

This Little Piggy...

LA BRASA'S CHEF TALKS ABOUT PREPARING HIS COVETED, WOOD-FIRED FEASTS

BY ERIC FRANCIS

Since opening La Brasa in Somerville four years ago, chef and owner Daniel Bojorquez has built a reputation for turning out impressive feasts from the restaurant's namesake cooking methods—the embers of its open pit grill and its huge, cylindrical, wood-burning oven.

While prepping a whole pig, Bojorquez lays out the four key elements that guide him as he cooks.



Daniel Bojorquez

“Sweet, savory, salt, heat,” he says. “I don’t really check the science. I cook with my palate.”

Speaking of savory: Before butchering, the Berkshire pig for this particular feast—an April wedding—tipped the scales at 65 pounds. Now, in La Brasa’s open kitchen, it’s laid out on its back on a roasting pan. It has been butterflied so it will cook more evenly, and its dark, plump kidneys are conspicuously present. Sprigs of rosemary sprout from where Bojorquez has pierced the shoulders and legs, and cloves of garlic are also stuffed into those cavities.

But the pig will get even more gussied up before its six-hour date with La Brasa’s wood-fired grill.

“I’ll cover it with an achiote rub, a Mexican spice made from the annatto seed,” the chef says. “It’s bright red and tangy, almost like sumac but with a different tang. It’s made with vinegar and garlic. With that acidity, when

it’s combined with the fatty pork it reacts like a dressing. It complements the flavor, caramelizes, and has smoky hints of oregano and cumin.”

Bojorquez will also prick the skin full of holes, as the pig will cook skin-side down for the first three or four hours. That will let the fat drain, caramelizing and crisping up the exterior into the delicacy known by pork-fanciers everywhere as cracklins.

Then the pig will be flipped and finished over higher heat until it’s done, at about the same time as the head and trotters are ready to come out of the combi oven.

Wait ... did we forget to mention the head and the trotters?

They are, after all, a natural byproduct of sourcing whole pigs. This Berkshire came from a farm in New York state, but Bojorquez has also bought pigs from Massachusetts growers. And very nearly every inch of the pig, bless its heart, is thoroughly edible.

For example, the trotters (pig’s feet, for the uninitiated), are actually amenable to several methods of preparation. They can still be found pickled in big glass jars on the shelves of many grocery stores in the more rural parts of the South. That’s not so different from another delicacy in Bojorquez’s home state of Sonora, Mexico.

“In Mexico, they pickle the skin with jalapeños and garlic,” he says, adding, “You need to be in a certain mood to do it.”

As good as that sounds, no pickled pig parts were on this feast’s menu.

“With the head, I’ll cure it overnight in salt and sugar,” he says. “I’ll cook it for three or four hours in the combi oven, with steam and heat, so it keeps its color. That will crisp it up, and the cure does the caramelizing. I’ll do the same with the trotters.”

While a whole roast pig makes for a delectable centerpiece, this one by itself would only feed about 30 people. And since the wedding couple expected about 100 guests, Bojorquez had many other plates lined up.

“There will also be grilled swordfish and skirt steaks,” he says. “Four vegetable sides, cheese and charcuterie ... probably 12 to 16 different items.”

The pig will be chopped and served with taco fixings, including corn tortillas, salsa verde, chile de arbol, onions, and the like. The fish will be served with a celery root puree and roasted maitake mushrooms. There will be an escabeche of mussels with saffron.

And the chef will serve his own Mexican interpretation of fried rice. Cooked in a tomato paste base with guajillo chiles and mushroom powder, once it is al dente he will place it in the cooler to evaporate the water.

Photo, left, by Chris McIntosh. Photo, right, by Sasha Israel.

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“Growing up, it was an instinct. If you’re hungry, you cook. If you like it, you eat it. If you didn’t like it, you do something different to it.”

When it’s time to serve, it will be pan-fried with green garlic and English peas in mayu, a Japanese-inspired burned garlic oil traditionally used in making ramen.

“It’s done with pork fat, I toast the garlic inside of it,” Bojorquez explains. “It makes a crispy layer with the rice, like paella, and gives it a smoky bitterness. I finish it with lime juice and scallions.”

This kind of culinary hybridization is standard operating procedure at La Brasa. Last year Bojorquez did a pig roast where he served the meat in a bowl of cold soba noodles with peanut sauce, cilantro, scallions, and Serrano chiles. La Brasa holds whole-animal roasts in its restaurant for special occasions like New Year’s Day.

“The creative idea is our food is very organic, it just happens,” the chef says. “Our planning phase is getting the product here. Once it’s here, I have fun with it.”

That’s a clear result of Bojorquez coming from a family of home cooks and a culture that emphasizes food.

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instinct,” he says. “If you’re hungry, you cook. If you like it, you eat it. If you didn’t like it, you do something different to it.”

Bojorquez attended a culinary school in Puebla, outside Mexico City. He’s versed in French cuisine and has worked in kitchens that required its exacting techniques. But at La Brasa, he pays homage to the more off-the-cuff methods he grew up with.

Even the design of the restaurant speaks to that philosophy—the open pit, the wood-fired oven, the elemental attraction of flames and the aroma of smoke. The dining room is wide open and wrapped in earth tones and dark wood. It’s a space where you can easily add a dash of color and throw a party. And that’s all intentional, Bojorquez says.

“We sell La Brasa as ‘This is what we are, what we do.’ If you trust us, you’re going to have fun,” Bojorquez says with his friendly grin. “We try to keep everything ‘La Brasa.’ We blast some tunes and hope people dance and eat.”

Photos by Sasha Israel.

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It’s not only the menu that is steeped in tradition; Opa is a family affair. George’s mother has owned and run Sophia’s Greek Pantry for over 15 years and now she keeps Opa stocked with homemade fresh Greek yogurt, delicious desserts and pastries.

Even though yeeros are in the name, Opa offers so much more. The menu is a curated selection of Greek favorites from traditional Greek salads to spanakopita and “the best Greek yogurt” you’ll find outside of the Mediterranean. George will greet you with a smile, a friendly chat and delicious food that will keep you coming back for more.



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