Food and Wine: Sonoma blend plays well with slow-cooked pulled pork

by Ron_James

For the passionate professional chef, the Food & Wine Classic in Aspen, Colo., is the World Series and Super Bowl rolled into one. Being invited to this Rocky Mountain culinary spectacle can be a ticket to fame and fortune - perhaps joining event stars such as Jacques Pepin, Thomas Keller, Emeril Lagasse and Mario Batali.

BRADFORD THOMPSON - Bradford Thompson, named by Food & Wine magazine as one of 10 Best New Chefs in 2004, prepares his delectable slow-cooked jerk pork sandwiches at this year's Food & Wine Classic in Aspen, Colo. PULLED PORK - Pork shoulder rests overnight in a jerk sauce marinade, then is slow-cooked until tender and succulent. A simple roll and fresh avocado are all that are needed to complete this yummy little sandwich. CNS Photo. Chef Bradford Thompson, who recently finished his second tour at Aspen, is well positioned to take his place among the cooking elite.

Thompson's first invitation to Aspen came in 2004 when he was selected as one of the 10 Best New Chefs by Food & Wine magazine. Every year, the magazine invites its chef selections from around the country to attend the Classic - but there are strings attached. Each must cook a special dinner for elite foodies and then show their stuff by preparing, plating and serving more than 900 guests at a gala celebration.

Food & Wine magazine said that Thompson earned his way into the select 10 because "he's in full control of every ingredient on his French-American menu - enhancing the simplest dishes with smart flourishes."

He learned his trade by working in some of the most revered kitchens in America, including Daniel and Cafe Boulud. But it was in 2002, when he became Chef de Cuisine at Mary Elaine's in Scottsdale, Ariz., that he came into prominence. In 2006 he was named the Best Chef in the Southwest by the James Beard Foundation.

THE DISH

This year, Thompson's ticket to Aspen was as special chef for All-Clad cookware in the Grand Tasting tent. Instead of making small plates for hundreds of hungry partygoers, he fed pulled pork to more than 2,000 attendees as they circulated the giant tents munching with one hand and sipping wine in the other.

For his slow-cooked jerk pork - an event favorite - Thompson took the pork butt (shoulder) to a new level by marinating it overnight in jerk sauce and slow cooking it for nine hours.

THE WINE

Beer is a sure favorite with spicy dishes like pulled pork, but there are wines that would go as well with this savory dish - such as a nice dry, crisp sauvignon blanc or even a cold fruit-forward rose. But the best bet is a multilayered red that tackles the spice and pork flavors head-on: the complex and delicious Ferrari-Carano 2003 Tresor Alexander Valley ($60).

The blend is from four top red wine varietals grown in the Alexander Valley of Sonoma, cabernet franc, petit verdot, malbec and cabernet sauvignon. "Tresor" means treasure, which certainly describes this rich layered wine. It is a luscious, silky wine with dark berry, chocolate and spice flavors and excellent acidity that provides a clean, satisfying finish.

LOW/SLOW-COOKED JERK PORK

Juice of 2 oranges

1 (1-inch) piece ginger, grated

2 tablespoons Jule's Gourmet Jerk or other jerk sauce available at most specialty food markets

2 carrots, cut in large dice

1/4 cup ketchup

1 cup water or beer

1 (8- to 12-pound) pork shoulder, split into 3 or 4 pound pieces

Salt and pepper, to taste

Avocados, for garnish

Lime juice, for garnish

Yields 32 to 48 servings.

In large bowl, combine orange juice, ginger, jerk sauce, carrots, ketchup, and beer or water. Marinate pork in liquid overnight in a nonreactive bowl or dish.

Remove pork pieces from marinade. Season to taste with salt and paper. In saute pan over high heat sear pork pieces for about 3 minutes per side. Allow to cool slightly and drain excess fat from pan.

Place marinade ingredients into slow cooker with heat on low setting. Place pork over marinade and cook for 9 hours.

Remove meat from crockpot and allow it to stand for 20 minutes. Slice or chop meat thinly.

While meat sets, place liquid from crockpot into blender and blend until fully combined. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Pour sauce over sliced meat and keep in warm pan until ready to serve.

Serve on simple white bread rolls or hamburger buns. Garnish with mashed, ripe avocado seasoned to taste with salt, pepper and lime juice.

- Adapted from Bradford Thompson's recipe.

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