

## Charcuterie: Will it stay or will it go?

**Artisinal meats are chic, but small producers worry that people's taste for cured, salty foods may be a passing fad. And strict safety rules make it tough for them to compete against Big Meat**

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You can't lift a wine glass at a high-end restaurant these days without bumping into a charcuterie plate.

The nose-to-tail movement is going strong, popularized in the past few years by British chef Fergus Henderson and his prudent philosophy: "If you're going to kill the animal it seems only polite to use the whole thing."

Combine this "waste not, want not" sensibility with the eat-local movement, and suddenly the desire to sample pancetta and smoked mackerel, cured only metres from the table where you're sitting, seems impossible to resist.

But is this craving simply a passing trend, or is it indicative of a permanent expansion of a chef's repertoire? Depends whom you ask.



Steve Alexander, owner of Cumbrae Meats in Toronto, says regulations for curing raw meat need to remain tough. (*KEVIN VAN PAASSEN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL*)

Chef Chris McDonald of Cava in Toronto thinks the charcuterie plate is an infatuation that will disappear as people get tired of eating high-fat food whenever they go out.

He may be right. But trends can inspire an attitude change as people become more aware of what they've been missing.

Since opening the Toronto restaurant Cowbell, chef and owner Mark Cutrara has noticed a willingness to taste outside the comfort zone.

"The nice thing is that consumers are becoming more informed and adventurous," he says. "Now I serve an *amuse* of whipped lardo on a crostini and people can appreciate the full feel and texture. Years ago it would have been unthinkable to eat fat."

But we may be at a tipping point just as demand for local charcuterie grows, and its future may have more to do with production logistics than with changing consumer tastes.

Smaller businesses often struggle to balance the infrastructure expenses required to meet health and safety regulations, which are more easily met by industrial producers.

Becoming federally licensed (so you can sell products outside your province) can be extremely difficult and cost-prohibitive for most small producers.

Jérôme Dudicourt, manager of Oyama Sausage Co. in British Columbia, says that when it is difficult to cross provincial borders with our own products, Canadians cannot properly support the national terroir or maintain and encourage traditional skills. "The government needs to get more flexible to ship within Canada," he says.

Events such as the Aylmer Meat Packers scandal and the recent Maple Leaf Foods listeria outbreak put pressure on the government to standardize regulations across the board.

As Dave Meli of the Healthy Butcher, a Toronto shop specializing in certified organic meat, explains: "The minute you're curing, brining, smoking or using salt you're considered a meat processor - no matter what your size."

Cowbell's butcher, Ryan Donovan, says that "most large companies have no problem having a separate parking space for an inspector, or separate change rooms or offices, [which is] next to impossible for the artisan."

For the consumer, the restrictions make it harder to sample salami from another province than to buy soprapsetta from Italy.

No one is arguing that health and safety standards should be loosened for smaller operations; only that the way a safe environment is evaluated could be more sensitive to size.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency was unable to comment on short notice about the possibility of looking at different regulations for small and large producers. It would say only that its first priority is the safety of food products, and ensuring that regulatory requirements are met to verify that safety.

Steve Alexander, owner of Cumbrae Meats in Toronto, agrees that safety is a delicate area. "Anything air-cured, dried from raw - you're dealing with something that could be dangerous," he says. "... The health department and retail food inspection agencies are really trying to define what you can and cannot do."

As for safety regulations that work for both large and small producers, Mr. Alexander has hope: "A lot of people think we're over-policed on that stuff. You have to be pretty tough, but I think you can do it."

Even if the government could confidently loosen its grip on smaller producers so that charcuterie could thrive in Canada, a better system for proper training would be required. In Europe, becoming a good charcutier takes at least 10 years of apprenticeship, learning not only how to make fine products but also the science of curing raw meat. In Canada, you may find only one butchery course out of a whole curriculum in a cooking program.

For Mario Pingue, whose name has become synonymous in Ontario with prosciutto that stacks up against Italian dry-cured ham, the issue is clear-cut: "I have no pity for any one who gets into a market and isn't properly trained."

Mr. Pingue had to educate himself. "I couldn't find any information of anyone making these products without nitrates or nitrites," he says, "so I had to go back to Italy to learn how to do it."

Mr. Cutrara at Cowbell also had to teach himself to make charcuterie. He says he has a 100-year-old Spanish charcuterie book from his grandfather that he consults. He also mentions the food community: "Talking to other chefs - what to watch for, what to look for - there's no school for this, which is the problem. Rather than fearing this stuff I think we need to embrace it."

And what can we hope for by keeping these Old World skills alive for a new generation of craftsmen?

"In Toronto there are so many cultures and so many old-school guys around - we can learn to make phenomenal products," Mr. Meli says. "It would be cool if we could say, 'My favourite salami comes from here.' "

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### *Charcuterie 101*

Curing and preserving practices such as salting, smoking, brining and cooking have been essential processes for the development and survival of civilization from the earliest days. Charcuterie encompasses products such as bacon, sausage, ham, terrines, salami, pates, smoked fish and even cold cuts. Early on, it was discovered that preserving meat acted not only to safeguard food supply, but it made the food supply taste better. A French culinary art since the 15th century, charcuterie began gaining respect on haute-cuisine menus by the end of the 19th century.

### *Sue Riedl*

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### *Classier cold cuts*

Enjoying charcuterie is not limited to eating head cheese as an appetizer. The quality of meat in your cold cuts can elevate a sandwich to a gourmet treat. And our newly refined palates are even dictating change on the grocery list. Artisanal salamis and cured hams can provide healthier ingredients (organic, nitrate- and nitrite-free) and tastier alternatives for our lunchboxes. For only a few cents difference per serving, why settle for generic flavours?

Steve Alexander, owner of Cumbrae Farms, says, "If you do a blind tasting of commodity pork and heritage-breed stuff you will see a huge flavour difference." He cites Mario Pingue's products as an example. Mr. Pingue says that with good husbandry, naturally raised pork can have many flavour nuances. An older pig will have more flavour in its higher-fat content, more meat intensity, darker colour and longer finish. It will also have more punch up front.

He suggests a test: "If you go to any Loblaws, pick five salamis and in a blind tasting try and tell them apart, I don't think you can discern them - unless on the basis of more or less spicy. You can taste the pigginess - but can you taste the pork?"

*Sue Riedl*