



At Thomas Caterers of Distinction's Up in Smoke station, a chef uses a "smoking gun" to add a smoky flavor to seared sea scallop with sautéed crimini mushrooms, bacon and corn kernels in a glass jar. When the guest lifts the cork lid, the smoke is released, unveiling this colorful dish. The concept also has been applied there recently to shrimp and grits, and chopped brisket.

BY DEANNE MOSKOWITZ

# SMOKING- HOT STARTERS

Catering chefs continue to explore the flavor potential of smoking, curing, pickling and fermenting, especially in appetizers and hors d'oeuvres

**T**he focus on seasonal ingredients may have sparked interest in ancient preservation techniques, but their ability to fire-up flavor has fanned the flame—particularly in the appetizer and hors d'oeuvre category, with its mission to kick-start the taste buds. The perceived health benefits of pickled and fermented foods has helped to stoke the fire.

Ignited by the roaring popularity of charcuterie and kimchi, now the trend is being fueled by new ingredients.

Smoking is showing up in unexpected places, from butters, vegetables and cheeses to salts, nuts, and even beers and spirits, observes Joanne Purnell, chef de cuisine at Good Gracious! Events in Los Angeles.

Laurine Wickett, chef/owner of Left Coast Catering in San Francisco, sees more fermented items entering the market, from kombucha to sauerkraut. She's developing a beet sauerkraut to serve with latkes and sour cream.

Vegetables star in the array of pickled and fermented appetizers curated by Karen O'Connor, executive chef at Daniel et Daniel Event Creation & Catering in Toronto. Among them are zucchini cups with pickled vegetables, beet-pickled quail eggs with saffron egg yolk, and Reuben pastrami potato skins with fermented summer sauerkraut.

But chefs aren't only experimenting with new foodstuffs. As this round-up of dishes illustrates, they're double-teaming techniques and finding ways to brandish them that ratchet up flavor.



Good Gracious! Events' Purnell points out that smoke adds an element beyond what's possible using such enhancers as marinades and rubs.

Above: Pomegranate Cured Salmon with Pickled Fennel over Smoked Wild Mushroom and Farro Salad from Blackstone Caterers.

Right: A little black cauldron from BG Events & Catering's Smokin' Stand.



For instance, using the ubiquitous mac 'n cheese as an example, Purnell points out that smoke adds an element beyond what's possible using such enhancers as marinades and rubs. Instead of substituting smoked cheese to add smokiness, she suggests lightly smoking the entire completed dish for just half an hour to achieve an almost indescribable, dramatic, umami-like depth of flavor.

**BG Events & Catering** in Boston harnesses smoke for a spellbinding effect at the **Smokin' Stand**, a chef's station where guests can grab little black cauldrons packed with their choice of freshly prepared foods and watch as—poof!—they are lightly smoked on the spot using a smoking gun. They can choose from salmon glazed with a pomegranate-balsamic reduction garnished with

the blood-red seeds; oregano-marinated grilled chicken with mushroom polenta cake; or roasted butternut squash with wilted greens and mozzarella. Complementing the station's theme and making eating while standing easier, the cauldrons augment the magic, since a puff of smoke escapes when the covers are removed.

Inspired by the rough New England winters, Derek R. Jolie, executive chef at **Blackstone Caterers** in Middletown, R.I., developed **Pomegranate Cured Salmon with Pickled Fennel over Smoked Wild Mushroom and Farro Salad**, which wields a trio of techniques to fuel the body and delight the senses. "It just felt like winter to me," he muses. To make it, Jolie produces a curing liquid by pouring pomegranate juice over a combination of brown sugar, kosher salt, mustard seed, ground bay leaf and ground fennel, until the consistency is like wet sand; covers boneless, skinless Atlantic salmon filets with the liquid, sets them in a small pan, evenly weights them and refrigerates them for two days; then removes them from the cure, rinses them and returns them to the refrigerator to continue curing. He boils a mixture of dried wild mushrooms to restore their tenderness, before grilling them until "nice and smoky," and flavors the julienne of fennel in a brine of water, unseasoned rice vinegar, sugar, salt and mustard seed. The dish is served in small portions on crusty bread as an hors d'oeuvre, or with local lettuces as a first course or a light entrée.

Monica Holmes, president of **The Clean Plate Club** in Nashville, Tenn., proves that big things come in little packages with **Cherry Wood Smoked Duck Breast with Pickled Shallots and Cherries, and Smoked & Smashed Cauliflower**, an appetizer as satisfying as the entrée that inspired it. The duck is rubbed in a mix of chili powder, sugar, parsley, garlic, mustard, sage, thyme and cayenne; seared, fat side only, until crispy; and cold-smoked using cherry wood. The cauliflower is blanched and refreshed, smoked briefly in a stovetop smoker, processed until almost smooth, and enriched with ricotta, garlic and melted

Below: Cherry Wood Smoked Duck Breast with Pickled Shallots and Cherries, and Smoked & Smashed Cauliflower from The Clean Plate Club. Bottom: Pastrami Cured Tuna with Fermented Tomato Gel & Smoked Aioli on a potato-cornmeal caraway chip from Daniel et Daniel.



butter. Just before service, the cherries are flamed in brandy and flavored with a touch of coconut sugar. The appetizer is presented open-faced on grilled French bread, with a piping of the vegetable puree atop slices of the duck, and a garnish of cherries and shallots that have been pickled in a brine of red wine vinegar, granulated sugar, kosher salt and a sliced serrano chile.

**Pastrami Cured Tuna with Fermented Tomato Gel & Smoked Aioli** is only one bright entry in a brilliant assortment from **Daniel et Daniel Event Creation & Catering** in Toronto, where Karen O'Connor, executive chef,



Above: Curried Chicken Sliders with Pickled Red Onions and Mango-Curry Cream from Good Gracious! Events. Below: Watermelon Radish Tacos, a vegan hors d'oeuvre from Great Performances.

appreciates the health benefits of fermenting and the “funky” flavor the process fosters. Cubes of the gel top a rare slice of pastrami-cured tuna, presented on a potato-cornmeal caraway chip. O'Connor creates the gel from fermented tomato juice she makes by salting 10 large ripe tomatoes cut into chunks, sealing them in a vacuum bag and leaving them at room temperature for three days until the bag puffs up, indicating fermentation. Then she blends the tomatoes and any water released in a blender, strains through cheesecloth and boils 1 liter of the reserved juice with agar agar for five minutes, finally removing from the heat, adding six sheets of bloomed gelatin and setting in a flat hotel pan.

Joanne Purnell, chef de cuisine at **Good Gracious! Events** in Los Angeles, has been preoccupied with pickling, since clients seem attracted to pickled foods. A spin-off of Southern barbecue, where pickles are

paired with pulled pork sandwiches, the **Curried Chicken Slider with Pickled Red Onions and Mango-Curry Cream** is one increasingly popular example. A mixture of light- and dark-meat ground chicken, sauteed finely diced white onions and pureed fresh garlic, and seasoned with Patak's Original Concentrated Curry Paste, the dollar-sized patties are sauteed in canola oil or ghee in a nonstick skillet for about three minutes per side or until browned. They're presented on buns slathered with the mango-curry cream and piled with pickled onions, made by combining finely sliced red onion, red wine vinegar, olive oil, chopped cilantro, salt and pepper, and a pinch of smoked paprika; left to marinate for 24 hours at room temp; and then strained and refrigerated until ready for use. Also house-made, the curry cream contains prepared chutney, mayo, balsamic, Patak's paste and olive oil.

Mark Russell, executive creative chef at **Great Performances** in New York, turns to smoking for the **Watermelon Radish Taco**, a vegan hors d'oeuvre notable for its striking appearance and sizzling flavor. For his modern take on the taco, he dresses a julienne of smoked firm tofu in Vegenaise mayo, minced jalapeños and hot sauce, and cleverly wraps it in a shell of paper-thin watermelon radish.

Striving to stay current in the competitive San Francisco market, **Left Coast Catering** created **Kimchi Pancake with Miso Aioli** for last year's *San Francisco Chronicle* party for the top 100 restaurants. The appetizer incorporates the flavors and sensibilities of the San Francisco food scene and packs a punch, reports Laurine Wickett, head chef and founder. To form the batter, Wickett chops, drains and reserves the liquid from house-made Napa cabbage kimchi and combines it with ground pork, all-purpose flour, rice flour, chopped scallions, a beaten egg and salt to taste, adding some reserved liquid if the mixture seems too stiff, and



Above: Kimchi Pancakes with Miso Aioli from Left Coast Catering.

Daniel et Daniel's O'Connor appreciates the health benefits of fermenting and the “funky” flavor the process fosters.



Right: *Everything Cronuts from Marcia Selden Catering & Event Planning.* Below: *The Savory Goat Cheesecake hors d'oeuvre from Thomas Caterers of Distinction.*

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letting the batter rest for 15-20 minutes. Then she crisp-fries half tablespoons of the batter in canola oil in a nonstick skillet. She tops the finished pancakes with house-made Kewpie-style mayonnaise aioli, garnishing them with black sesame seeds or sliced scallions.

Robin Selden, managing partner/executive chef at **Marcia Selden Catering & Event Planning**, with locations in Stamford, Conn., and New York, thought of everything when she created the **Everything Cronut**, a bite-sized twist on the everything bagel. She substituted flaky butter-rich puff pastry for the blander, chewy bagel dough; packed the tiny hors d'oeuvre with big flavors; and lined serving trays with warm "everything" seasoning to tempt guests with the aroma of toasted onions, poppy and sesame seeds, and garlic. To form the base, Selden spread house-made dill mustard between two thinly rolled sheets of puff pastry, folded in the sides and rerolled to 1/3-inch thickness, and fried little circles of the dough until they were golden brown. Then she layered the crispy disks with house-made popped caper cream cheese, house-smoked salmon, a slice of cherry tomato and a sprinkling of in-house seasoning blend.

**Savory Goat Cheesecake** hors d'oeuvres from Rachanee Keovorabouth, executive chef



at **Thomas Caterers of Distinction** in Indianapolis, are tiny in stature but huge in flavor, owing in part to their micro green and tomato jam accompaniment, and a showering of sweet-and-sour pickle relish. She makes the cakes from a mixture of cream cheese, goat cheese, eggs and lemon, seasoned with rosemary and chives, and bakes them in crusts she creates from Ritz Crackers. Both the jam and the English cucumber and onion relish are also made in-house. ●

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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- Blackstone Caterers**  
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- The Clean Plate Club**  
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- Daniel et Daniel**  
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