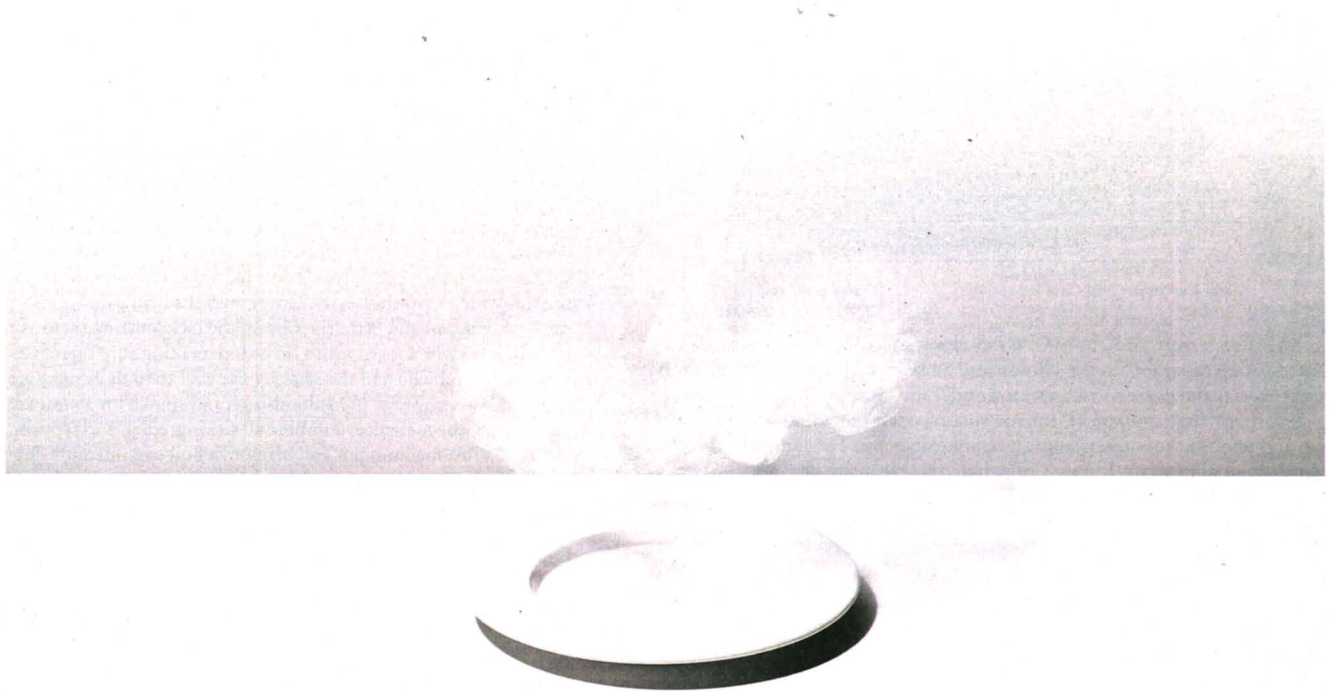


9.14.08 **The Way We Eat** By Jill Santopietro



Thank You for Smoking

Barbecue-pit flavor, minus the pit.

New York might not be the country's barbecue capital, but thanks to places like Daisy May's, Dinosaur, Blue Smoke, RUB and new arrivals like Hill Country, Bar Q and Wildwood, pork is smoking in this town. It has also been smoking in my 350-square-foot apartment, where I've been determined to create backyard barbecue flavors using only my ventless oven.

Creating smoke flavors without actual smoke is certainly feasible. Its essence can be sprinkled on using smoked Spanish paprika or smoked sea salt. By rubbing Lapsang Souchong tea over wild sockeye, a traditional salt-and-sugar-cured salmon morphs into a smoky gravlax. And then there's Liquid Smoke — basically concentrated smoke-flavored water — a popular additive in many parts of the country and an ingredient in lots of store-bought barbecue sauces. I brushed some on ribs and

dripped a little into sauces. Ugh! It tasted artificial. "It goes right to the roof of my mouth and hangs," says Mike Mills, an author of "Peace, Love and Barbecue" and the owner of the 17th Street Bar & Grill restaurants in Southern Illinois.

Though alternatives exist, smoldering wood produces unrivaled flavors. And real smoke is easy to create at home using a stove-top smoker, essentially a roasting pan fitted with a drip tray and a rack, sold by companies like Camerons and Emerilware. Or make your own: line a large wok with heavy foil, add wood chips, lay a smaller piece of foil over the chips to create a drip pan and set a round rack in the pan. A third piece of foil becomes the lid. Use pure, resin-free, ground wood chips. Elizabeth Karmel, the executive chef of Hill Country and the author of "Taming the Flame," says she likes to think of wood

Photograph by Kenji Aoki

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in terms of *terroir* and chooses wood chips based on the origins of the protein, like cedar for Pacific salmon and hickory with catfish. “Pork loves apple wood, and cheese loves pecan wood,” she says.

Before my first smoke-off, I made sure to open the windows, turn on a fan and remove the battery from the smoke detector. I began with ribs, the quintessential ‘cue cut. Kenny Callaghan, the executive chef and a partner at Blue Smoke, advised me to smoke the meat first, then finish it in a low-temperature oven (“low and slow” being the BBQ mantra). “You cannot cook and then smoke, because once you cook you have created a barrier that will not allow the smoke to penetrate the meat,” he says. My fourth-floor BBQ was a success.

I took my next cues from the chef Anita Lo, who has been smoking chicken, salmon and duck at her New York restaurant, Bar Q; Amanda Johnson, a pastry chef at the Five and Ten in Athens, Ga., who smokes chocolate for sauce; and even bartenders like Eben Freeman at Tailor in New York, who smokes Coke over cherry and alder woods to mix with bourbon for his Waylon cocktail. I smoldered wood chips under every food I could think of. I tried catfish, which cooked up tender in just 30 minutes and was tasty on its own or in Karmel’s catfish pâté recipe. I smoked mozzarella (messy but delicious), corn (don’t bother), salt, cod, ricotta, salmon, pears and tomatoes. In the end, I discovered that smoke complements fat and proteins more than delicate fruits and vegetables. Trust me, smoking is as addictive as the surgeon general warns. “I smoked everything that basically roams the earth,” explains Callaghan, talking about his early days at the Blue Smoke pit. “Foie gras was really good.”

The seductive aroma of smoking meat lures omnivores, which helps explain why smoking is so social. “In cooking barbecue, you have a lot of time on your hands to hang out with friends and family,” says Chris Lilly, the vice president of Big Bob Gibson Bar-B-Q in Decatur, Ala. When all is said and eaten, don’t forget to return the battery to your smoke detector. Nobody wants to smoke in his sleep.