

Pork Proud

Woodfire Grill Executive Chef Kevin Gillespie does more than bring home the bacon. He makes it.

By Sarah Gleim

Pork always has been a part of Woodfire Grill Executive Chef Kevin Gillespie's life. He grew up the son of parents who are part of an award-winning barbecue team and still spends much of his time smoking meats with them on their family farm—oftentimes driving an hour outside of town with slabs of meat for the restaurant to smoke on their industrial-size smoker.

So it should come as no surprise that the longtime Atlanta restaurant's new executive chef is quite the, well, bacon snob. So much so, he insists on only the very best for Woodfire Grill; for Gillespie, that means he makes it himself. "We make our own bacon out of necessity. There's nothing out there good enough," Gillespie says. "Plus, if we can find a way to put bacon in it here, we do." And that means he uses a lot of bacon.

"We order whole pigs here, so making our own bacon is also a great way to make use of the entire animal," Gillespie says. To make his bacon, he dry cures the pork belly in a mixture of brown sugar, salt, curing salt and other spices for about 15 days, then rinses it, and lets it rest for three or four more days. Finally, the meat is then cold and gradually hot-smoked for anywhere between six and 24 hours, depending on the size of the slab.

While curing and smoking the meat is relatively simple, it is a lengthy process and takes about 24 days. Inevitably that means supply can't always keep up with demand. "When we run out of our own, we use Allan Benton bacon," Gillespie says. "It's the only bacon worth buying."

And when Gillespie says he uses bacon whenever he can, he means it. We found bacon in everything from emulsified dressings like the apple bacon dressing to the fried egg and bacon sandwich on the new bar menu. But it was the dishes like the roasted scallops with smoked bacon and chicken-fried oysters BLT that had our mouths watering. And even we were surprised when Gillespie admitted he sometimes candies bacon and serves it as a dessert garnish.

Of course, it's that kind of thinking that got him promoted from chef de cuisine at Woodfire Grill to executive chef when Michael Tuohy sold the restaurant to Nicolas Quinones and Bernard Moussa of Five Senses Restaurants last summer. Since then Gillespie has made changes to both the dining room and bar menus. The dining-room menu is much smaller than the original and changes significantly every day. He's also introduced a brand new bar menu that features smaller plates of "bar" food like cheese and crackers, a pizza margherita, and a HAMburger with a beef patty, country ham, cheese and pickled red onion.

"We really like to think of this as today's version of Woodfire Grill," Gillespie says. "We still follow the same ideal of supporting local, sustainable farmers and organic growers, but this is a more modern version of that idea."

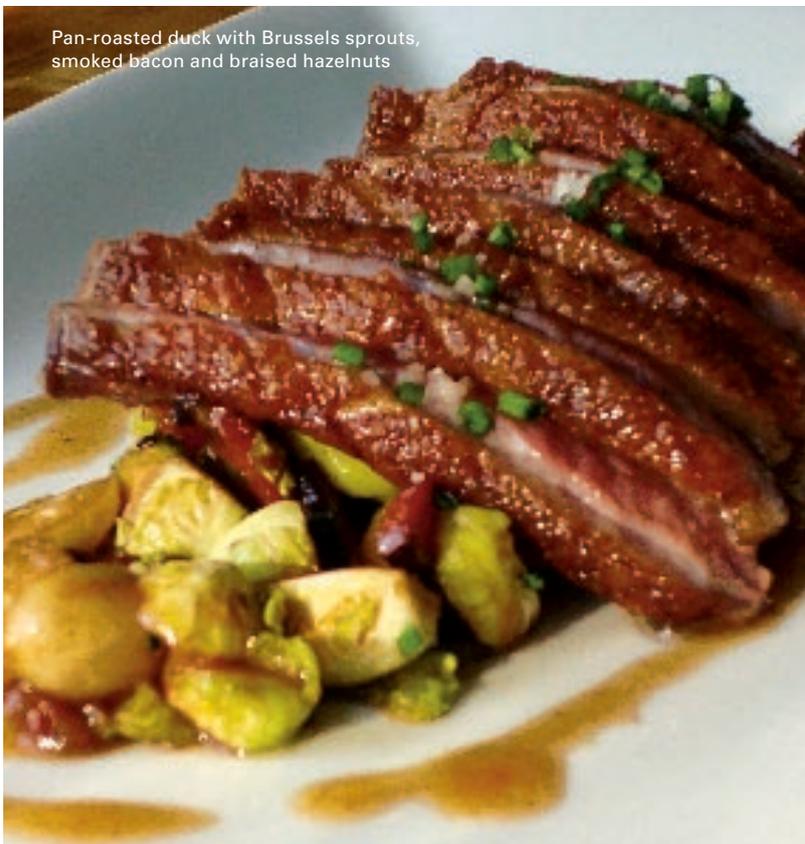
And come on. The guy makes his own bacon. What's not to like about that? ►

Woodfire Grill

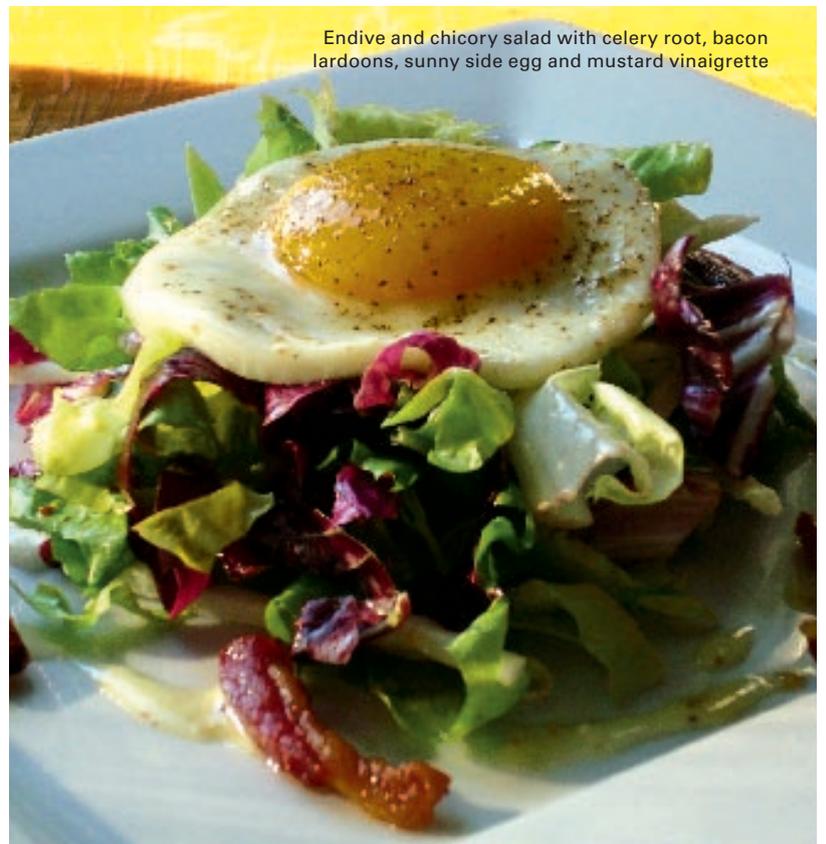
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Crisp fried oysters, cauliflower mousseline, braised bacon and cauliflower relish



Pan-roasted duck with Brussels sprouts, smoked bacon and braised hazelnuts



Endive and chicory salad with celery root, bacon lardons, sunny side egg and mustard vinaigrette