

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Where chefs tease the most from the fire

By S. Irene Virbila
Times Staff Writer

June 28, 2006

IT'S inevitable: The fragrance of wood smoke and food cooking over mesquite or olive or alder sets the mouth watering.

I remember the charred sweetness of baby pork chops cooked over a grill in the fireplace at a rustic country restaurant in Umbria, the taste of birds spit-roasted on a wind-up rotisserie in a fireplace big enough to sleep in at a wine estate in Tuscany. And sausages cooked over an iron grill and the embers at Manka's Inverness Lodge north of San Francisco.

Wood is some kind of cooking wizard. Cook anything -- meat, fish, veggies, tofu -- on a wood-fired grill or in a wood-burning oven and it's transformed. It's not just that food cooked in this primitive matter is incredibly delicious. Flavors are more vibrant and somehow alive.

And we're lucky in L.A. Some chefs are passionately devoted to grilling or cooking over a wood fire. And when you walk into any of their restaurants, that heady fragrance of wood smoke will work its magic.

Here are some of the best:

Ammo

At Ammo, chef-owner Amy Sweeney put in a wood-burning pizza oven when she remodeled a couple of years ago. It's fired with olive or apple wood, and right now she's doing a Zuni Cafe-inspired roasted half chicken on a bed of mustard greens, torn croutons and pine nuts. She also braises wild bass with baby artichokes, teardrop tomatoes and olives in the oven with a splash of white wine. Pizzas -- such as white corn with sun gold tomatoes, spring onions, parsley and fontina or baby artichoke with spring garlic, teardrop tomatoes and mint -- are terrific. Sweeney cooks a blueberry and caramelized orange crostata in the oven too.

Ammo, 1155 N. Highland Ave., Los Angeles; (323) 871-2666; www.ammocafe.com.

Antica Pizzeria

Not only does Antica Pizzeria's Peppe Miele hail from the Naples area, he's also president of Verace Pizza Napoletana Assn. in the U.S., which sets guidelines for making authentic Neapolitan pizza. To qualify, pies must be baked on the brick floor of an oven fired only with wood, and the dough can be made only with flour, natural yeast and water. His Margherita is the real thing -- just loosely chopped tomatoes, dots of melted mozzarella and a few whole basil leaves cooked in a pizza oven

fired with walnut wood. The Napoletana adds anchovies. Pizza capricciosa is a slick of tomato sauce with mozzarella, artichoke, mushrooms, black olives, basil and prosciutto.

Antica Pizzeria, Villa Marina Marketplace, 13455 Maxella Ave., Marina del Rey; (310) 577-8182.
www.anticapizzeria.net

A.O.C.

Dishes from the wood-burning oven make up a small section on A.O.C.'s menu, but they're some of the best at this chic small- plates restaurant. Think salt cod and potato gratin oozing bechamel or an earthy cazuela of clams with chickpeas and chorizo. Right now, it's doing half lobsters too, with paprika butter. But my favorite may be the arroz negro, rice stained a deep blue-black with squid ink, topped with tender baby squid and a dollop of garlicky saffron aioli.

A.O.C., 8022 W. 3rd St., West Hollywood; (323) 653-6359. www.aocwinebar.com.

Boneyard Bistro

Aaron Robins of Boneyard Bistro insists on using just the right woods for his barbecue. Beef ribs and tri-tip are cooked over fast- burning red oak, Santa Maria barbecue style. He smokes his pork spareribs and baby back ribs over a slow hickory fire and finishes them over red oak. The result is some serious 'cue, each bite of beef or pork infused with the taste of wood smoke.

Boneyard Bistro, 13539 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks; (818) 906- RIBS.
www.boneyardbistro.com.

Brothers

Matt and Jeff Nichols, the brother chefs behind Brothers at the historic Mattei's Tavern in Los Olivos, wish they had a wood- burning oven, but in lieu of that, they've got a smoker that they employ for one of their more oddball appetizers. They start by smoking a side of salmon over apple wood and end by laying on a pizza-like crust. It's actually regular bagel dough rolled out thin. Add a schmear of dill cream, and it's ... a bagel, but not quite?

Brothers at Mattei's Tavern, 2350 Railway Ave., Los Olivos; (805) 688-4820.
www.matteistavern.com.

Campanile

The grill has always been a big part of Campanile's Cal- Mediterranean menu. Chef-owner and grillmeister Mark Peel prefers almond wood because it's so dense, which means it gives a hot, long-lasting flame. And because California is one of the largest producers of almonds in the world, trees are constantly being replaced. Because the wood is a renewable resource, there's never a shortage.

Campanile's signature prime rib, grilled over almond wood and smeared with a dusky black olive tapenade and served with bitter greens and flageolet beans, whisks you to the French or Italian Riviera.

But Peel is equally eager to grill chops, squid or whole fish, whatever can take the heat.

Campanile, 624 S. La Brea Ave., Los Angeles; (323) 938-1447. www.campanilerestaurant.com.

Cut

The steaks at Cut, Wolfgang Puck's new Richard Meier-designed restaurant in the Regent Beverly Wilshire, are first seared under a 1,200-degree broiler to seal in the juices. Then they move over to the wood-fired grill, where the cooks bring the temperature at the center up slowly, the better for the beef -- and lamb chops and big-eye tuna steaks -- to take on the flavor of the smoke. Chef de cuisine Ari Rosenson says he prefers a blend of mesquite charcoal and American oak. If you're wondering, Spago uses the same sort of wood grill too.

Cut, Regent Beverly Wilshire, 9500 Wilshire Blvd., Beverly Hills; (310) 276-8500.

Dominick's

At Dominick's, Chef Brandon Boudet chars globe artichoke on the grill, giving the thistle a wonderful, smoky taste. He uses strictly white oak for its consistency and neutral flavor. "I basically grill anything I can get my hands on," he says. Right now, he's grilling thick slabs of provolone cheese and then finishing the cheese off in an individual cast iron skillet. The provolone arrives in the skillet at the table, melted and bubbling, with a sun-dried tomato pesto as a garnish. Wild king salmon and the perennially popular hanger steak go on the grill too. Sometimes he'll even grill carrots or asparagus for sides. And when peaches come into season, he slaps them on the grill and serves them warm, with mascarpone gelato.

Dominick's, 8715 Beverly Blvd., West Hollywood; (310) 652-2335;
www.dominicksrestaurant.com.

Hitching Post II

Frank Ostini's family has owned Santa Maria-style barbecues since the '50s. At Hitching Post II (the original is in Casmalia, Calif.), he not only mans the grill, he also makes the wine -- the very good wine -- under the Hartley Ostini label. Since the film "Sideways" featured the restaurant, business has stepped up a notch. But the sirloins, hefty T-bones, slabs of ribs and halved artichokes cooked over the red oak fire are as good as ever. You just may have to make a reservation ahead now.

Hitching Post II, 406 E. Highway 246, Buellton; (805) 688-0676. www.hitchingpost2.com.

JR's Barbeque

Jeanie Jackson and her son Robert Johnson of JR's Barbeque in Culver City fire the massive barbecue pit out back with a mix of white oak, hickory and pecan. And the ribs cooked over that smoldering fire pick up a nuanced smoke, the better to meld with Jackson's Memphis-style sauce. Check out the rib tips and the hot wings -- chicken wings smoked and covered with that clingy sauce.

J.R.'s Bar-B-Que, 3055 S. La Cienega Blvd., Culver City; (310) 837-6838. www.jrs-bbq.com.

La Terza

When Gino Angelini opened his second restaurant, La Terza, he went to considerable trouble and expense to install a wood-burning rotisserie and grill. Ducks, veal shank (stincò di vitello), squab, and pork or veal rack go onto the rotisserie, sometimes pork belly and also porchetta -- pig stuffed

with wild fennel, garlic, bay leaf and black pepper. He uses the wood-burning grill to cook branzino, Dover sole, quail, and on Thursdays, it's mixed grill.

La Terza, 8384 W. 3rd St., Los Angeles; (323) 782-8384. www.laterzareastaurant.com.

Literati II

Chris Kidder, the chef at Literati II in West Los Angeles, makes a great wood-grilled burger. But he also uses his special grill fired with pecan wood to cook all sorts of things. Think Copper River salmon, which he serves with a sweet pea puree and morels, or yellowtail, with new potatoes and baby artichokes. He's grilling duck breasts now and plating them with creamed corn and roasted cherries. Slabs of bread go on the grill to accompany burrata or salads, a bowl of steamed mussels. He's convinced cooking over wood enhances the taste of just about everything. "I just think it's a little more organic. There's a little more nuance to cooking on wood and it takes more skill to do it."

Literati II, 12081 Wilshire Blvd. (at Bundy), Los Angeles; (310) 479-3400. www.literati2.com.

Saddle Peak Lodge

At this former hunting lodge in the Santa Monica Mountains, chef Mark Murillo cooks buffalo "on the range," i.e., over a mix of mesquite charcoal and mesquite wood. But he finds the grill just as useful for cooking other meats such as rib-eye medallions, petit filet mignon and sometimes guinea hen breast.

Saddle Peak Lodge, 419 Cold Canyon Road, Calabasas; (818) 222- 3888; www.saddlepeaklodge.com.

Tierra Sur

At this kosher Mediterranean restaurant, which opened last June at Herzog Wine Cellars in Oxnard, chef Todd Aarons generally grills over mesquite or California oak from Calabasas. Since the restaurant is at the kosher winery, he often uses old oak barrel staves impregnated with wine as kindling. "You can smell the wine as the wood burns," he says.

Even when he's going to braise a cut of beef, he first sears it over the wood fire. There's no substitute for the flavor that wood gives, he says. Who would think that inside a winery in an Oxnard industrial park, there's a chef passionate enough about grilling that he's not only grilling massive rib-eye steaks, he's also giving Cornish game hens, trout, even mustard- and juniper-encrusted venison a dose of wood smoke?

Tierra Sur, 3201 Camino Del Sol, Oxnard; (805) 983-1560. www.herzogwinecellars.com.