



ANNALS OF TECHNOLOGY

THE BAKEOFF

Competing to create the ultimate cookie.

BY MALCOLM GLADWELL

Steve Gundrum launched Project Delta at a small dinner last fall at Il Fornaio, in Burlingame, just down the road from the San Francisco Airport. It wasn't the first time he'd been to Il Fornaio, and he made his selection quickly, with just a glance at the menu; he is the sort of person who might have thought about his choice in advance—maybe even that morning, while shaving. He would have posed it to himself as a question—Ravioli alla Lucana?—and turned it over in his mind, assembling and disassembling the dish, ingredient by ingredient, as if it were a model airplane. Did the Pecorino pepato really belong? What if you dropped the basil? What would the ravioli taste like if you froze it, along with the ricotta and the Parmesan, and tried to sell it in the supermarket? And then what would you do about the fennel?

Gundrum is short and round. He has dark hair and a mustache and speaks with the flattened vowels of the upper Midwest. He is voluble and excitable and doggedly unpretentious, to the point that your best chance of seeing him in a suit is probably Halloween. He runs Mattson, one of the country's foremost food research-and-development firms, which is situated in a low-slung concrete-and-glass building in a nondescript office park in Silicon Valley. Gundrum's office is a spare, windowless room near the rear, and all day long white-coated technicians come to him with prototypes in little bowls, or on skewers, or in Tupperware containers. His job is to taste and advise, and the most common words out of his mouth are "I have an idea." Just that afternoon, Gundrum had ruled on the reformulation of a popular spinach dip (which had an unfortunate tendency to smell like lawn clippings) and examined the latest iteration of a low-carb kettle corn for evidence of rhythmic munching (the metronomic hand-to-mouth cycle that lies at the heart of any successful snack experience). Mattson created the shelf-stable Mrs. Fields Chocolate Chip Cookie, the new Boca Burger products for Kraft Foods, Orville Redenbacher's Butter Toffee Popcorn Clusters, and so many other products that it is impossible to walk down the aisle of a supermarket and not be surrounded by