

# SPICED, BRINED & SMOKED

Few culinary techniques are older than those used for curing pork, beef and game meats, yet charcuterie has taken a front-and-center seat on many restaurant menus across the city. And those chefs doing it best are not only students of the craft; they're giving classic offerings a contemporary spin.

STORY BY ANTHONY DOMINIC

**I**n the belly of The Table, Donte Allen is in his zone. His eyes and shoulders are relaxed, and his knife hand dips in and out of a slab of chicken sausage with gentle, rhythmic fluidity. It's a little after noon, and in less than four hours diners will find it nestled inside a reassembled galantine with cured liver, heart, sweet corn and roasted peppers.

Since opening in late 2013, The Table has emerged as one of many restaurants evolving the city's dining landscape by way of cured meats. Charcutiers like Allen employ Old World preservation techniques to achieve exciting and often unfamiliar flavors, much like bartenders rediscovering vinegar and brewers rediscovering heirloom hops varieties.

Still, charcuterie remains an elastic 11-letter word. Pate, salumi, sausage—where does the term start and end? “To me, charcuterie means ‘of no waste,’ ” says Allen as he drops his knife into the chicken. “It’s not just the meats; it’s a philosophy for what you do. Everything has a purpose.”

We highlight some of the city’s can’t-miss cured offerings while getting to the heart of why the chefs behind them put so much time and effort into what they do. Allen is merging tried-and-true traditions with new culinary perspectives. For others, embracing charcuterie gets them closer to their roots—to what made them want to become chefs in the first place.

## THE OLD SCHOOL

**Meats.** The cash-only deli opens at dawn Thursday through Saturday, and brothers and fourth-generation owners Albert and Anton Thurn greet droves of regulars by first name and, most often, with a single question: “The usual?”

Pass through the wooden door behind the deli counter, and time twists back even further. Bruised cement floors and off-white subway-style tiling snake throughout a dim 4,000-square-foot workshop. It’s here the brothers spend the other four days of the week hand-linking sausage, wet-curing pork belly and wood-smoking cottage-style hams—much like their great-grandfather, Alois Thurn, did for his family and friends in the late 1800s.

“It’s kind of like ‘Groundhog Day’ around here,” Anton laughs of the process. But he and Albert are well aware their time-tested techniques and recipes have made Thurn’s a best bet for cured pork products in Columbus.

The Thurns source nearly all their meat through J.H. Routh Packing out of Sandusky and Heffelfinger Meats out of Jeromesville. This strong relationship with a select few in-state purveyors, Anton says, keeps their deli display windows packed with fresh offerings.

“It means I can call them for a pig on a Sunday, it’s slaughtered Monday and it’s here

in our hands Wednesday,” he says.

This also means ham and pork belly for bacon—two of Thurn’s top sellers—are continuously wet-curing in the cold room. They’re stored in large brine vats for seven to 10 days, submerged in a simple recipe of water, salt, sugar and sodium nitrate, which zaps bacteria.

The industry standard temperature for cold rooms is 41 degrees, Anton says, but he and Albert have found just a few degrees cooler—a constant 38 degrees—makes for even better texture and flavor in pork products.

Come Wednesday and Thursday, bacon, ham and anything else ready to go (like tongue, loin and even cheese) is wheeled into Thurn’s wood-fired smokehouse. Here, bacon will smoke for at least 20 hours at 145 degrees Fahrenheit over red oak and mulberry wood, which impart soft hickory and fruity notes, respectively, Anton says, adding hickory alone can be too overpowering.

“Trends change, but we don’t, really,” Albert says. “From our practices to the building itself, very little has changed around here since 1958.”

But they have seen shifts in customers’ preferences over the last 10 years, Anton adds, reflective of dining trends in the city.

“We’ve seen a lot more people buying pork belly instead of bacon, because they want to make their own bacon,” he says. “Corned beef, too. They just want the base from us so they can do it themselves, which is pretty neat.”

For Kent Rigby, reintroducing charcuterie



PHOTOS: TESSA BERG

Owner Albert Thurn smokes meat at Thurn's Specialty Meats.

# CHARCUTERIE 101

## PATE

French style of curing and presenting forcemeat that is typically leaner than a terrine. In texture and consistency, pates run the gamut. Donte Allen's country pate, for example, is served at The Table more as a sliced loaf, whereas his melts-in-your-mouth chicken liver pate is reminiscent of cold pudding.

## HAM

A fatty cut, typically from a pig's hind legs, that can be wet- or dry-cured. Allen offers a French-style jambon blanc (white ham) that's wet-cured with herbs and spices before being cooked.

## COPPA

Thinly sliced pork neck or shoulder, often dry-cured with hot paprika. Coppa is short for capicola.

## TERRINE

Terrines are baked into loaf-shaped molds, allowing the charcutier to build layers of meats and garnishes. By design, they're usually fattier than pates, says Allen, who makes a duck and rabbit terrine in the fall and a vegan terrine in the summer.

PHOTO: WILL SHILLING

## PROSCIUTTO

Dry-cured, thinly sliced ham that can be served raw (crudo) or cooked (cotto).

## PANCETTA

Cuts of pork belly or Italian-style bacon, often rolled and cured with salt and pepper. Rigsby's Kitchen serves a seasonal side dish of mixed zucchini with a house-made pancetta-tomato marinade.

## LARDO

Cuts of fatback cured for weeks to months with salt and spices. Lardo can also serve as shortening.

## SAUSAGE

A mixture of ground meat typically stuffed inside an organ casing. The Thurns spice, mix and hand-link more than a dozen styles of sausages, like their peppery and potato-flecked andouille.

## RILLETTES

Chopped meat (typically pork, but you can find a version made with salmon at The Refectory) cooked with fat until it's spreadable.

## SALUMI

A catchall term for Italian-style pork cuts, like prosciutto, lardo and coppa, usually served cold. Rigsby's Kitchen offers an assorted salumi plate.



to his restaurant's menu brought **Rigsby's Kitchen** closer to its Italian roots. This year, cured meats (pork specifically) popped up across the Short North restaurant's menu, from the obvious, like an assorted salumi board with prosciutto and soppressata, to the subtle, like pizza cooked with shaved lardo (cured pork fatback). Rigsby's newfound appreciation for charcuterie was born late last year when he met famed Austrian farmers Christoph and Isabell Wiesner at an intensive three-day workshop devoted to the slaughter and all-around utilization of the pig. The following February, he traveled to the couple's Gollersdorf grange and, over the course of 10 days, slaughtered three pigs.

The Wiesners raise Mangalitsa pigs, a rare, woolly breed popular in Austria and Hungary for its copious fat content. Rigsby (who has started sourcing his own Mangalitsas from Michigan) is drawn to cuts from the pig's shoulder and upper back. Cured for four to five months with salt, peppercorn and other aromatics, these cuts become the off-white

Club with his cured-in-house duck pastrami, jerk chicken and pork platters. Now leading the kitchen at **Double Comfort**, Varga's eager to gussy up the Arena District eatery's menu with Southern-style cured offerings. Soon, he plans to start hot-smoking Double Comfort's andouille sausages in house. He also hopes to add Southern-style hams, which he'll cure with salt and sugar for four days, rub down with spices and hot smoke at 150 degrees.

"Southern-style hams should be smoky-sweet," he says. "Lots of brown sugar and maple notes, and some of that is from the pecan wood." Even when he's not in the kitchen at Double Comfort, Varga preps salami and spicy, Spanish-style lamb chorizo in his basement curing room at home. He's drawn to fatty neck muscles and hopes to eventually kill, cut and cure his own coppa.

"It's all about the quality of the meat," he says. "I use local Ohio pigs most of the time and do very little, really, so the real flavor comes out."

*It's not just the meats; it's a philosophy for what you do. Everything has a purpose.*

—DONTE ALLEN, THE TABLE

lardo salumi which Rigsby and his son, head chef Forbes Rigsby, regularly use as shortening in the kitchen.

"It can sustain a lot of heat and browns things so lightly," he says. "And it's a very healthy cooking medium. That's a huge misconception. Crisco was created to resemble lard, and it's completely artificial and not very good for you at all."

After returning from Austria, Rigsby also turned one of the restaurant's wine coolers (visible from the dining room) into a curing box. He cures lamb belly with salt, sugar, fennel, peppercorn, garlic and thyme, washes off the residue after two days, then hangs the cuts in the cooler for two to four weeks. The reason for the wait? Evaporation. "That's what creates the texture and flavor in these 'charcuterie' whole-muscle meats," he says. "It depends on how big the piece is, but over two, three, four weeks, you'll see a 30 percent reduction in water weight, evaporating slowly out of the muscle."

Dan Varga built a following at Explorers

Every time Varga starts curing a cut of meat, he feels as if he's channeling his grandparents. Before they fled Soviet-controlled Hungary in the 1950s, his grandparents owned and operated a farm and smokehouse. He remembers being mesmerized as a child watching his grandmother slow-cook Gyulai pork sausage or carefully craft headcheese terrine.

"It's a heritage thing for me," he says of charcuterie. "It's my roots. When I got into cooking and started messing around and reading some books, it just felt very natural."

While he's eager to introduce more cured offerings to Double Comfort's menu, Varga hopes diners remain opened-minded about unfamiliar cuts and cures.

"It's about culture," he says. "[Charcuterie] is something we grew up with, something my grandmother would do. When you put it on a plate and you watch people eat it or shy away from it—you can tell a lot about that person, if they're adventurous or not. And you want to have an open mind."



PHOTO: WILL SHILLING

Donte Allen, charcutier at The Table



In the basement of **The Table**, the door to Donte Allen's curing room is perpetually covered in a

chalk-scrawled list. It details everything he's prepared for the current menu—from rich North African-style roast beef to caramel-lacquered pork belly—and rotates every three weeks to keep up with the season, farmers and Allen's latest inspiration.

"I open the refrigerator and take full advantage of what I have on hand," he says.

This can mean traditional French offerings, like his country-style pate made with pork and chicken liver, inlaid with shallots, spices and a little red wine—an easy fix in winter months. But come summer, when The Table's storage rooms are overflowing with freshly grown Ohio produce, the refrigerator can yield something unexpected. This summer, Allen crafted a vegan terrine packed with string beans, carrots, tomatoes, endives, artichokes and asparagus, wrapped in steamed cabbage leaves and gelled with veggie-stock-rendered aspic.

At the request of a friend from Syria, Allen also dreamed up a beef pate he calls H. Cartwright that is an option for people who abstain from pork. In addition to the beef base, the pate includes duck and lamb liver, raisins, smoked paprika and garlic.

"I grew up on the TV show 'Bonanza,' so it was like, 'What would Hoss Cartwright eat?' " he says. "It probably wouldn't be pork anyway, because they raised cattle. So whatever they would find [in the West] is in there."

Allen's exploratory mind makes The Table's cured offerings fun and accessible. Having the liberty to regularly change his menu as well as the presentation of his dishes, he says, keeps him sharp and always experimenting.

"Whatever your imagination is—that's where you're going to stop," he says of charcuterie. "There are no rules."

While The Table is one of the most charcuterie-centric restaurants in the city, Allen occasionally encounters diners who are unfamiliar with (and often weary of) some of his cured offerings. His advice: Ask questions.

"Never feel like you can't question what you're going to eat, like you should just take it for what it is," he says. "Especially if I'm here. I want people to ask me questions or come up and ask me, 'What is this?' or why did I do that; what's the purpose?"