

## **Chefs go hog wild**

*Restaurants serve up special events with their takes on whole roasted pigs*

By Lisa Jennings

**(May 21)** - With the exception of cultures that avoid pork completely, it seems variations on the theme of a whole roasted pig can be found all over the world.

In Hawaii, the buried, roasted pig is an integral part of the luau. In the South, going "whole hog" means barbecue, likely slow-cooked for many hours. In countries such as Cuba, the Philippines or Mexico, the pit-roasted "lechón" is spiked with condiments at the table, such as chimichurri, mojo or salsa. In Italy, "porchetta" is typically roasted on a rotisserie. In China, a roasted pig is a wedding banquet tradition.

Whatever the cooking method, marinade or head-on/head-off preference, there are common themes: the crispy skin is prized, and whole roasted pigs make great party food.

That is why an increasing number of chefs are offering their versions of whole roasted pigs as theme-night events.

At the high-end restaurant Norman's on Sunset, for example, the Los Angeles outpost of Latin-fusion chef Norman Van Aken, Friday night pig roasts and paella have been a regular theme since August 2005, and almost all such events have sold out.

Mike Bryant, who recently stepped into the chef de cuisine slot there, uses a Cuban-style roasting box known by the brand name La Caja China. The aluminum-lined plywood box on wheels is topped with a tray on which the coals are placed, radiating an indirect heat.

The process begins the day before cooking. Bryant brines and seasons a 75-pound gutted and splayed pig, with a mixture of cumin, garlic, habanero peppers, sour orange and lime juices, which are injected into the meat. The pig then goes into the outdoor roasting box for about five or six hours. Bryant keeps the pig's head on, so he can serve the cheeks and ears, when requested.

When ready, the meat is plated in the kitchen and served with a mash of caramelized plantains and boniato yams as well as Nicaraguan-style cole slaw, with white cabbage, mustard vinaigrette, cucumber and shaved onions.

In the summer, the pig is roasted and carved on the patio, which offers more tableside theater. "It feels very Miami," Bryant says.

The set price for any combination of pig and paella is around \$20, and Bryant says it accounts for about 75 percent of sales every Friday.

At the Italian restaurant La Terza in Los Angeles, whole roasted suckling pig is offered on Sunday nights. There, chef de cuisine Danilo Angelini uses the wood-burning rotisserie in the dining room, which will cook a 16- to 20-pound pig in about an hour, he says.

Angelini, who described his method as Sardinian-inspired, takes a basic approach. The inside cavity is simply stuffed with some pork fat, fennel tops, garlic, salt and pepper. After roasting, Angelini carves the meat onto the plate with some mixed green salad and roasted potatoes and nothing more than perhaps a drizzle of olive oil. Prices run about \$25 per plate. At [Rathbun's](#) and [Krog Bar](#) in Atlanta, an upscale spot with an eclectic menu, chef owner Kevin Rathbun also uses a La Caja China for weekend specials involving a whole roasted pig.

Rathbun prepares the meat by injecting it with a garlic-and-lime solution, though sometimes he uses an overnight brine or a dry rub. A 50-pound pig cooks in about four hours. "It emulates a luau, but you don't have to bury it," Rathbun says.

The meat is carved from the pig and chopped, Southern-barbecue style. It is served with a starch or vegetable as well as chimichurri sauce, a mix of spices, parsley, and olive oil and vinegar. Typically plates range in price from \$18 to \$19.

When possible, Rathbun tries to place the roasting box in clear view of diners eating outside. "People don't really get it until they see the box," he says.

In the Miami area, it's not difficult to find whole roasted pig as an offering at one of the countless Cuban restaurants. But lechon offered on weekends at Doug Rodriguez's [OLA Steak](#) in Coral Gables, Fla., stands out for its painstakingly traditional preparation.

Rodriguez is often described as the father of "Nuevo Latino" cuisine. In addition to two OLA locations in Florida, he also is chef of [Alma de Cuba](#) in Philadelphia and Deseo in Scottsdale, Ariz. He also has plans to open De la Costa in Chicago this summer.

Jose Luis Flores, executive chef of OLA Steak, says the process starts with the brining of the pig for two days in herbs and spices. On the third day the pig hangs in the cooler to dry — a vital step for crisp skin, Flores says.

On the fourth day the pig goes into the roaster box for about four hours for a 60-pound pig. Lechon is available on weekends as part of the brunch menu for a set price of \$25.

To serve, a table is set up with different sauces, such as chimichurri and mojo, a more chunky salsa-like condiment often involving fruit. Guests are invited to stuff tortillas with the meat and sauces, along with black beans on the side.

For events, Flores says he might plate the meat with mojo, rice and beans for about \$12.

Flores says the pig roasts began at OLA Steak last summer. "Now it's very popular," he says. "It has definitely been increasing our sales on the weekends."

At [Bohn's](#) restaurant in Batavia, N.Y., whole pigs are available for special events, says owner Mike Bohn, who estimates the restaurant caters about 15 pig roasts per year.

Bohn uses a propane-heated roasting box on wheels, and the restaurant uses large pigs, ranging from 225 to 230 pounds. Various options are available to stuff the pig: sauerkraut and apples, bread-based dressing, or onions.

Generally the meat is served with a barbecue sauce, gravy or marinade on the side, along with potato salad and other options, for about \$15 to \$19 per person.

What people love, however, is watching the entire roasting process.

"We try to carve it in front of people," Bohn says. "There's nothing pretty about a pig, but they love to watch the stupid thing cooking. And they love to walk up and tear off the skin."