

June 2015



*Chefs bring curing stations
out into the open.* / BY KATHRYN KJARSGAARD

With the rising popularity of cured meats and charcuterie in restaurants, it's no surprise that chefs are expanding this trend by creating special rooms, display cases and patented processes to showcase them.

Glass curing cases are appearing at restaurant entrances, and glass-enclosed dry-aging rooms are popping up in the center of dining rooms as a new way to put cured meats at center stage. These spaces help educate guests about the meat they are eating and spark conversation about individual cuts of meat, how they are prepared and the flavor nuances from different techniques.

"Right as guests enter our restaurant, they will see our patented dry-aging room," says Matthew O'Neill, executive chef of David Burke Kitchen Aspen, Aspen, Colorado, which is scheduled to open late spring/early summer 2015.

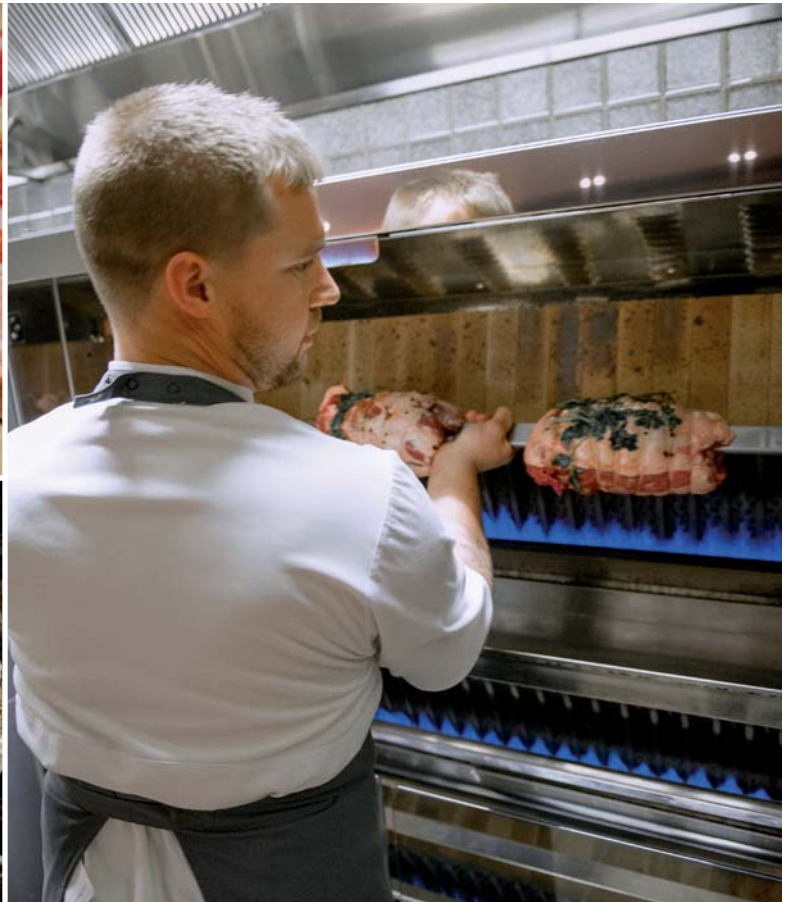
"I think, for Aspen, it will be a controversial thing, which is not necessarily a bad thing. If I make people more aware of the process, that's a good thing. If I have ducks hanging, a whole pig and half a cow, people are really going to know where the food is coming from. Sure, I will get some pushback from vegetarians, animal welfare people and others who don't want to see that. But if I can educate people, it's a better environment for me."

Cured, San Antonio, was designed around a large glass case in the center of the dining room, says chef/owner Steve McHugh. "You know you are in a restaurant called Cured right when you

ABOVE: At David Burke Group restaurants, a patented process adheres to strict guidelines about how the bricks of pink Himalayan rock salt are placed inside the dry-aging room.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP LEFT: 1) Tete's pâté champagne, front, with, left to right, prosciutto di Parma, coppa, finocchiona and Rosette de Lyon. 2) Bryan Voltaggio tends the rotisserie, which is visible to diners, at Range. 3) Dry-aging beef at David Burke Prime, Mashantucket, Connecticut. 4) The charcuterie case at Cured, which elicits lots of interest from guests.

PHOTO CREDITS Above, David Burke Group; opposite, from top left: 1) Kay Nielsen 2) Ken Goodman 3) David Burke Group 4) Scott Martin



EQUIPMENT the cure

HOW LONG TO CURE?

The key to knowing when meat has completed the curing process is to watch for the proper amount of weight loss, says Matthew O'Neill, executive chef, David Burke Kitchen Aspen, Aspen, Colorado.

O'Neill says raw product is tagged and weighed, then set on the shelf in the restaurant's patented dry-aging room. "The room does all the work. We'll have different items in the room at different stages and ages. It doesn't start getting good until after 30 days. Some things age 55-75 days, and even up to 100 days."

The tag is continuously checked and the meat weighed to determine how much loss there has been. "As it's aging, it's losing moisture. Technically, it's rotting," O'Neill says. "You trim off the outside edge and dead skin, then weigh it and see how much weight has been lost. At 100 days, you typically lose half what you started with, so that product will be more expensive. You double the cost."

Steve McHugh, chef/owner, Cured, San Antonio, says the length of time he cures meats is also based on an item's change in weight. "We aim for 30% weight loss. We are trying to pull water out of ham, salamis, for example, to reduce their water weight constantly over time. We're developing flavors at same time."

He says it's not an exact science, and you have to experiment. "We have hams that have been aging for 12 months that are not ready yet. Some hams at 12 months taste like prosciutto, though."

Tete's open-layout prep kitchen allows guests to watch through the window as staff prep meats, make terrine, and grind and case sausages.



walk in. People ask where all the hams are from, and we explain that we make them right here. They are amazed. It also helps teach young chefs and cooks the processes—which are thousands of years old—for curing meats.”

patented room

At David Burke Kitchen Aspen, the dry-aging “box” is a glass-fronted room located at the entrance to the restaurant. It is lined with bricks of pink Himalayan rock salt that are backlit for a glowing effect, says O'Neill.

The room is designed and built the same way in all David Burke Group restaurants. The box is built around the company's patented process, and adheres to strict guidelines about how the salt is placed inside. Using a patented method, meat is dry-aged employing a specific mix of materials, temperature and humidity.

“Unlike wet aging, the dry-aging process exposes the surface of the meat to the atmosphere in an aging room, and aging occurs from the outside in,” says O'Neill. “The circulation of the temperature-controlled room pushes the moisture from the meat into the air while the salt is flavoring the beef at the same time.”

He adds that the ratio of salt to beef has to be just right. Only one wall in the room is covered in the salt, he says, and there is also UV lighting to destroy any bad bacteria.

Among meats aging in the room are charcuterie, duck, beef, sausage and pork. “Things have to be fatty,” O'Neill says. “It's not good when you dry-age a lean meat, such as chicken, or fish. A steak like a filet wouldn't age well. It would rot. The fat protects it from rot. A tenderloin is already tender, so you don't need to put it in the room.”

O'Neill says scraps will be used to make burgers. “We'll blend the trim with with fresh meat for a burger with the dry-age taste but without the dryness.”

What is different about the Aspen location is that the dry-aging room is visible from the dining room. Other David Burke locations have aging rooms in the back of the house.

“We are also the first to have the open storefront look with an entire wall made of glass,” O'Neill says. “It's like looking into a storefront. The glass has chicken wire inside it, as well, for an industrial look.”

cured at the core

McHugh and his team put a lot of thought into the name and philosophy of Cured. He is a cancer survivor, and this fact paired with a menu designed around cured meats led to the restaurant's dual-meaning moniker.

The focus on cured meats stems from his desire to be a friend of the farmer and buy the entire animal, which means less waste and a better price. "Everybody wants just pork belly or shoulder, but the farmer needs to sell the whole animal," McHugh says.

He soon realized he was going to have a lot of product and would need a case for aging. It started out as a deli case, and grew. "I didn't need to hide the charcuterie in the back or place it in an invisible refrigerator," he says. "Space is at a premium, but I wanted to put it where it made sense."

The case ended up being 9 x 11 feet and located in the center of the dining room. It's known as the charcuterie case, aka "the charc tank." The humidity-controlled dry-aging case was designed by Stainless Innovations, Fort Smith, Arkansas.

"It's a piece of art," McHugh says. "We are in a 1904 building, so we wanted it to fit with the look and feel. The case mimics an old refrigerator, with powder-white trim. It lets guests know that we believe in this. We thought, let's show people who we are and what we are. People love the case, and take photos next to it all the time and ask us hundreds of questions about it."

The case is designed to mimic optimal conditions in the Italian countryside, which is 60°F and 60% humidity. Before placing the meat in the case, McHugh covers it with salt, which permeates the meat and fills in any small holes. The salt is wiped off before the meat goes in the case.

He cures ham, salami, pork belly, pork tenderloin, Spanish chorizo and lamb merguez. "We buy locally from farmers," he says. "They do such a wonderful job raising the animals. We need to respect that and do the same when the animal gets to us."

out in the open

At Tete Charcuterie, Chicago, there's an open-layout prep kitchen with a glass window. Guests can watch staff prep various meats, make terrine, and grind and case sausages. While no aging is done in the area, it serves as more of a service element, says chef/co-owner Thomas Rice. "It's connecting all the dots. Guests see items going through the prep room to the hot line and to the cold station. Spices also are on display on a shelf along the back wall."

Longanisa sausage, inspired by the flavors of the Philippines, is one of Tete's most popular entrees.



Rice says the prep area is definitely the showpiece of the restaurant. "Guests can see all the action and the camaraderie among the cooks. The kitchen is entirely visible and accessible. They ask about the prep room, and we're happy to give them a tour. It's always fun when we have customers who want to engage with what we do. The more open and hands-on experience we give people provides them with a unique dining experience."

Tete also has a charcuterie bar with a glass-enclosed display case. After meat is prepped in the open prep area, it is placed in the case and labeled. Guests can see the cooks reach in to get items when making charcuterie boards. In addition, a 5 x 5-foot wall of a room in the back of the restaurant was transformed into a curing chamber where game birds and larger pieces of meat are aged for a few days.

Range, Washington, D.C., has two visible units for fermentation and aging. One of them is used exclusively for dry-curing meats, including whole short loins, rib-eyes, ducks and foie gras. Staff also cure a lot of ham, and currently, there are 30 hams drying and/or on cure, says Bryan Voltaggio, executive chef/co-owner. The second unit is used for the first steps in fermentation. Meat is then transferred to the aging room, which is located near the salumeria. The salumeria displays cured and dried meats, as well as pâtés and terrines. The restaurant also has a visible rotisserie.

"We wanted to be able to use the animals at Range in their entirety," says Voltaggio. "Having the ability to cure and age meats gives us flexibility in menu and 100% yield."

He adds that diners today are interested in the processes of curing and aging meats. "We don't force the information, but if someone asks, we certainly can give a tour of what we do." ■

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