

A robot cook promises the perfect meals. It wasn't as good as it sounds

Soleil Ho

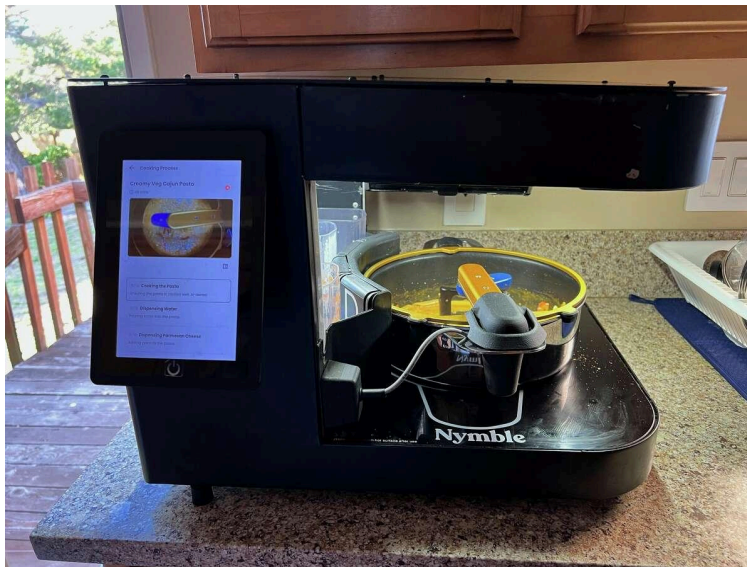
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1 of 2

A Nymble robot chef cooks Cajun vegetable pasta. The device comes with a nonstick saucepan, an induction burner, a mechanical stirrer, ingredient dispensers and a tablet with hundreds of recipes.

Soleil Ho/The Chronicle



A human still must chop the ingredients, but the Nymble puts them together, stirs and cooks.

Recently, in a San Mateo backyard, two young men told me about me with their dream to put a team of robot cooks in every kitchen in America, bringing the dream of Michelin-starred meals and machine-generated recipes to households that have no time to cook.

“Get 26 hours in your day,” their company website promises, so you can play board games and read books instead of watching the stove. Maybe not what philosopher Herbert Marcuse imagined when he wrote that automation would spell “historical progress toward a new civilization,” but it’s a start.

Their key to the kingdom? Nymble, a nonstick saucepan that comes with an induction burner, a mechanical stirrer, ingredient dispensers and a tablet with hundreds of recipes scripted by a team of chefs in their home base in India. The majority of the recipes are one-pot meals — since there’s only one pot. Contestants from the “Masterchef” reality show have also contributed recipes, and the founders mentioned that they hope celebrity chef Gordon Ramsey will eventually take their calls.

I watched as the machine followed the recipe for matar paneer, translated from recipe to code by Nymble’s programmers: It tipped plastic containers of cubed cheese, minced onions and tomato puree into the pan, dispensed spices measured to the gram and adjusted the heat to make the mixture bubble just-so. You have to chop the ingredients, but the machine puts them together and stirs.

I signed up for this demonstration because I've got a lot of questions about the growing mechanization of home cooking. Nymble's rivals — Thermomix, Moley and Suvie — are also speeding toward a release of their countertop cooking machines. After a long career of making things like tonkatsu ramen and Kraft-style cheese the slow and labor-intensive way, I definitely see the virtue of time-saving appliances and tools. But I can't help but see this whole enterprise as rather sad.

In a recent article in Science magazine, emerging technologies researcher Jack Stilgoe proposed that we start thinking seriously about the social impact of artificial intelligence. Calling it the “Weizenbaum test” after AI pioneer Joseph Weizenbaum, Stilgoe writes, “As excitement builds about the possibilities of generative AI, rather than asking whether these machines are intelligent, we should instead ask whether they are useful.” Is it good? Do we need it? What problem is it trying to solve?

As I think back on the Nymble demo, I'm not sure this idea passes the test.

The matar paneer, made with a default amount of sauce, was luxuriously creamy, while another dish, an attempt at Cajun vegetable pasta, tasted like a stock photo of a pasta dish, which maybe feels accurate to the whole AI thing.

There are some good use cases for automated kitchens: If a disabled person wants assistance with home cooking, perhaps. But that use was more of a

surprise benefit the creators didn't initially plan, they told me. And at \$1,500, this thing is likely beyond reach for most people who depend on disability benefits, which averaged \$1,234 per month as of 2019. (Nymble representatives told me that they'd like for the machines to be cheaper once the company grows, but would their investors still want to invest?)

Rather, juiced up with venture capital funding and set to ship by the end of the year, company representatives told me that they have their sights set on upwardly mobile millennial Americans: families and couples with dual incomes. The team is based in Bengaluru, India, but apparently Indians with disposable income wouldn't go for this because, well, who needs a machine when servants are a dime-a-dozen?

As with ChatGPT (moderated by Kenyan workers paid \$2 per hour), Midjourney (based on uncompensated artists' work) and other modes of what we call "artificial intelligence," the million-dollar-saving question is, where are they hiding the people?

A built-in camera allows Nymble support staff in India to peer into the pan any time you use it, to make sure nothing goes awry while you're playing Uno. If the sauce burns, they'll send you a text about it. Like angels dancing on a pin, the servants are there, you just can't see them. I'm not sure if that's a net social good.

The sad thing is, like Soylent, whose advertisements emphasized the “inconvenience” of eating non-pureed food, this tech seems to be made by people who don’t really get why cooking matters.

Cooking is chaotic: a science experiment that can take place in any kitchen, where culture, creativity and necessity clash to form inconsistent, surprising and usually nourishing outcomes most nights of the week. It can certainly be hard work, but there’s creativity and even a little pride still involved when you spontaneously toss a can of sardines into boxed mac and cheese and it turns out OK.

I worry that the overly deterministic format of a cooking machine, where every motion is programmed to balletic precision, cuts down too much on the spirit of invention that makes cooking so wonderfully strange and human. Cooking gives us opportunities to ask *why* our parents used this-or-that spice and to learn the sensation of dimpling focaccia dough with our fingers. Will we care that artificial intelligence can produce an ideally creamy chicken tikka masala if we don’t understand why that happened?

A machine simply gives us the solution — not the journey. We lose so much when we automate that all away.

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Reach Soleil on

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