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## Invention: Computo-cooked perfection

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Barry Fox

### Computerised cookery

Philips claims to have discovered the secret ingredient for automating fine cuisine. A new range of kitchen devices for the domestically challenged could produce food that is perfectly "done" at the press of a button, the company reckons.

The secret is to measure the amount of water released while the food cooks, whether it is baking, frying or being cooked in a microwave. Apparently, this accurately reveals the food's dryness and crispness without the need to taste it.

An oven or fryer would contain a precise scale, capable of recording the total weight of anything placed inside it. As it cooks a meal it measures the weight difference, revealing how much water has been released in the form of steam.

To make the measurement more accurate, the released water could also be trapped, condensed and weighed.

The budding chef need only enter a few commands, telling the machine what kind of food is being cooked, and how crispy it should be. An electronic library of cooking instructions then sounds an alarm and switches the oven off when it is perfectly done. Sound good, but I'll believe it when I taste it.

Read the full [cooking by numbers patent application](#).

### Bacterial electronics

Bacteria can be fooled into producing conductive nano-fibres that may then be used as tiny electronic connectors. The discovery was made by researchers at the University of Massachusetts, US, working for the Department of Energy.

Tiny hair-like surface appendages, known as "pili", are used by bacteria to connect to host tissue and reproduce with other bacteria of the same species. Pili are made of protein and are usually non-conductive.

But the patented idea is to grow a bug strain called *Geobacter sulfurreducens* using a nutrient that contains particles of insoluble ferric oxide. The resulting bacteria should sprout pili that are highly conductive. So growing the bacteria in lines over an absorptive substrate would create a circuit of biological nano-wires.

Alternatively, the bacteria could be deposited on top of a chip surface and the pili detached and then manoeuvred into position between nano-components. The inventors also hope to genetically modify bacteria to create pili with specific electrical characteristics.

Read the full [bacterial electronics patent application](#).

### Smart trunk

A patent from German car maker Audi could ensure that no one ever gets trapped inside the trunk of a car ever again.

Children can get trapped inside a trunk while playing, while movie gangsters often lock their enemies inside them. A latch inside a trunk can over-ride the external locking system and release it from within, but this can be dangerous if the vehicle is moving.

Audi's solution is a solenoid latch controlled by the car's speedometer. At 5 kilometres per hour or less the solenoid is inactive and lets anyone inside the trunk open it. As soon as the speedometer goes above this speed, however, the solenoid shoots a bolt to stop the cover from opening more than a few centimetres.

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This is enough for a trapped person to get some air, and see where they are, but not enough for them to jump out and risk injury. When the car slows down again, the solenoid releases and so does the lock.

The Sopranos will not be happy...

Read the full [smart trunk patent application](#).

*For more than 30 years, Barry Fox has trawled through the world's weird and wonderful patent applications, uncovering the most exciting, bizarre or even terrifying new ideas. Read previous Invention columns, including:*

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