



Labor of Love

Test and hone your house-curing and charcuterie skills for unique and flavorful first nibbles.

By Jody Shee

Nothing sends a meal off in the right direction like a small, delicate first bite offered as a labor of love—and science. Guests may never know that the delightful prosciutto before them was a hanging fixture in your back room for a year before it was finished, sliced and wrapped around that chunk of juicy ripe cantaloupe. It's certain they don't realize that the delicious terrine they just enjoyed is the product of a pig's head that was blowtorched to remove the hairs and simmered for hours to render it soft and tender.

After all, it's not the beauty of the back room, but, rather, the skill required that makes appetizers produced via house-curing and charcuterie so trendy. House-curing is a rite of passage for chefs, says Drew Belline, chef/co-owner of No. 246, Decatur, Ga. "So much work goes into it, with a lot of time invested." It's a way to show off his butchering skills and his ability to break down the whole animal, making use of every piece.



For the spring menu, Drew Belline, chef/co-owner of No. 246, Decatur, Ga., likes making botargo (salted, cured fish roe) using large shad roe sacks. He starts the curing process in late March or early April so it is fully cured by late April. He believes house-curing is a rite of passage for chefs.

House-curing and charcuterie provide fodder for hours of chef shoptalk. “(Chefs) go check out what others are doing and show off what they are doing different,” Belline says. “What type of meat are they sourcing? Where are they getting it from? What level of humidity are they curing at? At what temperature?”

Answers to those questions lead to new ideas and never-ending appetizer opportunities as different from the next as brining and spice-rub ingredients. Lucas Trinosky, a chef instructor at The Chef’s Academy, Indianapolis, discovered that milk in lieu of water is the perfect brining liquid to cure salmon. Five days cured in milk, salt and sugar leads to soft, tender salmon, probably thanks to the milk enzymes, he supposes. After drying and slicing the salmon, Trinosky is amazed at how tender it remains, with a flavor lighter than that of dry-cured salmon and a little less salty. He has served the salmon on an appetizer platter with onion, hard-cooked eggs and cream cheese.

make the most

Trinosky takes four weeks at the end of his meat class to teach culinary students about charcuterie. Among curing and charcuterie trends, he sees that buying animals from small, local farms is now preferred, because the animals usually are treated better with more space to roam and given a better diet, which impacts the final product.

The practice of self-curing has also gained in popularity as the price of many meats has increased, leading chefs to look for ways to prepare underutilized meats, cuts and parts, as in the full head of the pig. Trinosky had success with cured and lightly smoked quail breasts as part of a quail/citrus salad appetizer. He dry-cured the quail breasts for a day, then smoked them. Each appetizer plate featured a little current jam as sauce; a whole cured quail breast with more jam sauce on top; a small fanned section of peeled and sliced mango; mandarin orange segments; and cooked and sauteed artichoke pieces with seasoned herbs, all topped with micro basil.

Though he’s never seen it done, next on Trinosky’s curing to-do list is turtle and alligator. He has his sights set on alligator andouille.

Some chefs prefer to house-cure so they can control the nutrition quality—something Luciano DelSignore is attuned to. He is chef/owner of Bacco Ristorante, Southfield, Mich., and three Bigalora Wood Fired Cucina venues in Southfield, Ann Arbor and Royal Oak, Mich. It’s difficult to source cured items/charcuterie without nitrates, antibiotics and hormones, he says. Chefs are cooking healthier and want to know everything that goes into their product.

Using his house-cured duck prosciutto or guanciale (cured meat from pork jowl or cheeks), he wraps scallops and domestic prawns as appetizers and cooks them on a piastra. He



presents them with a variety of sauces, including roasted bell pepper coulis or a fragrant mushroom ragoût of diced porcini mushrooms cooked in olive oil, garlic and chili peppers.

seafood renditions

With greater interest in fresher, lighter fare, seafood is showing up more as the choice medium for curing and charcuterie.

Tom Van Lente, executive chef at TWO Restaurant and Bar, Chicago, has begun to rotate smoked fish onto his charcuterie board, but he notes that it is a different animal when it comes to cures, ratios and flavor profiles. “All fish reacts differently to those ratios,” he says. “It’s fun to practice and experiment.”

More recently, he experimented with fermenting salmon, brining it for about 35 minutes, drying it off and allowing it to sit uncovered in the cooler to dry and age for two to three months. The result is a hard chunk of concentrated fish/flavor that he plans to grate on top of items or slice super-thin and include on a charcuterie board as “a real kick to the palate,” he says. For a spring appetizer, he plans to master salmon pastrami to include on a charcuterie board with ramps and morel mushrooms.

At No. 246, Belline developed a spin on beef eye-of-round common in creating bresaola by using tuna “eye-of-round.” It almost looks like beef when sliced and placed atop a small salad of grilled squid and fingerling potato with grated salt-cured egg yolk on top. He finishes the salad with dill or fennel prawns and oil-cured chili and preserved Meyer lemon vinaigrette.

Above: Adam Sappington, chef/owner, The Country Cat Dinner House & Bar, Portland, Ore., has butchered animals for 16 years and says that charcuterie was a natural progression, because he had the whole animal to use.

SAUSAGE TYPES AND CLASSIFICATIONS

Andouille	smoked, uncooked
Blood sausage	cooked
Bockwurst	fresh, cooked
Bologna	cooked, smoked
Bratwurst	smoked
Braunschweiger	cooked
Breakfast	fresh
Cervelat	semidry
Chipolata	cooked
Chorizo	smoked, uncooked
Frankfurters	cooked, smoked
French garlic	cooked, smoked
Head cheese	cooked meat specialty
Italian	fresh
Knockwurst	cooked, smoked
Landjäger	semidry
Leberkåse	cooked meat specialty
Liverwurst	cooked
Mortadella	cooked
Salami	dry, fermented
Scrapple	cooked meat specialty
Tuscan	fresh or cooked
Weisswurst	cooked

Source: *The Art of Charcuterie*, by John Kowalski and *The Culinary Institute of America* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011)

He cures the tuna “eye” in salt, coriander, dill and zest from various citrus fruits for six or seven days, pulls it out, ties it with butcher’s twine, and hangs it in the cooler another eight to 10 days until it is adequately firm, perfect for slicing.

One of Belline’s favorite exercises for the spring menu is making botargo (salted, cured fish roe) using large shad roe sacks. He starts the curing process in late March or early April so it is fully cured by late April. The finished product is firm and grateable. “I would see in spring making a fava bean and artichoke salad with pine nuts and preserved Meyer lemon vinaigrette and topped with sliced cured shad roe,” he says.

the fruit of spring

Spring presents a good opportunity to consider charcuterie and fruit on the appetizer plate, a match made in heaven—or perhaps in Italy, where prosciutto and melon are a classic. Stone fruit goes well with charcuterie, and cherries are fantastic, says DelSignore. “I would find some sort of cheese, like truffled pecorino that’s not so sharp or hard, and build a tower of cherries with cracked pepper, new oil and my shaved loin of pork.”

At TWO, Van Lente has success with his house-cured bacon and smoked fruit salad, something he first saw on his honeymoon in Spain. He medium-dices perfectly ripe honeydew and cantaloupe, places them in a perforated pan and lights apple chips under the pan. He lets the pan smoke for up to 1½ minutes, then arranges the melon in a straight line on a rectangle plate dressed with crispy bacon lardons. He tops the melon with bacon and arugula tossed with Greek olive oil and flake salt with a little lemon juice. “It’s super-simple with a lot of flavor, and it’s a lot of fun,” he says.

Van Lente also makes a savory bacon and shallot jam from his homemade bacon. He cooks together shallots, bacon and a touch of fresh garlic for five hours until it completely reduces and becomes super-sticky and tacky. He finishes it with some fresh-picked thyme. It’s great as a toast spread. “I can sell that as a dish by itself. We nailed it,” he says.

For a spring dish, Adam Sappington, chef/owner, The Country Cat Dinner House & Bar, Portland, Ore., likes to serve his lamb bresaola with soft goat cheese or sheep cheese along with roasted cherries that have been dipped in pickle



Left: House-cured meats at The Smoking Goose, Indianapolis. Above: Luciano DelSignore, chef/owner of Bacco Ristorante and three Bigalora Wood Fired Cucinas in Southeast Michigan, believes stone fruit and cherries work well as charcuterie accompaniments.

PHOTO CREDIT Left: Kelley Jordan Heneveld/Kelley Jordan Photography



"It's super-simple with a lot of flavor, and it's a lot of fun"
 — Tom Van Lente



liquid for two hours. He serves it with arugula and saba with a little extra virgin olive oil and sea salt.

He also makes his own coppa out of the neck of a pig, which he cures for four months. Then, he slices it thin to top his roasted corn and sweet pepper salad with blackberry vinaigrette.

Also in spring, Sappington combines coppa with pickled green strawberries and serves it with aged hard sheep cheese. Additionally, he likes to serve his beef bresaola with fried artichoke hearts, black pepper and horseradish aioli. For his cured lamb, he makes a mostarda out of loganberries or gooseberries. The dish includes aged hard Parmesan and garlic breadcrumbs.

Sappington believes the house-curing and charcuterie appetizer trend is a natural outcome of the trend toward more chefs butchering their own meat rather than ordering it from a supplier. He has butchered animals for 16 years and says that charcuterie was a natural progression, because he had the whole animal to use. He mastered bacon-making 12 years ago, and now goes through 250 pounds of bacon a week. ■

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THE THREE "Cs" OF SANITATION

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To avoid introducing unsavory bacteria, viruses, parasites and mold when making sausage, practice the following three Cs:

1. Keep it cold. Chill all metal equipment that will come in contact with the meat in either an ice-water bath in a clean sink or hotel pan or under refrigeration. Additionally, keep all perishable products and meat at proper chilled temperatures, below 41°F.

2. Keep it clean. Wash hands before beginning any preparation. Use gloves if product will not be cooked later. Clean and sanitize all surfaces that will be in contact with the meat, including tabletops, grinder parts, pans, knives and cutting boards.

3. Keep it covered. Keep all items covered during and after processing to help eliminate cross-contamination, contamination from pathogens and physical contamination from foreign matter, such as hair.

Source: *The Art of Charcuterie*, by John Kowalski and *The Culinary Institute of America (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011)*

Above: No two charcuterie boards are alike, presenting endless opportunity for chefs to showcase their creativity, such as this one created by Tom Van Lente, executive chef at TWO Restaurant and Bar, Chicago. He has been curing meat for years and has begun to rotate smoked fish onto his charcuterie board.

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