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The Appeal of ASADO

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THE APPEAL OF *asado*

Chefs embrace
the theater and
flavor wood-fired
cooking imparts



| BY JACQUELINE RAPOSO |

With a recent focus on all things safety, it can be hard to remember the thrill of interactive hospitality.

“Every cooking method has its place, and all can be enjoyable,” says Greg Denton, co-chef-owner with his wife, Gabrielle Quiñónez Denton, of the Argentinian-inspired **Ox restaurant** in Portland, Oregon. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Dentons have offered everything from outdoor dining to to-go barbecue boxes. But diners miss out on the theater of their wood-fired grill. “Everyone loves the look and feel of the fire as they enter our restaurant,” Denton continues. “It’s exciting in the same way that a roller coaster is—so much fun, but with a hint of danger.”

While asado has a beloved history among Mexican and Latino cuisines, cooking over wood fire fell out of fashion in U.S. kitchens when cleaner fuels inspired compact setups and faster lines. But as diners pine for the thrill of shared experiences once again, supermarket and chef trends suggest a return to grilling with a heavy interest in spiced meats.

Which means it’s time to bring the fire back where it belongs: *everywhere*.

A LITTLE ABOUT A LONG HISTORY

Scientists estimate homo sapiens first threw meat onto

flames around 1.8 million years ago, and they credit this revelation for why we evolved as we did: cooked foods are easier to digest than raw foods and create surplus energy. Over time, this helped our brains become almost double in size to those of our primate cousins. As our societal bonds deepened, the hunting and gathering of food evolved into gathering around fire to cook and eat it, too.

In following centuries, roaming tribes made and remade spit-roasts for meat and clay ovens for fish. Staid farmers and fishers smoked proteins and baked grains in crude closed “fire chambers.” Then came indoor cooking hearths so tall you could stand in them. In the mid-16th century, Argentina’s gauchos dotted the plains with open-fire grills, cooking large slabs of meat on makeshift *parillas* to define asado cooking. Styles in Brazil, Uruguay, Peru, and Mexico followed.

By the mid-1700s, professional kitchens in the United States swapped out those massive cooking hearths for enclosed “fireboxes” built into chimneyed walls where, for the first time, cooks could somewhat control the heat as it twisted to a series of cooking chambers. The iron boom of the early 1800s then inspired massive cast iron cooking stoves complete with ranges, ovens, broilers, and hoods. Ovens were still fueled



The wood-fired oven at La Vecina Restaurante

by wood until coal became the post-Civil War norm, and the 20th century brought gas and then electricity into the slim, colorful ranges that soon entirely replaced those iron klunkers.

The sole means of cooking for millions of years, open-fire cooking became almost obsolete within a century. It’s still beloved for backyard cookouts and barbecue restaurants. But as anyone working the smoker can tell you, cooking with wood takes work.

AND YET... WE ALWAYS RETURN TO THE HEARTH

“This is how we all started to cook,” says chef Justin Bazdarich of **Oxomoco**, a Mexican restaurant in Brooklyn, New York. “It’s sort of in

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our DNA to be enjoying this in its primality.” Because of its history, it’s almost sacrilegious to call open-fire cooking a trend. But as diners seek restaurants that comfort and entertain, chefs lean into cuisines that fire them up, too. Literally.

Coralville, Iowa’s new **La Vecina Restaurante** creates wood-fired Oaxacan fare, featuring grilled proteins folded into heirloom masa tortillas.

For over five years now, Chris and Idie Hastings have relied on open-fire cooking to marry southern ingredients with the cooking traditions of Spain, Portugal, Argentina, and Uruguay at their Birmingham, Alabama **Ovenbird**. After selling one of his two Mexico Clasico Grill locations in Rockford, Illinois, Chef Jose Chaves renamed his sole location **El Fuego Grill** to make sure guests know he has a



Cilantro and green onion add flavor to Oxomoco’s Brazino, as Sasso Chicken hangs in the background PHOTO BY LOUISE CECILIA PALMBERG

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particularly hot offering. And the Dentons’ Argentinian cuisine would not be complete without it: “We knew our first restaurant would feature wood-fire cooking because we love the smoky, charred flavors that this kind of grilling imparts,” Denton says assuredly.

Bazdarich got hooked on wood-fired cooking at his first restaurant, too. “I wanted everything to be wood-fired,” he remembers of the first dishes coming out of his wood-burning ovens at Speedy Romeo in Manhattan. “I wanted wood-fired tacos, wood-fired steak frites...” Having traveled throughout Mexico since high school, he

points out that ingredients like chiles and masa already have or pair well with inherently earthy, smoky flavors. It only made sense to give two wood-burning grills focus at Oxomoco, too. “I took all my favorite dishes and put a wood-fired twist to them,” he says of that menu.

THE CHALLENGES

Of course, folding wood-fire cooking into a professional kitchen isn’t as simple as firing up a Weber or Big Green Egg.

For decades, even the toughest commercial grills came with expensive upkeep and lacked finesse. Then designers like Ben Eisen-

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– CHEF JUSTIN BAZDARICH, *Oxomoco*

drath hit the scene. Eisendrath's **Grillworks** grills replicate the asado technique with angled grates, rotisseries, mesh surfaces, and *planchas* that move by crank wheels over adjustable fireboxes so that chefs get the precise steam or char they desire. They're dubbed the "gold standard of wood-burning grills" by *The New York Times*, and the Dentons are among those who praise their custom-made setups. La Vecina's stacked setup comes from **Grills by Demant**, an Atlanta-based company that customizes stainless-steel grills for regional chefs. Texas companies **Champion Tuff Grills** and **M Grills** also make grills that handle that heat. Such getups make for expensive startup costs but are worth the long-term investment.

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hardwood for those grills isn't an issue. But wood isn't the friendliest fuel to cook with. "The biggest challenge is the physical nature of it," says Denton, whose chefs continually load and unload heavy fuel, and regularly risk dehydration and heat rashes from standing for hours at the fire.

Bazdarich points out that wood is more expensive to purchase and store than gas or electricity, too, and that unlike those other fuels, it's an ingredient: "It also adds flavor to the dish," he says. While he's never figured wood into his menu costs, he points out the expense should be reflected there.

There are expenditures related to state environmental regulations, too. New York City now requires a "smog hog" to mist smoke particulates out of exhaust systems before it clears the roof.

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La Vecina
Restaurante's wood
oven-roasted Plátanos

In Portland, Oregon, a wood-fired hearth requires a separate hood system entirely. These are costly to build out, clean, and maintain. "I understand it. But the expense is exhausting," Bazarich says.

THE REWARDS

Even with all those things considered, wood-fire cooking transforms ingredients so fully as it cooks, crisps, and caramelizes that there's no substitute for it.

"There are very few things that are not fitting for the wood fire," Denton says of its versatility, citing how tender

fish fillets, tiny spring onions, and sweet seasonal melons all benefit. The collagen of skin and bones in whole animals and large chops meld to turn out incredibly tender and juicy results, too, cutting down ingredient waste at the same time. "It can bring a concentration of flavor that other cooking methods may not be able to," he points out.

Bazarich incorporates the grill into most dish components at Oxomoco, even grilling ingredients before chilling them for marinades and salsas. But his Sasso






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Chicken—which he brines and cooks in a low oven before hanging over the grill to slow smoke and then fries to finish—wouldn't be the same without it. "We wouldn't be able to get that same level of smoke flavor that's so subtle and nice and juicy and tender," he says of how other barbecue methods would overpower the particular hen's subtle, tender fat and flavor. Even meatless, tortilla-based dishes like his Spring Pea Tlayuda with salsa cruda, mint puree, quesillo, serrano and scallions get the wood-fire treatment.

While an incredibly versatile cooking method, eaters know dining by an open fire remains a rarity, and noses perk wherever sweet smoke wafts. As food only gets tastier when touched by flame, asado is an antique technique that well deserves trending.

Ready to take the torch?

Jacqueline Raposo is a food writer and podcast producer based in New York City. First generation Azorean American, her mouth waters for fresh fish grilled over open flames and playing fútbol with family while waiting on churrasco.

See recipe for Oxomoco's wood-fired roasted Spring Pea Tlayuda on page 54.



Oxomoco's Spring Pea Tlayuda

"I WANTED WOOD-FIRED TACOS, WOOD-FIRED STEAK FRITES... I TOOK ALL MY FAVORITE DISHES AND PUT A WOOD-FIRED TWIST TO THEM."

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