

Flavor of FIRE

Fire is as old as time, but chefs and consumers alike are fanning the flames

“ONCE FIRE WAS DISCOVERED, the instinct for improvement made men bring food to it.” Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin said those words more than 200 years ago, but that primal quest for cooking with fire continues today. Diners — hungry for layered flavors, expert cookery and experiential dining — are like moths to the flame. They’re seeking out the flavors of fire: charred, smoked, flamed, wood-grilled, fire-roasted.

Indeed, Technomic reports that menu mentions of the word “fire” have increased steadily since 2008 — 814 mentions versus 519. “It’s recovery behavior,” says trend forecaster Suzy Badaracco of Culinary Tides. “Recession sees simmering and braising. When you go to fire, you’re feeling brave. It takes precision, talent and bravado.”

The trend is, ahem, catching fire. What quickens and widens its path through all segments of foodservice is how it consumes other major trends, gaining force from all that it touches.

First, it radiates food as experience. “Grilling and smoking intrigues all of the senses,” says The Culinary Edge’s Steven Goldstein. “Not only is it exciting for guests to see things being grilled and smoked, but they

can also smell it a mile away.” As evidence, look to the proliferation of fire-centric concepts, from the boom in casual wood-oven pizza concepts to the many new upscale wood-fired grill and hearth restaurants.

“

Fire is about casualization; there’s nothing fussy about it. Fire allows the simplest ingredients and flavors to be the forefront of the meal. Plus, the flame brings an experiential factor without being intrusive.

”

MINDY ARMSTRONG

“The wood-burning grill, competitively, is where it’s at,” says Cliff Pleau, culinary director at Seasons 52, where such items like oak-grilled filet mignon and cedar-roasted tofu are pulled out of the fire. “You can’t beat the sensory cues. The aroma entices — from the burning of the oak and mesquite wood to the char of the cedar plank. You get the visual from the open hearth. Wood burning sets the stage for good, approachable food.”

And it is that familiarity with fire that makes it a formidable trend — it envelops comfort food in its rustic, homey presentation, evoking nostalgia of family campfires and Father’s Day cookouts. The yearning for home and hearth should not be underestimated.

But that homey warmth is tempered by a hankering for bold, well-executed food. Behind the flavor of fire is craftsmanship. Someone is stoking the fire, tending to it, nurturing it, taming it. Diners know this. The trend in craftsmanship is not new. Foodservice

The wood-fired grill and rotisserie is a central feature of Imperial, chef Vitaly Paley's new Portland, Ore., restaurant.



JOHN VALLS FOR IMPERIAL

Why Now This one is right on the heels of a general rusticity that was ushered in and celebrated during the dog days of the recession. In essence, cooking with fire and smoke harkens back to simpler times. And as part of this, you get charred and smoky flavors. Thus, bitter, which is one of the five learned tastes, becomes more appreciated. For operators, there are great opportunities to leverage this along with smoke. Play up the rustic idea. Go for more live fire, where people can watch and smell. This sets the mood for the bitter, charred experience, giving it context and relevance.

– CHRISTOPHER KOETKE



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Fire-roasted produce — as with this blend of edamame, carrots and red peppers — conveys enhanced flavor, craftsmanship and culinary technique.

has responded to it with craft cocktails, house pickling, handmade pastas, in-house charcuterie, local honey, farm-to-fork, artisan ingredients. But fire not only speaks to craftsmanship, it captivates.

At the new Imperial in Portland, Ore., diners can order wine-barrel planked pork secreto or ember-roasted potatoes. At Cedar Hill in San Francisco: pit beans with burnt tips. Chicago diners can visit The Hearty Boys for campfire fish

“ Flavor is the driving force here. Fire is an easy way to gain flavor; techniques with open fire replace the need for heavy seasoning. It’s great to use descriptors such as charred, roasted, grilled, etc., but be sure they are accurate, as it sets flavor expectations. A charred or roasted item that is poorly executed can be a big disappointment. ”

RICK PEREZ

DRINKS on FIRE

There is an interest in bringing complex flavors to cocktails without necessarily using complex ingredients. Smokiness imparts an interesting character and can create a signature flavor. Incorporating some mezcal into a margarita is an easy way for an operator to introduce smokiness in a cocktail.

DAVID COMMER

In cocktails today, as with food, it's all about the layers of flavor and playing with the senses using a combination of taste and aroma. The flavor of fire is a subtle but distinctive way to add depth and richness to a cocktail. Charred and toasted herbs or grilled fruits is a fantastic and more approachable way to add this element than the smoking gun that is commonly used in molecular mixology. Smoking, charring and grilling methods add a unique flair to cocktails and make for appealing menu descriptions.

KATHY CASEY

served with miso lemon couscous. At Pachamamas in Lawrence, Kan., wood-fire-roasted kale appears with spiced pecans, maple yogurt, citrus, toasted garlic and hot mustard.

PRODUCE ON FIRE

"I have never seen so many Brussels sprouts on menus," says Technomic's Darren Tristano. "The effects of fire — caramelizing, charring — make such a difference. Consumers have stopped seeing them as nasty boiled vegetables."

In fact, fire coaxes out flavor in fruits and vegetables like nothing else. "Vegetables used to get dumbed down at the multi-unit level," says Jeffrey Tenner, executive chef of Massachusetts-based Bertucci's and its brand-new 2Ovens wood-fired pizza concept. "We're going after vegetables with bolder flavor combinations, attracting a broader interest."

The recently launched wood-fired Roasted Mushroom & Asiago Pizza at the 93-unit Bertucci's has secured a top spot among specialty pizza offerings. The pizza features

"You get these great natural sugars when you char root vegetables," says Province's chef/owner Randy Zweiban of his Charred Parsnip and Fennel Salad, with mixed greens, aged pecorino and a sherry vinaigrette.



LAURIE PROFFITT

roasted portobello mushrooms and white button mushrooms on a multi-grain crust with Asiago cheese and fresh sage. Other fire-roasted dishes include Brick Oven Beets with Blue Cheese and Roasted Butternut Squash with Candied Walnuts.

At Bertucci's, the descriptions are familiar and somewhat tame. "Not every guest is ready to see the words 'scorched' or 'charred' on the menu," says Tenner. "Words like 'caramelized' and 'roasted' are more appealing to our consumer set. When I'm in the development stage, I go edgier, but then I give it the mother-in-law test."

When it comes to fire-forward descriptors, Seasons 52's Pleau agrees. "I'd use 'char' in char-rubbed, maybe, but on its own? Not everyone would understand that. I'd rather call out what kind of carrot I'm using. I have to be careful with my menu language at the chain level."

Charring finds more favor at the independent level. John Critchley, executive chef at Urbana Restaurant and Wine Bar in Washington, D.C., uses a wood-stone oven for both his charred Brussels sprouts and charred cauliflower. In an iron skillet, par-cooked sprouts seasoned with olive oil and sea salt get pushed far back by the flame for about 10 minutes. "They get a lovely crispy char on the outside and are creamy on the inside," he says. The cauliflower gets seasoned with cardamom and a

“It makes sense that the flavor of fire is on the rise. With a move toward healthier eating, consumers are looking to add flavor with less fat. Smoky notes from charcoal, fruitwoods and herbs provide just that.”

ANDREW HUNTER

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bit of olive oil. It also sits in a cast-iron skillet by the flame for 20 minutes. “The fire toasts the cauliflower, condensing the flavors beautifully.”

At Province in Chicago, chef/owner Randy Zweiban serves charred carrots as a side and currently features a Charred Parsnip and Fennel Salad, which sports mixed greens, aged pecorino and a sherry vinaigrette. “You get these great natural sugars when you char root vegetables,” he says. He gets a cast-iron grill pan white hot, then adds the vegetables, which have been brushed with oil. He lets them go for a few minutes, then flips once.

Back to Brussels sprouts: At Pastaria in St. Louis, Executive Chef Gerard Craft serves a Brussels sprout pizza out of its wood-stone oven. It features béchamel, mozzarella, preserved lemon and thinly shaved Brussels sprouts. “They char and blister and take on a lot of that smoke,” says Craft. The pizza is finished with lardo. “The culture of the Brussels sprout has come out of the high-end kitchen to the casual kitchen. You just have to know how to make them shine.”

Apart from the flavor that fire imparts into produce, it also conveys value. “If I’m bringing asparagus off the grill, I get credit for that work,” says Pleau. “Diners see the value behind this kind of cooking technique.” In a match between a boiled potato against a wood-grilled one,



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ALMOND BOARD OF CALIFORNIA

Fire has in part fueled a renewed interest in Brussels sprouts, which benefit from high-heat techniques. At Super Linda restaurant in New York City, chef John Martinez tosses sprouts with pickled chiles, toasted almonds, panko breadcrumbs and red-wine vinaigrette.

which entices the palate more? Which conveys cooking technique and craftsmanship? It's not a fair fight.

PYRO TECHNIQUES

It's easy to wax poetic about the flavor of fire, but of course, mastery takes time, attention and skill. "It's great to be a part of the ancient guild of pyromaniacs, but it's not without culinary expertise," says Pleau.

"There's a fine line between charred and burnt," says Technomic's Tristano. "You don't want acrid and ashy.

“The chef's desire to deliver food with character and depth of flavor spurs this trend. The flavor of fire has been a longtime friend in a chef's culinary arsenal of gourmet tricks. This is about bringing real food experiences to the mouths of our guests.”

ROB CORLISS

ON THE MENU

Flavor of Fire

EMBERED ~ Salad of embered kale with vinegared plums and salted ricotta
METROPOLE, CINCINNATI

FIRE-ROASTED ~ Fire-roasted green-chile pork stew, corn bread, cotija cheese
BECKETT'S TABLE, PHOENIX

BURNT ~ Bourbon, lemon juice, maple syrup, bitters, burnt rosemary
AMMO CAFÉ, LOS ANGELES

CHARRED ~ Charred corn and poblano with sweet cream
EDGE RESTAURANT & BAR, DENVER

How to Work It Fire triggers a primal craving. The roasted, flame-kissed flavor of charring and grilling switches on the salivary glands like no other technique. Consider roasting tomatoes for a ceviche, or try wood-oven-roasted fennel, carrots, and mushrooms tossed with baby arugula, applewood-smoked cheddar and a warm maple-sherry vinaigrette.

– TODD DOWNS

CHAR Cues

BY ROB CORLISS

Subtle touches, like charring, can have a big impact on the overall picture — creating a point of difference and adding depth of flavor. And the descriptor provides romance to menu copy. Charring transforms the ingredient, creating an indelible flavor experience:

Brussels sprouts become nutty.

Carrots and onions become sweet.

Chiles become more balanced.

Lemons become a savory-sweet squeeze.

Pineapple becomes multi-dimensional.

Mushrooms become earthier.

Carmitas become more succulent.

The natural oils in rosemary become more fragrant.

Attention has to be paid. How quickly can you get charred items out to the diner? How well trained is your staff on handling the fire? Operators have to have all of the moving pieces in place for it to work.”

As example, here’s a look at the set up at Seasons 52. This Darden concept now boasts 26 units and anticipates a growth of eight to 10 units annually. It holds no fryers, no hoods. Instead, it boasts induction cooking for sauté, a wood-burning grill and a wood-burning oven. And 75 to 80 percent of its extensive menu comes off the grill.

“A wood fire is a living thing. You have to groom it. You have to use different woods for different applications,” says Pleau. For instance, oak gives a long, even burn and is great for caramelization. Mesquite burns hotter and quicker. “For delicate proteins like salmon and chicken, you want them over hot coals that don’t flame,” he says. “We use a water spritzer to control the flame. But steaks can take a licking from the fire.” And back-of-house staff and managers have to earn a “License to Grill” before managing the fire. It’s a minimum of two weeks — and that’s for those who have grill experience.

At Belly Q, chef Bill Kim’s modern Asian barbecue concept in Chicago, the restaurant features a pizza oven and a wood-burning grill. It also brings in “food as experience” through its infrared tabletop grills. Recessed into concrete tables, diners click on a button and within 10 minutes, the temperature on the grill is up to 650° F. An under-the-table vacuum system draws out the smoke. Kim marinates different proteins overnight, then the server places the pounded or thinly sliced cuts onto the grill. Diners are instructed when to flip, depending on preference.

“It’s all about the smell and the sound of the sizzle,” says Kim. “When you’re growing up, someone in your family was grilling. We tried to recreate that in a modern way.” Kim’s intent, as with his other Belly concepts, is to make Asian foods accessible, flavorful and affordable. “Diners expect exotic-but-friendly food when they come here. I’m not giving them chicken feet. I’m giving them scallops, beef, chicken — and I’m cooking with fire, a method everyone can relate to.” ☺