

Not a lot of sourdough starters: Our brief escapes amid continued COVID chaos

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Let's not mince words: 2020 has been an extremely tough hang. It sucks, frankly. We're three months into a viral pandemic that continues to kill thousands of individuals both in the United States and abroad, and now numerous instances of police violence against black Americans have urged protesters to take to the streets despite the underlying health risk (and the potential for more violent interactions with law enforcement). To make matters worse, no one still has any idea what a post-pandemic society will look like.

Our lives have inevitably changed forever, and we haven't even hit July. So, occasionally, we all need whatever bit of temporary respite we can find. COVID-19 has, naturally, also halted some of the most basic kinds of past hobbies—playing sports, eating out or having guests over, traveling, etc. But it hasn't drained every ounce of relaxation from the world yet, judging at least by some of the weekend hobbies still being clutched tightly around the Orbital HQ.

- At top, St. Louis ribs, dry rubbed. At bottom, a tri-tip that got a quick sear and then about 40 minutes of smoking with oak, à la Cold Spring Tavern outside of Santa Barbara, Calif.

Eric Bangeman

- Dry rubbed chicken wings, hickory smoked
Eric Bangeman
- A pair of turkey tenderloins smoked with apple wood
Eric Bangeman

Hickory, oak, or mesquite tonight?

I'm a serial hobbyist, taking up new pastimes and then giving them up when I get tired of them. Hence my coin collection that has been untouched for most of the past decade and the empty fishtanks in my garage. But one hobby I've held on to, and have invested more time into, since the pandemic reared its ugly head in the US: smoking meat.

I purchased a kamado grill in 2008, and over the past 12 years, I have been honing my grilling and smoking skills. In addition to the lump hardwood charcoal, I keep cherry, apple, hickory, oak, and mesquite on hand. Although I have a couple of store-bought rubs (one from Moonlite Bar-B-Q in Owensboro, Kentucky, and one from The Loveless Cafe in Nashville), I prefer to make my own using Alton Brown's 8+3+1+1 formulation.

I'm no expert, but I have seen some recent improvements recently. First, I make sure to brine my poultry. I've made this recipe for bacon-wrapped turkey tenderloin twice in the last couple of months, and the brine mitigates against my biggest problem with smoked turkey breast—dryness.

Second, I've cut back on the amount of smoke. I try to use just enough so that the smoke from the added wood chunks dissipates about one-third of the way through the cook time. That results in a great balance between the flavor of the meat and smokiness.

Since the pandemic started, I've smoked turkey breast, pork shoulder, chicken wings, and a chuck roast. The chuck roast was amazing—it was about 3.2lb and took 7.5 hours of smoking,

including spritzing it with beef broth throughout the first three hours on the smoker. The result could be best described as “pulled beef.”

The other advantage of smoking is that it’s time consuming, giving me something to do on a Saturday when I’d otherwise be at a local rugby pitch coaching a referee or watching one of my kids play. That’s what I’ll be doing this weekend, in fact. I have two racks of St. Louis Ribs that are going to be spending the day on the smoker. Here’s the recipe if you’re interested.

–Eric Bangeman, Managing Editor

Enlarge / A bike of roughly the same vintage as the author’s normal ride.

Finding time for elbow (bike) grease

One of my hobbies is cycling, but the pandemic has caused me to add a related project: rebuilding an old bike. Over 25 years and many thousands of miles ago, I bought a Trek 1200

road bike. Over time and a number of moves, things got knocked a bit out of alignment, and crowded New York City apartments made it hard to do basic maintenance. With all those miles, a few of the parts were due for replacement. It still worked, but not especially smoothly.

So, a couple of years back, I got a modern replacement, which was *incredibly* smooth. But I kept the old one around for cases where I didn't want to risk my latest and greatest. And in the naive hope I might have some time to spare during the pandemic, I found a reasonably priced set of parts for it on eBay. Would it be possible to buy a tolerable new bike for the amount of money I'm spending to refurb the 1200? Probably. But all those miles left me with a bit of an attachment to the old ride.

I'm now about halfway through putting together my hybrid of new and old. Hopefully in a month or so, I'll be able to take it for a ride—and it'll be as smooth as when I first bought it.

—John Timmer, *Science Editor*

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