
CHARCUTERIE: THE WHOLE HOG

BY CLARE LESCHIN-HOAR

Jamie Bissonnette's love affair with charcuterie struck him hard at an early age. At just eight or nine years old, he would burst through the door of his Hartford childhood home, and persuade his mother to feed him liverwurst as an after-school snack.

Fast-forward to today, and the now 29-year-old Bissonnette, most recently Executive Chef of Eastern Standard, (and soon-to-be Chef de Cuisine in a new venture with noted chef, Ken Oringer), is recognized for his charcuterie expertise – whether he serves it in the form of the daily charcuterie plate, or in one of the many delicious sausages he creates from lamb, duck or pork; or in a flavor-packed dish of duck confit.

Picking up one of the long terrine molds he used to prepare pates in the night before, Bissonnette smacks it down loudly on a sheet of plastic wrap to loosen it from its form. He then swiftly scrapes the brick with the side of a knife to remove any excess fat that formed while the pates were baked and then cooled.

Today it's a rustic country pork, another country pork with chicken liver, and a duck pate with cranberry, though Bissonnette will change ingredients to follow the seasons. Some are wrapped in bacon that's been rendered during cooking, and all five are various shades of appealing pink. Twirled tightly in wrap and labeled in Bissonnette's shorthand, they go into the refrigerated walk-in until dinner orders begin streaming into the bustling kitchen.

Next Bissonnette turns his attention to the pig's head that's been peering at him through a clear container on the counter.

"Sometimes they come in hairy and you have to shave them," he says.

But today's pig is beardless, and after the ears are snipped (because they have a tendency to stick out of the water while cooking), the whole thing is gently placed in a deep pot with bay leaves,



Chef Jamie Bissonnette with a pig's head.

tarragon, onions, carrots and a bundle of fennel fronds, where it will slow-cook for eight hours or more. Eventually it will be transformed into *fromage de tete*. That's right, headcheese, which of course, is not a cheese at all, but is delicious nonetheless.



In making the dishes that he does, Bissonnette is actually connecting with a way of preserving meat and fish that's thousands of years old, and crosses nearly every culture.

While the term charcuterie (which roughly means: *cooked meat*) may not be familiar to everyone – charcuterie itself is easily recognizable in our every day lives in items like bacon, sausage, salami, prosciutto, salted cod, pates; all and much more are typical examples of charcuterie.

What make charcuterie special is that humans don't have to preserve meat in this way anymore thanks to modern refrigeration. We do so because it *tastes so incredibly good*. This form of cooking also encourages us to waste little by providing an important way to use all the parts of the animals we're consuming. A challenge that's welcomed by Executive Chef Jason Bond from Beacon Hill Hotel & Bistro.

"When you buy a whole pig, you can't just use the chops, you have to use the whole thing," said Bond. "That's how I originally got into it – there were all these pig parts."

Bond, who studied charcuterie in France, says guanciale – which is dried, seasoned pork jowl – is one of his personal favorites, but at the restaurant he serves a variety of charcuteries including terrines, sausages, saucisson sec and more. Some of what Bond creates from jowls or shoulders can take as long as eight months to cure before it's ready to be served. That means nearly anytime of year, some form of Bond's charcuterie can be found on the menu or as a special.

Another local chef and fierce supporter of local sustainable ingredients, Tony Maws, Chef-Owner of Craigie Street Bistrot, says part of what drew him to charcuterie is its vast history and the variety of regional takes that can be tasted in

its preparation. “There’s not one way,” said Maws. “My rillette is different than someone else’s rillette.”

“But it’s not a wastebasket. You can’t just take scraps of this and that and make a terrine. There’s technique to it and certain ratios of fat and meat. With charcuterie and cured meats, and even to a point, with terrines, there’s also a time issue. You can make a terrine and eat it that day, but it won’t taste anything like it would in a few days. Same with dried meats. It doesn’t taste anything like it would in a few months, and that’s the real essence of what charcuterie is about. Charcuterie is simply ripening,” he said.

And patience.

Many forms of charcuterie take several months to a year before it may be ready to serve. It’s not a form of cooking that can be rushed. And in many cultures, it’s a tradition that it still passed down through families.

Gianni Caruso, Executive Chef of Umbria says he learned



Chef Gianni Caruso

charcuterie from his mother while still a child in Capistrano, Italy, where he says they made it only when the moon was in its last phase, and usually during the months of December, January and February.

While Italian charcuterie, which is what Caruso creates, can vary slightly from its French cousin in spices or names given to the finished products, the essence is still the same: meat, spices and great patience.

“Last month, I cut the last one of a three-year old prosciutto,” said Caruso. “It was rock hard on the outside. I thought I had lost it. But when I cut it, it was the best prosciutto I had ever seen.”

However, Umbria’s basement walk-in holds a dozen newly aging prosciutto that could rival that in time. Thick with

rock salt to draw out the moisture, the prosciutto still wear their rinds, followed by a thick layer of fat and then flesh. Later they will be soaked in wine and hung for many months to continuing drying.



Next to the prosciutto is an unrolled pancetta made from pork belly that’s nearly ready for use; and drying nearby are white boar sausages to match those seen packed in oil at the front of the restaurant’s open kitchen. Dense, peppery and mottled with fat that enhances their intense flavor and texture, Caruso’s white boar sausages are impressive.

While some mouthwatering charcuterie is served in-house, there are fabulous feasts to be found on the go. Check out Lionette’s Market in the South End, which is ultra-committed to sourcing food within New England.

Owner James Lionette – who purchases a locally raised pig every week – says that to stay true to the sustainable model he adheres to, the entire pig must be used, not just the select cuts of meat. That means he’s constantly making charcuterie for the market and its adjoining restaurant, Garden of Eden. He cures and smokes the pork belly for bacon and often makes pancetta. Lionette also transforms the jowls into guanciale, and he makes sweet and hot Italian sausages, in addition to the classic Irish bangers he makes daily.

“What we’re doing is standard traditional things and doing them the right way. There’s nothing crazy about making sausages. People have been doing that since they slaughtered animals. We just are doing it with what’s available in New England, and meats are often easier [to acquire] than produce because there are always cows, chickens and hogs around,” said Lionette.

“And there’s no greater pleasure than making sausage,” he said.

He may be right about that, but for the rest of us, that pleasure may simply come in the opportunity to devour all the lardo we can get thanks to chefs who are committed to keeping traditional charcuterie methods alive locally. □

Freelance food-writer Clare Leschin-Hoar can be found boarding fennel-laced finocchiona in her refrigerator in Mansfield. Her writing covers the entire food chain – from field to dish, and her stories have appeared in dozens of national and regional publications. Visit her at: www.leschin-hoar.com.