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HOME & DIGITAL

Move Over, Bacon: Foodies Just Want Smoke

BY SARAH ROSE

As the bacon craze reaches a saturation point among foodies, restaurant chefs and home cooks are finding new ways to enjoy its essential quality—smoke.

From the culinary elite to roadside barbecue there has been an explosion of smoked foods on American menus. New York chef Galen Zamarra last year opened Mas (la grillade), a restaurant entirely devoted to wood-fired cooking. Even its desserts are smoked, including a smoked white chocolate mousse with charred cherries and brown butter cake. Smoked fish livers, tuna hearts and other piscine offal appear at chef John Eisenhart's Pazzo in Portland, Ore.

"If salt is the odorless spice, smoke is the ephemeral magical invisible spice," says chef Seamus Mullen, who smokes foods ranging from eggs to olive oil at his fine-dining restaurant Tertulia in New York City. "You can't feel it, you can't touch it, but you can taste it."

Even cocktail mavens are feeling the spark, with mixologists firing up smoked drinks. Todd Maul at Boston's Clio restaurant uses smoked ice and liqueur-soaked wood chips in his Frank-O cocktail, while the Smokey Margarita Trifecta at Bottega in Yountville, Calif., is rimmed in smoked salt, with smoked tequila and smoked jalapeño simple syrup.

Popular cable-network cooking shows such as "Bobby Flay's Barbecue Addiction" on Scripps' Food Network and "BBQ Pitmasters" on Discovery's TLC helped spark interest in smoked foods, says Michael Kempster, executive vice president and chief marketing officer of the Palatine, Ill.-based Weber-Stephen Products LLC, which manufactures Weber grills.

While some 86% of American households already own a grill, sales of wood chips and planks are on the rise, says Leslie Wheeler, a spokeswoman for the Hearth, Patio and Barbecue Association, an industry trade group. Home cooks interested in smoking will spend an average of 7.5 hours a week cooking outdoors this summer, versus grillers who stand in front of the fire for a mere 5.3 hours weekly, according to the Weber-Stephens' annual grilling survey.

Humans evolved to crave the flavors of smoke, says Nathan Myhrvold, the former chief technology officer at Microsoft Corp. and author of "Modernist Cuisine," a six-volume, 2,438-page encyclopedia of cooking science. Where most animals run from flame, people stare into fireplaces, and even have fireplace screen savers, Mr. Myhrvold says.



"We have a fascination with fire, and the smell of wood smoke, the meat and the sizzle, it gets you hungry. We come from a long line of people who loved that," he says.

Almost any food can be smoked, says Mr. Myhrvold, who began smoking pasta in 1991. Mr. Myhrvold credits Joan Roca, the modernist chef, for inspiring a wave of smoking experimentation in the past decade, serving smoked fat and filling overturned glass jars with wood smoke for dra-

matic table-side presentations at his three-Michelin-starred restaurant El Celler de Can Roca in Girona, Spain.

Smoke contains solid particles and drops of liquid suspended together in a gaseous mix that not only adds flavor, but also helps preserve food by coating the surface and inhibiting the growth of bacteria. Different woods burning at various temperatures will produce a variety of flavors, including vanilla, coconut and peach.

New York City's restaurant scene

has grown so enamored of smoking that former stockbroker Adam Rubin started The Woodman, a Brooklyn-based company which sells specialty charcoals and cooking woods such as apricot, alder, grape vine and Cabernet oak. "We sell the paint to the artists," says Mr. Rubin.

While evolution and food safety can't entirely account for the increased interest in smoke, the grilling industry credits the extended economic downturn as a proximate cause for its popularity. Americans are eating in more often and staying home for vacations due to high gas prices, increased travel costs and lower discretionary spending, says Mr. Kempster of Weber grills.

"We're going through tough times," says Adam Perry Lang, author of a new cookbook, "Charred and Scruffed" (Artisan, May 2012). Smoked dishes are "nostalgic food that touches us and says 'everything is going to be OK,'" says Mr. Perry Lang. From a restaurant-business point of view, smoked and barbecued meats—even with high commodity



Chef Adam Perry Lang cooks shrimp on a plank, left, and then covers them with a domed lid to capture a smoky flavor. The Smokey Margarita Trifecta, above, at Bottega in Yountville, Calif. The hand-held Smoking Gun, below, from PolyScience.



prices—can save on time and labor. "Instead of pan-roasting 10 chickens, with barbecue you're cooking a large piece of meat all at once, it's a bit more efficient," says Mr. Perry Lang, founder and former owner of Daisy May's BBQ in New York City.

"To some people the 24- to 36-hour ordeal of smoking a 20-pound pork shoulder seems a little crazy," says Erik Leander, a home chef who buys whole hogs from an organic farmer and has kept a smoking diary for five years. Smoking chestnuts to brew in a dark stout will be his project for the summer, says Mr. Leander, the chief technology officer of a medical malpractice insurance brokerage in Elmwood Park, Ill.

For would-be smokers who don't have the space, finances or inclination to invest in a big metal smoker, there's the Smoking Gun from PolyScience, the Niles, Ill.-based manufacturer. The hand-held kitchen tool injects smoke directly onto a dish or drink. The company says it has sold more than 10,000 since it was introduced in 2010.

Rewards, Risk of Smoky Shortcut

Liquid smoke is not a laboratory concoction that mimics a natural flavor like artificial vanilla or aspartame. The condiment is nothing more than condensed, smoked water. It is made when hardwood smoke gets run through a water bath, "much like a hookah," says Kantha Shelke, a food chemist and principal at Corvus Blue LLC, a food science research firm in Chicago.

The pleasurable smoke flavors stay

suspended in solution, but the bitter tastes of tar and cancer-causing byproducts of smoke are filtered off. "Science and technology have taken the art of smoking and made it safe," says Ms. Shelke. Smoked flavor gives diners a feeling of being satiated, but research shows people's palates will reject food with too much smoky flavor—which is easy to do when using liquid smoke.

—Sarah Rose