyn, on a block of low-slung scrap metal yards that make the sun freakishly bright and give the sky a Nebraskan feel. It also serves some of the best Vietnamese food in New York.

Chef-owner Jimmy Tu never meant to open a restaurant here. He was looking for the cheapest rent to start a seafood distribution business. His wife, a kindergarten teacher, was expecting their first child and they decided non-chef hours would be better for their family.

Then Hurricane Sandy hit, destroying the cheap space. Without insurance or the upfront cash needed to start importing seafood, Tu and his partners decided to turn it into a restaurant instead. He'd done it before, with Tigerland in the East Village. He was also one of the opening chefs at Eleven Madison Park. This time around, with nothing to lose, Tu decided to focus on the Vietnamese street food he grew up eating.

Tu cares primarily about making good, real Vietnamese cuisine. "I like to stay traditional," says Tu. "My partners push me to throw soft shell crab and lobster on the menu, but I don't unless I feel I can improve on tradition a lot." The people have responded. City folk hitch rides out to this no-man's-land or trek from the

faraway train station for the much-Yelped-about bánh xèo. Some call it an omelet, others a crêpe, but Tu's is the Siamese-twin version: a sheen of egg fused to a crisp, thin rice pancake.

Though he travels regularly to Vietnam, Tu says he hasn't had a better bánh xèo than the one his mom makes in Elmhurst—three miles away. He throws a little turmeric into his crêpe batter for its curried edge, and



swaps her raw pork belly slices for heritage Berkshire bacon. But otherwise, he hasn't messed with her version. What makes the Tu family bánh xèo killer is its crispness. It has the crackle of fresh tortilla chips, but the inner egg layer keeps it moist inside.

The tools are the secret to success here. Tu says he prefers a carbon steel pan but concedes a nonstick will work even if it won't get as hot. You should also keep

your oil in a squirt bottle to easily lube up the edges of the crêpe as it cooks. "You need a lot of oil here to get it crisp enough," advises Tu, "but it gets drained at the end so you don't have to worry about eating it." And you have to eat it fast. The nearly burnt edges of bánh xèo are as elusive and critical to the enjoyment of this dish as the quavering golden shell is to a French omelet. Worlds apart but just as satisfying.

## NUOC CHAM

**1 Pound the garlic and chili** in a large mortar with a pestle until pasty.

**2 Whisk in the sugar,** fish sauce, lime juice, and 1 C water until the sugar dissolves. Transfer to a serving bowl for dipping.

## BÁNH XÈO

**1 Whisk the flour together** with the scallion, turmeric, salt, and ¼ C cold water in a bowl until completely smooth. Set aside.

**2 Heat a well-seasoned 9" carbon steel skillet**

over high heat until smoking hot. Add enough oil to coat the bottom of the pan generously

and swirl to lightly coat the sides too. Add the bacon and shrimp and cook, stirring and

tossing, until the shrimp start to curl but before they become completely opaque, about 1 minute.

**3 Whisk the batter again** to mix in any flour that's settled on the bottom and ladle a spoonful into the pan. Swirl the pan to coat the bottom and an inch or so up the sides with a thin layer of the batter. Repeat two more times. Let the batter set, about 30 seconds.

**4 Drizzle the egg** over the crêpe and swirl the pan to evenly coat the crêpe with egg. The crêpe should have released from the sides of the pan; squirt oil between



## INGREDIENTS FOR BÁNH XÈO

### FOR NUOC CHAM:

1 garlic clove, peeled  
¼ red Thai bird's eye chili  
¼ C sugar  
¼ C fish sauce  
1 T fresh lime juice  
1 C water

¼ C Thai rice flour\*  
1 small scallion, very thinly sliced  
pinch ground turmeric  
pinch fine sea salt  
¼ C water

+ vegetable oil  
1 strip thick-cut bacon, cut into ½" pieces  
5 small (26/30-count) shrimp, shelled and deveined  
1 large egg, beaten  
½ C bean sprouts  
8 green and red lettuce leaves  
4 shiso leaves  
+ fresh mint, cilantro, basil, and dill sprigs

\* Be sure to buy regular rice flour, ground from long grain kernels, and not sweet rice flour (aka glutinous rice flour or mochiko). Tu uses Thailand's Erawan brand, labeled RICE FLOUR. The lettering is all red, unlike the very similar looking green-labeled glutinous rice.

the crêpe edges and the pan. Gently shake the pan to keep everything moving. Poke holes in the crêpe with a fork or spoon to keep it from bubbling up—you want a flat crêpe. Oil should be sputtering at the edges of the crêpe. If it isn't, add more.

**5 Cook the crêpe**, oiling and shaking until the egg has set on top and the bottom of the crêpe is dark brown around the edges and in speckles on the bottom. Pile the bean sprouts on one half and fold the other half over with a spatula. Hold the

folded omelet against one side of the pan and tilt the oil out the other side into a heat-safe bowl. Discard.

**6 Lift the omelet out of the pan** with the spatula and immediately serve with the lettuce and shiso leaves,

herbs, and nuoc cham. Tear off a piece of omelet with a bunch of bean sprouts and tuck it into a lettuce leaf with a shiso leaf. Pluck a few fresh herb leaves and stuff them in there, too, then roll it up and dip into the nuoc cham. Eat. Repeat.

## MICHAEL ANTHONY'S TAMAGOYAKI

MAKES 1 OMELET; SERVES 2 TO 4

**M**ichael Anthony, chef of New York City's acclaimed Gramercy Tavern and author of its eponymous cookbook, is the poster child of all that's good about American food today. His style is seasonal and vegetable-centric, his flavors clean and intense, his dishes flawless in execution. But he actually started cooking on the other side of the globe. He studied Japanese in college and hopped a plane to Tokyo the day he after he graduated. He ended up in Saitama, a semirural satellite suburb north of the city. Officially, he was there to teach English. And he did, trading language classes for cooking lessons with a group of middle-aged women.

"I was interested in learning how people ate at home, from a cultural perspective as well as a culinary one. Every Friday morning, I'd go to my friend's house and she and her friends would teach me the basics of home cooking. Tamagoyaki was the first dish they taught me."

At its best, tamagoyaki (aka *dashimaki tamago*) is a rolled log made from numerous golden-brown layers of savory-sweet egg cooked in a traditional heavy copper square pan called a *makiyakinabe*.

Anthony moved on from those lovely ladies to a "tough old mean lady" in Tokyo. Shizuyo Shima trained Anthony in her tiny bistro kitchen with a brutality to

match the legendary French chef-tyrants. Then she pushed him out so that he could continue learning, advising him to attend her culinary school in France. Anthony moved from the best kitchens in France to the best in New York City, tracking eggs along the way.

"I became infatuated with savory egg dishes," Anthony says. "They were the benchmark for any good cook and an easy, direct connection to the farm." Over the years, he went from making a French rolled omelet stuffed with lobster to a new American soft-boiled version crusted in almonds and panko; he's now experimenting with smoking them. But he's got a soft spot for tamagoyaki.

The ingredients are simple—eggs, soy, dashi, sugar. Anthony worked to get the balance just right. These days, he adds extra yolks for richness and uses white soy sauce because it's saltier and more savory (umami!) and paler (better presentation).

As for equipment, Anthony admits a lightweight nonstick skillet would be easier to maneuver than his *makiyakinabe*. Nowadays, Japanese markets sell lighter square nonstick pans for the weak of arm. To aid with the egg-rolling, Anthony flips the finished omelet onto a sushi mat and gently presses it into whatever you call a rectangular cylinder. Watching him maneuver the omelet with wooden chopsticks—extra long and tapered like supermodels' legs—I wonder if this great American chef isn't a Japanese cook at heart.



## DASHI

**1 Simmer the kombu and  $\frac{2}{3}$  C water** in a small saucepan for 20 minutes. Remove from the heat.

**2 Discard the kombu, and add the katsuobushi.** Stir well and let stand for 15 minutes. Pour through a sieve.

## TAMAGOYAKI

**1 Mix the eggs, yolks, sugar, and salt** in a medium bowl with chopsticks until well blended, but not foamy. Mix in the dashi and soy sauce until incorporated, then stir in the mitsuba or parsley.

**2 Heat a well-seasoned 8-inch-square copper makiyakinabe pan** over medium heat. To check if the pan is ready, draw a line of beaten egg in the pan. It should coagulate on contact. When the pan's ready, soak a paper towel with oil and rub a generous coating all over the bottom and sides of the pan. Pour in enough egg to form a thin layer, swirling the pan to evenly coat the bottom.

**3 Cook the eggs**, tapping down any bubbles with the chopsticks, until the bottom is completely set and golden brown and the top is glossy. Pick up one far corner of the egg and pull it in 2" and fold it over. Repeat on the other far corner so that there's a 2" strip of golden brown egg folded over the remaining omelet. Let it set for a second, then grip the center of the fold with the chopsticks and gently lift and roll it over while pushing the pan away from your body and bring it back more gently in a circular motion. So, you're simultaneously pulling the egg toward you while rotating the pan away from you. Repeat until the omelet is fully rolled and snug against the handle-side of the pan.

**4 Gently scooch the roll** to the far side of the pan and press it firmly against the side. Soak the oiled paper towel again and lube the pan, letting oil seep under the roll. When the oil's hot, add another thin layer of egg. Lift the roll

to let the wet egg run under it. Once this layer is set, repeat the rolling and rotating technique. Keep adding egg and rolling until all the egg is used up. Be warned: the rolling gets harder with each layer as the roll gets heavier.

**5 When the roll is complete**, carefully turn it out onto a sushi mat. Wrap the mat around the roll and press it gently, squaring off the edges. Transfer the roll to a cutting board and cut it into

1" slices. Transfer to a serving dish. Tamago also tastes good cold or at room temperature, though it is best hot.

**6 To garnish**, grate the daikon on a Japanese grater or fine microplane. Squeeze out any excess liquid then press into a little snow-hill on the dish and drizzle with soy sauce. Cut the radish into paper-thin slices and the turnip into wedges. Arrange on the plate like a zen garden with the greens and serve.



## INGREDIENTS FOR TAMAGOYAKI

### FOR DASHI:

$\frac{2}{3}$ " square dried kombu  
 $\frac{2}{3}$  C water  
3 T loosely packed katsuobushi (dried bonito flakes)

5 large eggs  
3 large egg yolks  
2 T sugar

1 t kosher salt  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  C **DASHI**  
2 T white soy sauce  
2 T fresh mitsuba leaves or flat-leaf parsley leaves, finely chopped  
+ grapeseed oil  
+ daikon, peeled  
+ baby green radish, peeled  
+ baby white turnip, peeled and trimmed  
+ microgreens