



Grilled squid salad, Owner Patrick Martin, Martin's BBQ Joint, Nolensville, Tenn. RECIPE, plateonline.com.

BACK TO basics

Southern chefs tend their fires with whole animal cookery **by Jody Eddy**

No technique more viscerally taps into the primitive side of our cooking personas than grilling a whole animal over wood. The heady aroma of a slowly caramelizing beast seizes upon our primordial natures as the crackling fire forges a tether to an ancient culinary past illuminated by its intensely blue, smoldering light. It's a collective memory shared by cooks around the world regardless of how divergent their other culinary traditions might be. In the South, it's an enduring legacy embraced by contemporary chefs who strike an effortless balance between the present and the past. For this stalwart breed, whose passion for whole animal grilling is as intense as the temperatures generated, there is no substitute for the sublime flavor coaxed low and slow into an

animal from the heat of burning wood.

"Grilling whole animals is all about being able to understand how a fire breathes, how it acts while it's burning, how it lives, and when it's about to die," says Patrick Martin, owner of Martin's BBQ Joint in Nolensville, Tenn. The owner of a 40-foot transportable rig capable of cooking up to six whole hogs and 20 pork shoulders at once adds, "You have to know your pit, know your grill, read it and be able to act, anticipate, and understand before it happens."

City Grocery Restaurant Group's John Currence of Oxford, Miss., agrees that grilling with wood demands more innate wisdom than other methods of cooking: "It's more

common sense and constant monitoring than anything else. I told the guys on the line before we had the wood grill, 'The worst thing that can happen to you during service is to let the fire go out because then the entire line will draw to a halt.'"

Craig Deibl, of the Charleston, S.C., mainstay Cypress, has been grilling with wood since the restaurant opened more than 10 years ago. "Start adding wood before the rush, so you're cooking on coals and not on flame," he advises. "The coals are your heat source, not the fire." Once the coals are smoldering during the crush of dinner service, it might be tempting to let them fend for themselves.

Deihl backs up Stryjewski's claim: "Eucalyptus is pretty spectacular. It adds a mentholated smell and the results are extremely flavorful." But while he might occasionally throw eucalyptus into the mix, other varieties garner more sustained devotion: "We use oak for heat and use whatever fruit wood we can get our hands on whether it's hickory, cherry and pecan; these are the three primary fruit woods we use for actual smoke. We let the oak dry but let the other woods sit out and weather the elements. We want them wet in order to generate a nice smoke, because this provides our flavor. They'll burn all night long, but you won't get a drop of heat from them, just intense flavor."

Pork belly gets similar love from both chef and customers at Cypress, with Deihl's roasted pork belly with pickled okra and pepper jam (\$12, recipe, plateonline.com).

"We grill a lot of pork belly, long and slow so the skin gets nice and crispy, and then we finish it on the wood grill," he says. "This is one of my favorite items because everyone braises pork belly, but when you have a lacquered belly that's grilled and dipped in reduced pickle juice, you can't go wrong."



Roasted pork belly with pickled okra and pepper jam, \$12, Executive Chef Craig Deihl, Cypress, Charleston, S.C. RECIPE, plateonline.com.

Wood Ash

One of the factors that might be considered a detriment to grilling with wood is the resulting residual ash. But some chefs have found a way to transform this by-product into a flavorful workhorse in their restaurant kitchens. Craig Deihl of Cypress in Charleston shares how he transforms ash into flavor.

"I've always used it to make hominy. The guys in the kitchen also combine it with oranges, lemons, limes, and salt to create salt crusts. We also make hot sauce by adding wood ash to already fermented pepper juice. It mellows it out and adds smokiness. And although I haven't tried it yet, I would like to add wood ash to boiling water for oysters. I think that could result in something really flavorful and interesting."

sphere in the restaurant. There's a Pavlovian response to the subtle, smoky aroma. People stand outside thinking they're a little hungry. Then they walk in and think, 'Hell yes, I'm hungry!'"

Currence's reaction to wood roasting and grilling is the visceral one shared by Southern chefs who are drawn to the tradition by a compulsion that resonates deeper than the virtue of good flavor.

"I started to see very quickly how much you could do with it and the qualities that you draw from fire if you manipulate it right. I started to look at it as something that was skillful and worthy of my consideration."

Jody Robbins would love to try a whole goat cooked over eucalyptus wood on an asador in Uruguay. For recipes from this article and more, visit plateonline.com.