

At Two Urban Licks in Atlanta, a 14-foot-tall rotisserie dominates the dining room.



DRAWN TO THE *Flame*

From floor-to-ceiling rotisseries to hot-rock tabletop cookers, equipment takes center stage in exhibition cooking

BY DEB NORTH

The firetower that commands diners' attention at the super-hip Two Urban Licks in Atlanta takes exhibition cooking to bold new heights. In chef Scott Serpas' open-spaced Concentrics Restaurants concept, the 14-foot-tall wood-fired rotisserie with immense hovering hood is the showpiece for the operation's fiery American regional cooking.

"The flame-show adds great aesthetic value to the dining experience; it's something you don't see every day," says Serpas.

Indeed, only a few chefs across the country have a similar configuration in their restaurants, and for good reason. Behind the scenes at Two Urban Licks, challenges mount in keeping up with guest counts that can exceed 800 covers on weekends and 450 on weeknights.

Serpas' dishes combine the best of his New Orleans heritage with a love for Southwest heat and a dedication to the boldest seasonal flavors, creating what he calls "Southern regional, urban honky-tonk cuisine." He features a range of small plates for sharing and a robust round of entrées focused on fire-roasted meats, fish and vegetables. The custom-made rotisserie is a workhorse

with a built-in wood-burning oven deck at the bottom, all perfectly calibrated to execute the tight but trendy menu.

"We have to plan ahead on rotisserie specials in order to execute on our volume," says Serpas. "We have to think about same-day service as well as three days out."

He points out that for larger cuts of meat, such as pork shoulder or leg, preparation includes brining, rubbing or

QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶ How the right equipment can turn exhibition cooking into destination dining
- ▶ Towering rotisseries, hot volcanic rock and flaming woks — equipment that makes dining an interactive experience
- ▶ Kitchen skills, space, maintenance and other points to consider when taking on exhibition-style dining



CITY WOK



HOT ROCK

The Hot Rock brings the sizzle to the table at Michele's in Dover, Del.

seasoning and tying the meats onto the skewer well in advance of service, since they are the night's showpiece. Roasted rabbit presents well on the rotisserie but requires prepping much closer to service time.

Serpas also has to calculate ahead to have enough flavorful leftovers for filling nightly specials such as ravioli or quesadillas. "A big part of my job is product utilization — and then making the menu interesting enough to captivate the audience," he notes.

AS THE TOWER TURNS

The firetower comprises large, 4-foot-tall stainless-steel skewers and pins that hold product in place as motorized gears turn the wheel at specified intervals, resulting in even cooking of like-sized items. Both heat and weight factor into the equipment's wear-and-tear; the skewers tend to warp or break and need to be retooled or replaced about once a year, while the gas pipes are prone to warping after long service times.

Because heat rises, the motor at the top of the rotisserie also requires yearly replacement. Everyday cleaning is necessary to remove grease build-up and to retain the firetower's shiny appearance.

Revolving rotisserie items on Two Urban Licks' menu include appetizers of lamb lollipops with grape-chile jam and goat cheese as well as dry-rub Texas baby back ribs with grapefruit coleslaw. Fire-roasted entrées feature the use of whole chicken, pork shoulder, prime

rib, beef brisket, leg of lamb, whole salmon and often the chef's choice of roasted vegetables. Entrée standouts are skirt steak with herb-whipped potatoes, local peppers and chimichurri; open-faced ravioli with slow-roasted pork, pork jus and wild mushrooms; and pulled chicken enchiladas with poblano jack cheese and pico de gallo salad.

To achieve a distinct flavor profile in his rotisserie fare, Serpas uses only local hickory wood for the firetower, which he is fortunate to source consistently and in big enough quantities to keep up with Two Urban Licks' tremendous volume.

"We get good smoke from hickory, as opposed to pine or maple," says Serpas, explaining that pine and maple tend to hold too much moisture, which is counter-productive to creating heat. "Guests enjoy the smell and taste of hickory; it has mass appeal, and we can get it year-round."

SELL THE SIZZLE

A recent restaurant renovation at Michele's in the Dover Downs Hotel & Casino in Dover, Del., takes the notion of exhibition cooking even closer to the tables.

"We wanted to change our menu to be fresh and different, with plate ware and unique service ware," says Tara Kazimir, chef de cuisine.

Kazimir researched Hot Rock systems online, where she found the website for the San Jose, Calif.-based company. Her research also turned up plenty of compelling reasons to try the concept in her operation.

First, she discovered there were no other Hot Rock systems in use in her geographic area; there are only 25 installations in the entire United States and just 300 worldwide. And the excitement and entertainment value that Hot Rock brings to the table were a definite selling point. She also found Hot Rock is as easy to install as it is for diners to use.

The setup includes an electric Hot Rock oven filled with volcanic rock and situated in the back of the house; any typical restaurant kitchen could handle this unit. The oven is set to 400 degrees Celsius, which heats the easy-to-clean volcanic rocks.

For service, the Hot Rock is placed on a metal plate, centered on a specially designed

white platter. The kitchen staff sears the protein on the rock, surrounds it with side dishes of potatoes, seasonal vegetables and a complementary sauce. The completed platter is then sent out to the guest, where the protein continues to sizzle at the table, making the last bite as hot as the first.

At Michele's, the Hot Rock system cranks out four core menu items: a 14-ounce prime rib-eye, an 8-ounce center-cut filet mignon, jumbo Gulf shrimp and sea scallops and a wild Alaska salmon fillet.

Whatever the protein, Kazimir recommends only a sprinkling of sea salt as seasoning and uses no oil or fat for cooking. Guests customize their entrées with a choice of four sauces: garlic, herb demi-glace, mesquite barbecue or sesame ginger.

"Shrimp and scallops are our best seller, with the filet mignon a close second," says Kazimir. "People are excited because it makes their regular meal an experience."

FAST AND FURIOUS

A lightning-paced, exhibition-style kitchen takes center stage at City Wok, a California multi-unit created by CEO Stuart Davis in 1990. For this cook-to-order, fast-casual concept, the flaming wok is key, as are the skilled chefs who work two woks at once in a bright open space, literally firing out authentic Chinese dishes such as Kung Pao Chicken, Moo Goo Gai Pan and Mongolian Beef.

"It's organized chaos, and that's the way we like it," says Davis.

Ticket times run fast and furiously, with many items prepared while guests look on, and are complete in three to four minutes, keeping pace with a bustling dine-in atmosphere and a lucrative take-out business.

"We think we fill a unique category with a fast-casual look but with full service," says Davis. Efficiency is key, and Davis favors a 2,500 square-foot floor plan with a manageable 80 seats. The extremely prompt service brings hot, wok-fired food to tables quickly, avoiding as much heat loss as possible.

Davis was sold on the concept of ultra-fast full service because he believes that when dining out, people want to be served and not made to stand in lines.

Naturally, stir-fry dishes make up the majority of City Wok's menu. The wok of choice is the Turbo Wok from Raven Range in Vancouver, British Columbia. Temperatures reach 500 to 600 degrees F, which sears in aromatics and flavors. These ultra-hot woks are used for both on-the-spot cooking and slower preparations, such as simmering fresh stocks daily for soups.

City Wok employs a traditional cooking style of blanching vegetables before tossing them into the wok with aromatics and the finishing sauces. Davis prefers to go light on the sauces but high on flavor, depending on the particular caramelization that wok heat brings to ingredients, combined with fresh aromatics that are heated just enough to let their flavors and essential oils bloom.

"We are very cognizant of flavor profiles," he says, explaining that menu inspirations tend to follow an East-meets-West convergence without trying to "Americanize" Chinese food. "The combination of different flavors is what Chinese cooking is all about," notes Davis.

"People find [our food] amazingly addictive," he adds, citing a barbecued-pork appetizer made with pork roasted in a Chinese barbecue oven. To order, the pork is portioned, dredged in sweet barbecue sauce and fired on the char-grill to achieve a perfect exterior crust. Just before plating, the pork is brushed with honey and served with hot mustard for dipping.

In addition to the exhibition cachet of City Wok, part of the fun comes from small packages. More than 80 percent of the menu is available in half orders, which encourages people to try different things and share, family-style.

"We try to be a very food-centric concept, where people are blown away by the freshness and flavor," says Davis.

In other words, seeing is believing, and where there are flames, steam and sizzle, there is sure to be flavor. ☺

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► **BREAKTHROUGH:** Even a small window to the kitchen can capture some of the behind-the-scenes excitement

► **SIZZLE SELLS:** Don't rule out small-scale ways to bring an exhibition thrill to the dining room, like hot stones and sizzling platters