

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER

## COOKING & EATING

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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SATURDAY/SUNDAY • OCTOBER 2-3, 2010 | D11

### THE BACON BACKLASH

When bacon appears in cocktails, mashed potatoes and cupcakes, you know it's time for chefs to find a new trick. Those on the forefront are experimenting with a new wave of flavor boosters. Make way for smoked salt and mango vinegar

BY KATY McLAUGHLIN

**IT'S 8 O'CLOCK ON SATURDAY** night and you're waiting for your table at the place to be. You sip a bacon-infused bourbon old fashioned, while nibbling on pancetta-wrapped figs. Once seated, you waver between the braised pork belly or the Allan Benton-bacon wrapped trout, served with Brussels sprouts roasted with cured fatback. You'll need to save room for the bacon-banana ice cream. And, don't forget, you'll be meeting a friend for bacon-maple doughnuts tomorrow morning.

It's lip smacking and finger licking, fatty and salty, savory and sweet. It's bacon, and it's everywhere. In every restaurant. In every course. In every dish.

We are in the midst of a bacon bubble—and a growing number of chefs (some of whom quietly admit they helped inflate the bubble to begin with) say it's about to pop. Bacon had a good run, but now it has gone flabby—used too much and too often, it's lost its novelty and coated fine dining with a ubiquitous veneer of porky grease.

Chef John Currence, owner of four restaurants in Oxford, Miss., adores bacon and proudly wears a pig tattoo on his arm. But even he says that the bacon craze has gone a bit far. Strike that: The man recently received a gift of bacon-flavored lip balm. It's gone way too far.

"It's like cussing," Mr. Currence says of today's overuse of bacon in restaurants. "It's easy, it's effective, it always gets a cocked eyebrow, but it just doesn't belong in church." Bacon is a staple of the Southern cuisine he specializes in, but it shouldn't become a crutch—it's facile and everything ends up tasting the same, Mr. Currence says. Lately, he has begun experimenting with less-obvious flavor boosters, including an intense mango vinegar he drizzles on seared scallops. Searching for flavors that "punch you in the mouth," he adds Indian spices to roasted carrot and red pepper sauces.

Bacon's ascendance from proletarian breakfast food to truffle substitute can be traced to noble intentions of American chefs to create a native version of haute cuisine, untethered from French traditions. Six or seven years ago, big-city chefs began rediscovering and celebrating small-scale, quality producers of hams and bacon in the South. Quality bacon helped put the American flavor in chef David Chang's unique Korean fusion, the down-home touch in Thomas Keller's lofty European tasting menus, and the relatable accent in Grant Achatz's wild creations at Chicago's Alinea.

Home cooks have also been encouraged to use bacon in everything. Never mind bacon-packed tomes such as the "Blue Ribbon Cookbook: Better Home Cooking" or Mr. Chang's "Momofuku," there's the recent "Bacon: A Love Story," "The Bacon Cookbook," (the recipe for bacon and peanut butter chocolate truffles is on page 257) and, for the Kindle, the "Geek's Guide to Bacon Cookery." A separate opus covers the fine points of making bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwiches.

By 2008, bacon had caught on like wildfire. Locate salsify, cardoons, radicchio or chard on a menu, and bacon is sure to be tagging along, a spoonful of fat to help the medicine go down. The bacon old fashioned is a real drink, served in bars from Portland, Ore., to New York. Allan Benton, a smoked-bacon artisan in Madisonville, Tenn., has received the kind of hagiographic accolades from

Staples Lunch for The Wall Street Journal. Food styling by Victoria Giamali



**BACON GONE BONKERS**  
A cherry and bacon pie—has our penchant for pig jumped the shark?

Chefs are saying 'enough' to bacon's lava-like flow into every crevice of culinary topography.

food magazines and celebrity chefs usually reserved for food magazines and celebrity chefs. Culinary fashion accessory Vosges Haut-Chocolat sells two varieties of bacon chocolate bars, and Dean & DeLuca peddles \$28 a pound bacon-peanut brittle candy.

Now some chefs are throwing up roadblocks to bacon's lava-like flow into every crevice of the culinary topography. In August, Ken Oringer, chef and owner of Clio and five other Boston restaurants, tasted his pastry chef's latest creation: milk chocolate-bacon bon bons. He ordered her to melt them down and turned them into a mole sauce used for a staff meal.

"It's been overplayed so much and my taste buds are tired of it," says Mr. Oringer, who now swaps it for less showpwn ingredients. If he's looking for smoke with little fat, he'll toss a smoked turkey wing into the pot. Trout wrapped in bacon is a gastronomic trope, but trout's delicate flavor is easily masked, Mr. Oringer says. A sprinkling of smoked salt

gives an accent while highlighting the fish's essence.

One reason bacon is so popular is that it provides not just smoky, fatty and salty flavor, but also a more mysterious accent known in food-science circles as umami, indicating a rich, savory, mouth-filling taste. In Japanese cuisine, umami has traditionally been achieved by the laborious process of making dashi—a broth of shaved, dried bonito fish and a specific type of seaweed. Bacon is a kind of express train to umami, with the added benefit of being crispy and crunchy.

There are other ways to achieve umami. Gary Danko, of the eponymous San Francisco restaurant, grinds shiitake mushrooms in a blender, then dusts cuts of meat, fish or chicken with the powder before searing. Other umami-boosters are miso paste and parmesan cheese. Soy sauce also provides a boost.

Perhaps no restaurant deserves more of the credit—or blame—for the bacon bubble than Los Angeles' Animal, which serves everything from bacon-chocolate bars to deep-fried pig ears. The co-owners are opening a new restaurant later this fall, and say the only certain thing about the new place is that it won't specialize in bacon-packed dishes. "Sometimes I just want a salad, you know?" says co-chef Jon Shook.

#### THE NEXT NEW FLAVORS



**DRIED MUSHROOMS**  
Dried mushrooms, rehydrated with a little water, stock or wine, are great in soups, risottos, and braises. Chef Gary Danko grinds dried shiitakes to a powder, which he uses to flavor breadcrumbs and pasta dough.



**PIMENTÓN DE LA VERA**  
Smoke-dried over local oak in La Vera, Spain, pimentón is often called "vegetarian bacon" by chefs. Spanish chef José Andrés uses it in paella and garbanzo stews.



**MISO PASTE**  
Chef David Chang mixes equal parts white miso and unsalted butter for a sauce he stirs into corn and over roast asparagus. It's also good mixed with butter on pasta, topped with chives.



**SMOKED SALT**  
Now widely available at gourmet supermarkets, use instead of regular salt to accent anything with a light crunch and pure smoky flavor. Chef Ken Oringer uses it on trout.



**TOASTED PUMPKIN SEED OIL**  
Use sparingly and always uncooked to add intense nutty flavor to salads, potatoes and as a soup garnish. Chef Kurt Gutenbrunner drizzles it over vanilla ice cream for a surprising dessert.

David Fields for The Wall Street Journal