

SMOKING GOOD FLAVOR

How new and improved smoking techniques are firing up flavor on today's menus

One of the greatest challenges all restaurant operators and product development managers face is delivering fresh and exciting flavors to the menu without overloading the inventory with new and often perishable ingredients that lack versatility and range.

While the availability of exotic ingredients and flavorings tempt many chefs to create menu items that are driven by single-use ingredients, savvy operators have learned that one of the easiest, cheapest, and most creative ways to drive flavor and menu innovation is not with ingredients, but with techniques. For example, just about anything — from proteins and cheeses to vegetables and even beans — can be hot- or cold-smoked to add additional flavor. For something nearly invisible, smoke can pack a huge flavor punch to almost any menu item.

Besides the wonderful flavor and tenderness that smoking imparts, there's also the enticing aroma that can permeate the dining room and significantly influence diners' ordering patterns. When was the last time you walked into a restaurant and actually smelled food cooking? The sensory power of smell offers a

simple yet often overlooked way to market your menu, in your dining room and beyond. And, it's free!

Bandera restaurant, a Houston's concept, has tapped the marketing potential of smoke. It uses its ventilation system to successfully intoxicate pedestrians and drive-by traffic with the aromas of rotisserie chicken being hardwood-grilled and smoked. Smoky aromas have customers following their noses in for Bandera's slow-roasted chicken or Mexico City-style sliced lamb.

SMOKING THROUGH THE AGES

Smoking food probably originated in prehistoric times, soon after fire was discovered, and prehistoric folks caught on to the fact that hoisting freshly hunted fish or meat over a smoking fire accelerated the drying process and helped to ward off insects. The resulting enhanced flavor and preserving qualities made smoking a customary practice used throughout the ages.

Today, smoking procedures range from the very simple, like using a stovetop wok or a double boiler, to

QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- The benefits of offering smoked foods on today's menus
- Creative spins on smoking material, brining methods and smoking techniques
- Menu examples from innovative operators using smoke as a flavor enhancer



SMOKEY BONES BBQ

OPERATIONS LIKE SMOKEY BONES BBQ REALIZE THAT SMOKING ADDS FLAVOR AND VALUE TO A VARIETY OF MENU ITEMS, FROM MEATS AND SEAFOODS TO VEGETABLES AND CHEESES.

firing up elaborate commercial-grade hot- and cold-smoking equipment. However, the basic goal remains the same — to cook with the smoke and heat of a burning substance to enhance the flavor and tenderness of food.

The varied applications and usefulness of techniques mean that now operators can selectively add value by smoking specific ingredients to create signature menu items without being stereotyped as a “barbecue concept.” Moreover, smoking materials are not limited to hickory or oak woods but can include all woods such as apple, cherry, maple, mesquite, apricot, cedar, kiawe, grape vines or any combination. Fruit woods are generally mild and impart a sweet, earthy flavor that enhances and doesn’t mask an ingredient’s flavor, and avoids some of the problems associated

with the sugar-sweet residue from burned hickory or the sometimes-bitter flavor of mesquite wood.

While many chefs have caught on to the value of designing their own special blends of hard and fruit woods to achieve specific flavor results, other innovators look beyond the forest and the trees to flavor inexpensive cuts of meat with blends of affordable and accessible ingredients like white rice, garlic, gingerroot, brown sugar, lemon grass and other savories and aromatics. These unexpected ingredients add a complexly flavored smokiness and allow chefs to put subtle ethnic spins on humble ribs or pork chops.

For further variations on an age-old technique, many prominent chefs report that they have had the best results using fine wood shavings or sawdust rather than chips. Another clever technique is to soak the

wood in wine or fruit juices to achieve additional hints of flavor and add moisture to the smoking process, essentially smoking and steaming at the same time, a process which also increases the amount of penetration of smoke into the food.

Chefs as varied as Ming Tsai and Emeril Lagasse are even using jasmine, oolong or black lychee teas and other flavorful ingredients like star anise, citrus zests, scallion brushes and sesame oil to infuse flavor into fish or poultry while also adding value and justifying higher prices.

CREATIVE BRINING OPTIONS

Just as smoking methods have advanced, so too has the thinking behind brining or preparing meats for smoking. The brining process could be as simple as soaking the meat in a mixture of two parts water, one

creamy mustard sauce. Some higher-end additions like vanilla beans and whiskey are also adding a real cachet to soaking liquids. Still other chefs forego the brining altogether in favor of dry rubs or marinades.

The smart play here is to add value to existing ingredients within the inventory and create exciting and on-trend menu items that maximize inventory dollars. This artisan approach to preparing even the most basic dish adds perceived value, distinctiveness and quality, and therefore commands a higher price.

EASY WAYS TO GET SMOKING

It used to be that smoking was a complicated process involving outdoor pits or expensive indoor equipment, and highly guarded techniques, but today operators can achieve smokiness in any number of ways.

For operators and product development specialists with limited cooking facilities or multi-unit consistency issues to consider, purchasing value-added pre-smoked food products may be one of the best options for adding flavor. Panera Bread purchases hardwood-smoked meats from a prominent supplier and offers them in several menu items like its Bacon Turkey Bravo Sandwich, which layers smoked turkey breast, smoked bacon, smoked Gouda, lettuce, tomato and a signature dressing on tomato-basil bread.

Other chain operators like Not Your Average Joe's and Johnny Rockets are using applewood-smoked bacon as an easy way to jazz up and add value to their hamburgers and sandwiches. Shellfish, seafood and cheese are other easily sourced smoked ingredients to consider for adding flavor to a variety of menu items.

If pre-smoked ingredients prove to be cost-prohibitive or limiting, the good news is that, depending upon your comfort level and quantities needed, you can use your own stovetop to test your skills with smoking. Many chefs at small restaurants with occasional or limited production of smoked foods create their own "stove-top pan smokers" crafted from lidded hotel pans and raised wire racks, woks with bamboo steamers or any other object that can lift the foods above the smoldering smoking medium. If you like the results, then the next step may be to venture into an inexpensive smoke oven that has a digital timer and other basic technology to make the art of smoking more of a science.

One of the secrets to smoking is to find out how little you can use to achieve the desired result. Fortunately, new electronic smokers either have fans or good ventilation systems to move the smoke around and permeate the food.



SMOKEY BONES BBQ

A HIDDEN ATTRIBUTE OF IN-HOUSE SMOKING IS THE ENTICING AROMA THAT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO INFLUENCE DINERS' MENU SELECTIONS.

part brown sugar, and a half part kosher salt. Extras like hot sauce, fresh ginger and garlic add more complexity to the brine.

Chefs are becoming creative with this part of the smoking process as well, and have devised savory brews of tea, apple juice, honey, soy sauce and a host of spices to enhance the flavor and achieve ethnically inspired dishes. West Town Tavern, a casual restaurant in Chicago, adds maple syrup to the brine for its pork chop entrée, which is described as maple-cured, and served with braised red cabbage, sweet-potato hash browns and

The Rock Bottom Restaurants chain of casual brewpubs finds that a small Alto-Shaam smoker-holding cabinet meets its needs when hickory-smoking seafood, poultry and ribs for several signature menu items. The restaurant's alder-smoked salmon puts a clever twist on the traditional pub fare of fish and chips. Another menu standout is its plum-marinated Tuscan smoked chicken, which layers flavors and takes advantage of the hot Tuscan flavor trend.

Barbecue chain Smokey Bones BBQ swears by its Southern Pride smokers, which are large enough to fit full-size hickory logs, have room for racks and racks of ribs in the holding cabinets, and can be set for very slow cooking, resulting in falling-off-the-bone tenderness.

The casual dining chain of Hops Grillhouse & Brewery also uses Southern Pride equipment for its hickory-smoked salmon, prime rib and Shanghai spareribs.

There are numerous smoking devices available from commercial equipment suppliers. In our opinion, the biggest bang for the buck comes from a smoke oven that's compact, easy to operate and maintain, and portable enough to be wheeled under a hood when needed.

SMOKING BEYOND PROTEIN

Other clever menu items prove that smoking is not limited to great big slabs of protein. The Red Hot & Blue barbecue chain has leveraged its smoke oven capabilities to include Chicken Corn Chowder, a creamy blend of roasted corn and hickory-smoked pulled chicken.

In addition to its tea-smoked filet mignon, the popular 5'0" (Five Feet) restaurant in Laguna Beach, Calif., tops one of its signature fish dishes with a smoked shrimp and cucumber salsa.

Protein remains the most obvious menu item to benefit from smoking, but chefs are proving that vegetables — from the begging-to-be-embellished zucchini to the tender tomato — are great candidates for the smoker. The standard procedure is to lightly toss vegetables in a flavorful oil, sprinkle with salt and pepper and wrap lightly in foil to prepare it for the smoker. New York City's Miracle Grill serves a smoked-tomato concassé with its grilled shrimp risotto, and often features fish dishes complemented by a smoked-jalapeño vinaigrette. Rock Bottom Restaurants also smokes tomatoes for several of its signature pasta dishes and salads. And Bennigan's tosses its Asiago Chicken Pasta entrée with smoked vegetables.

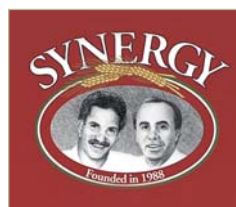
Inventive chefs and menu development professionals are proving that the prehistoric



HOPS GRILLHOUSE & BREWERY

SMOKING ADDS A LAYER OF FLAVOR TO HOPS GRILLHOUSE & BREWERY'S TENDER PRIME RIB ENTRÉE.

technique of smoking has evolved far beyond filling a big chamber with smoke and letting it linger over a piece of meat. Improved stovetop techniques, new smoking equipment and a broader use of ingredients are making smoking a more viable technique than ever. The concept of adding flavor to the menu with the use of smoked foods is a big idea and offers huge value-added potential, limitless creativity in the kitchen and a more memorable sensory experience in the dining room. ☺



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