

Charcoal

Why are chefs and mixologists across the country heading to the dark side? // By Amy Paturel

When Leigh Lacap, lead bartender at Campfire in San Diego, walked into a Venice Beach, California, hotspot for a little food inspiration, he was struck by the sight of a glass of jet-black elixir gliding through the dining room on a tray. The fabled Midnight Margarita was the first time Lacap had seen a pitch-black cocktail.

“It was so sexy and exotic, I immediately hit the bar and asked the bartender, how?” he says. The answer? Activated charcoal.

Made by heating coconut shells, wood and other plant materials to astronomically high temperatures, charcoal is gaining superfood status for its purification properties, among other perks. Like most “hot” ingredients, charcoal first debuted on the health-food circuit in the form of fresh-pressed juices and smoothies, particularly of the detox variety. More recently, it has been cropping up in culinary applications from pizza dough to pie à la mode, mostly for its uncanny ability to turn foods as black as night.

To capitalize on its visual heat, chefs and mixologists across the country are coming up with ways to incorporate activated charcoal into menus. You can get charcoal in your cocktail, folded into pizza dough (which makes it a stark backdrop for mozzarella cheese) or whipped into ice cream for a sweet-meets-tough mashup.

But, according to Lacap, altering a dish’s (or drink’s) flavor profile isn’t the goal with activated charcoal. Instead, chefs and bartenders are turning to the darker side of culinary experimentation for intrigue and fun. Charcoal adds personality to a dish, an element of a surprise, and transforms even simple dishes (hamburgers, chicken and waffles) into veritable conversation starters. So it’s no surprise that the Specialty Food Association Trendspotter Panel predicted activated charcoal as one of the top 10 food trends for 2018.

What it is

Activated charcoal is not the same as the standard charcoal you buy at Lowe’s or ground-up leftover coals from a beachside barbecue—and it’s not the same as eating the charred layer on top of overdone toast. Instead, activated charcoal comes from burning certain kinds of wood—bamboo, birch, balsam and poplar are among the most popular—then oxidizing it. The particles remaining are almost pure carbon, giving it the ability to suck up moisture and chemicals.

In that way, charcoal can also be used on the farm. Chef John Mooney of Bidwell in Washington, D.C., chars sticks and branches to purify captured rainwater in his Hawaii orchard. “It’s a full-circle approach to sustainable farming,” he says.

But using charcoal to draw out impurities is hardly new. Charcoal showed up in biscuits in the 1800s, and it has a storied past as a medical treatment. In fact, it has long been a



Charcoal Waffles

Eric Johnson, Chef/Owner
Stateside
Seattle

2½ cups all-purpose flour, sifted
4 T. sugar
2 t. baking powder
½ t. salt
¼ cup activated charcoal powder
3 egg yolks
2 cups milk
½ cup melted butter
3 egg whites

1. Sift together flour, sugar, baking powder and salt; lightly add charcoal powder using a whisk.
2. In bowl, beat egg yolks; add milk and butter. Add sifted dry ingredients.
3. In small bowl, beat egg whites to thick foam. Add gently to preparation.



Charred Cactus

Leigh Lacap, Lead Bartender
Campfire
San Diego

2 oz. activated charcoal tequila
0.75 oz. charred nopales syrup
0.25 oz. peach puree
0.75 oz. fresh lime juice

Method: Pour activated charcoal tequila, nopales syrup, peach puree and lime juice into cocktail shaker. Add ice; shake. Strain over fresh rocks in rimmed rocks glass.

Note: The charred cactus cocktail pays homage to San Diego food culture and the mighty taco with Campfire's use of nopales. Lead bartender Leigh Lacap and his team grill the cleaned cactus paddles over red oak until they blacken and are fork-tender. The cooked cactus is then boiled and simmered in sugar and water before blending. They pair the tart green-bell-pepper flavor of the cactus with a white peach puree before mixing with charcoal tequila and fresh-squeezed lime. The savory qualities are accented with a green salt rim made from dehydrated sorrel leaves blended with kosher salt. Finally, it's garnished with tart, citrusy micro sorrel.

Charcoal beauty basics

In addition to food and drink, charcoal is making its way into the beauty space. Appearing in products ranging from antiaging face creams to deodorizing foot masks, activated charcoal purportedly draws out toxins, softens skin and repairs tissue. The Crème Shop, for example, has a full line of charcoal products, including charcoal towelettes (to remove oil, dirt and makeup), an overnight gel mask that seals in moisture while quieting troubled skin, a "little black mask," which draws out blackheads, whiteheads, dirt and excess oil, and a sock-like deodorizing foot mask infused with activated charcoal.

staple in hospital emergency rooms as an antidote for food poisoning and drug toxicity, among other ailments. More recently, activated charcoal has been touted for everything from brightening teeth to tempering body odor.

On the culinary landscape, it adds a striking hue and a hint of smokiness to entrees, desserts and drinks. And while charcoal doesn't have a pronounced flavor profile, it does offer a unique texture ranging from grainy to powdery. Still, few chefs and mixologists turn to the trendy ingredient for its health perks, or even its textural effects. Instead, they're using it for theatrics.

What it does

America's chefs and bartenders are exploring the smoky, earthy notes of coal (both activated and run-of-the-mill) to tap into a few hot trends—bitterness, playful presentation and umami.

"The powder format can enrich the texture of food slightly, but the visual effect is stunning. It adds an element of surprise to sauces, too, much like squid ink," says Lacap, citing Campfire's chef who turns scallops black with activated charcoal and serves them atop toasted nori and bright-green garlic risotto.

Some say it tastes like the smell of summer barbecue. The smoky char you get from cooking a burger over open coals is finding its way into vegetables, oil infusions, even fresh loaves of dough. At Bidwell, for example, Mooney uses a charcoal bun to elevate his humble veggie burger to superfood status while simultaneously hammering home its barbecue flavor.

And while seeing a jet-black burger bun can be disconcerting, activated charcoal's striking versatility and subtle, smoky flavor lend a certain cachet to standard fare. A bonus: Activated charcoal absorbs moisture, making it the perfect ingredient for crispier waffles and pizza, says Eric Johnson, chef/owner of Stateside in Seattle, which has become renowned for serving jet-black waffles.

Although many people associate blackened food with cancer-causing chemicals, charcoal made from coconut shells and wood isn't subject to detrimental health effects. It's different

from consuming protein- or fat-rich foods that have been charred or burnt. In fact, experts say activated charcoal helps preserve fresh foods, cleanse the body of toxins and alleviate post-meal bloat.

It's perfect for pizza, which can make people with sensitive stomachs queasy. The charcoal binds to everything, counteracts the acidic effects of the tomato sauce, sausage and pepperoni, and kicks it down a notch.

Take Bidwell's Moon Pie, for example. The Chicago-style pizza boasts sausage, pepperoni and mushrooms. "Even though I use all-natural ingredients with no preservatives, the fat and spice can be hard for some people to digest," says Mooney. "Pair it with charcoal dough, though, and diners sidestep the tummy troubles." They might detect a hint of earthiness on the palate, but otherwise, it's almost flavorless.

Cooking with charcoal

Working with charcoal isn't rocket science. Just burn your favorite natural ingredients beyond recognition—far past the degree to which you've ever burned

anything before, suggests executive chef Jacob Versteegen of LondonHouse in Chicago, who started playing with charcoal about eight years ago when he was working at a restaurant that didn't have a grill.

"The chef would take herbs that were past their prime, things like leeks, parsley and thyme, and make them into a powder," says Versteegen. "We would roll our steaks in the dust, and it imparted this smoky, herbaceous flavor without putting fire to it. Then, when you cut the meat, it's a beautiful red color in the middle but this dark-black outside."

Not a fan of burning vegetables, herbs or wood? All it takes to add a whole new color to the rainbow on your plate (or in your glass) is a bag of food-grade activated charcoal, which you can buy at specialty food stores or on Amazon.com. Purists purchase activated charcoal made from certain materials. Some even select charcoal from a specific type of tree that burns at incredibly high temperatures to eliminate any off-flavors or impurities.

Versteegen uses the dust in his deviled egg flight. The Russian egg boasts charcoal, vodka, osetra caviar and creme fraiche. Mooney displaces a portion of the flour with charcoal powder in recipes ranging from empanadas to flour tortillas. And Lacap drops it in tequila and uses it to color salts and garnishes such as coconut flakes to mimic ash.

"Charcoal adds mystery and whimsy. It's shocking and exciting. And, it makes a big impact with a little dusting," says Lacap. "You can shake it into cocktails a la minute and color syrups with it." The cocktail tastes like a classic, but its appearance is radically different.

When working with activated charcoal, there are a few basic rules: Start with small amounts, because it acts like dye—it spreads, says Lacap. Use a steady hand, take shallow breaths and add a dash of patience. You don't have to be a seasoned chef, but it does take practice.

"It's a superfine powder, so if you breathe on it, it will go everywhere," cautions Johnson. And if you ingest too much, it dries out your mouth with notes of bitter and smoke. But visually, it's magic.

It's a seamless way to add color to the plate without dramatically altering a dish's signature flavors. And when you add it to a recipe, diners will take notice. There's no doubt that the appetite for charcoal isn't dissipating. So the next time you burn your signature dish to a crisp, take a bow. You're on trend with one of the hottest crazes in the food and drink business. ■



Russian-style Tea Eggs

Jacob Versteegen, Executive Chef
LondonHouse
Chicago

12 eggs
2 oz. activated charcoal
1 oz. vodka
2 oz. Earl Grey creme loose leaf tea
6 oz. creme fraiche
1 oz. osetra caviar
Finishing salt

1. Hard-boil 6 eggs. Cool completely. Softly crack eggs along all edges to create spider-web pattern.
2. In separate pot, make tea with loose leaves in 3 cups water. Mix vodka with charcoal to make a paste; whisk into tea.
3. Submerge eggs in tea; refrigerate overnight.
4. Separate remaining 6 eggs into yolks and whites. Whisk yolks until smooth. Seal in vacuum bag; drop into 143°F water for four hours. Chill immediately.
5. Carefully peel submerged eggs without breaking whites under shell. Cut in half; remove and discard yolk. Fill cavity with circulated yolk and creme fraiche. Top with caviar and finishing salt.

A smoking gun

- Even if you're not keen on burning staple ingredients beyond recognition, you can still play with the color and flavor of charcoal. Just use a smoking gun. This gadget not only offers special effects, it's also an easy way to char your food without it ever hitting the grill.
- Bolster the oaky flavor of whiskey or mescal by smoking cocktails.
- Seal kosher or flaky salt in a bag and insert the smoking gun for homemade smoked sea salt.
- Smoke cheeses ranging from Gouda to manchego. And because the smoke is cold, you can even smoke softer cheeses such as goat cheese or ricotta, which ordinarily wouldn't hold up under heat.
- Infuse popcorn with a smoky char for a campfire-like snack.
- Fill the smoking gun with herbs such as rosemary, thyme and parsley—instead of just wood chips—to impart added flavor to your favorite dishes.

Don't go overboard

While activated charcoal binds to chemical toxins to flush them out, it binds to nutrients, too. Get too much, and you could compromise your nutrient status or interfere with the way your body absorbs medication. It can make blood pressure medication, and even birth control pills, less effective.