



AN UNCOMMON SPICE

Follow the guidance of chefs who use Kentucky’s “salt and pepper”—bourbon—in the kitchen to bring out surprising flavors in food.

BY FRED MINNICK



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DISH



*“Gamebirds have mild flavor and bourbon adds some smoky tones, making the combo a great marriage.”
—Anthony Lamas*

Great food sends chills down my spine, puts tingles in my belly, and makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck, almost like a daydream. When Chef Anthony Lamas of Louisville, Kentucky, cooks with bourbon, I taste flavors I’ve never found in food before. He uses my beloved whiskey as an uncommon spice with savorys, in desserts, and in gamebird preparations—but never too much and never too little.

“As far as I’m concerned, bourbon is its own food group,” says Lamas, owner of Seviche, a Latin restaurant in Louisville. “You don’t want raw alcohol flavor. You want a hint.” Fortunately, you can find bourbon in every zip code. So cook away with a versatile ingredient that in Kentucky is a little like adding salt and pepper to your recipes.

Just ask Lamas: “I’ll introduce bourbon to grits, Apple bread pudding, macadamia ice cream, mint pesto lamb, shrimp with bourbon orange glaze, Pineapple, ginger, sesame soy broth . . .”

Lamas isn’t Kentucky’s most-famous chef or most-celebrated Latino cook, but he could be—and is ascending to stardom. A former Future Farmers of America member who showed cattle in California, Lamas, 45, adhered to the farm-to-table philosophy long before it was cool. But he did so working in his own kitchen, instead of pursuing megabrand hot sauce or TV deals. Lamas is a throwback to old-school chefs who cooked their guests’ food rather than hiring sous chefs to do all the chef work.

Lamas has somehow managed to run a kitchen plus attend to business matters and still win the 2011 competition *Extreme Chef* on the Food Network. He was featured on the Cooking Channel’s *America’s Best Bites* and is a perennial James Beard Award contender. Lamas also just launched his own drink mix, Master of Mixer Bloody Mary, and hopes to announce a new venture soon (though I couldn’t get those details out of him).

Although his career is taking off, Lamas says he was first nationally noticed when he won a Woodford Reserve bourbon cooking contest 10 years ago. Back then, this chef of Mexican and Puerto Rican heritage by way of California thought of himself as an outsider living in Kentucky. Lamas, who moved to the Bluegrass State to be with the woman who is now his wife, was a Latin chef working in a Southern town. When he entered the Woodford contest, he didn’t think he had a chance.

“I thought all these great local chefs like Dean Corbett or Jim Gerhardt would win it,” Lamas remembers. “Then, I won and that really gave me the confidence I needed.”

Since then, Lamas has quietly become one of bourbon’s greatest proponents in the kitchen. Unlike other bourbon-cooking Kentucky chefs—notably chef Ouita Michel, who represents Woodford Reserve, and chef Edward Lee, who developed a bourbon with Jefferson’s Bourbon—Lamas remains independent and cooks what he wants. Gamebirds are meant for bourbon, says Lamas, an avid quail hunter.

“Bourbon works well with gamebirds,” he says. “It matches duck, quail, and pheasant, while beef is so rich you might lose the bourbon (flavor) a little bit. Gamebirds have mild flavor and



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bourbon adds some smoky tones, making the combo a great marriage.”

Bourbon can overpower fish, he says, and chicken can be saved from boring flavor days with a shot of bourbon. But the trick is balance. Bourbon balance is certainly Lamas’ perspective. Michel explored bourbon cooking by replacing all brandy recipes with bourbon. Unlike Lamas, Michel believes, in her kitchen, the more bourbon, the better.

“The most common comment I get from people about cooking with bourbon is, ‘I can’t taste the bourbon.’ If you’re going to simmer a sauce for two hours, guess what? You’re really not going to be able to taste the bourbon a lot,” Michel says. “That’s why I finish with bourbon in a demi-glace or sauce.”

Lee sticks to younger bourbons for sweets and eight-year-old bourbons for the savory dishes. He believes the charred barrel in which bourbon ages gives the bourbon smoky notes; and the longer it sits, the smokier it gets. Lee shies away from cooking with anything older than 12 years.

“The older bourbons have all these additional nuance flavors

from the barrel char,” says Lee, a finalist on Bravo TV’s *Top Chef*, Food Network’s *Iron Chef America* winner and author of *Smoke & Pickles: Recipes and Stories from a New Southern Kitchen* (Artisan, May, 2013). “Older bourbons can’t stand out in food, because their nuances are reduced in the cooking process.”

Lamas, whose first cookbook *Southern Heat* hits stores in 2015, knows the nuances of all bourbons, too. Maker’s Mark and Woodford Reserve are sweeter, he says, and great for dessert, while Buffalo Trace’s smokier and spicy notes make it great for country ham. Lamas also loves making sauces with bourbon, especially with ginger and soy sauce. But again, he prefers a balanced approach with the bourbon pouring.

“I’ve eaten some stuff that tastes like raw whiskey. The bourbon ruined the dish,” he says. “It’s about balancing and finding the perfect marriages. Sorghum and bourbon, both from Kentucky, work great together because they are from here,” he says.

Okay, the hairs on the back of my neck are starting to stand up. I need to cook something with bourbon. Bourbon quail, anybody?

SWEET TEA QUAIL WITH BRAISED KALE AND CHIPOTLE SORGHUM BOURBON GLAZE

BRINE

(Brine quail 8 hours or overnight.)

1 gallon fresh tea
1 cup sugar
¼ cup salt
3 bay leaves
1 tablespoon peppercorns

2 ounces crushed red chili flakes
2 ounces garlic
1 cup red wine vinegar
2 ounces salt
1 large onion
1 cup diced smoked bacon

SORGHUM CHIPOTLE BOURBON GLAZE

2 cups sorghum
5 ½ ounces chipotle in adobo

¼ cup honey
½ cup bourbon

1. Remove quail from brine and pat dry.
2. Grill over charcoal for 3 minutes on each side.
3. Brush on glaze and then finish in a 450 degree oven for 3 minutes.



TUNA OLD FASHIONED

1 pound sushi grade tuna
¼ cup bluegrass soy
Juice of 3 limes
1 teaspoon chopped fresh ginger
¼ cup bourbon
1 teaspoon sambal chili
1 teaspoon sesame oil

Dice tuna into 1/8- to ¼-inch squares and refrigerate. Combine remaining ingredients and blend with the tuna.

PINEAPPLE SALSA FOR GARNISH

1 cup diced pineapple
½ cup diced tomato
Juice of 1 lime
2 tablespoon cilantro
1 teaspoon sesame oil
1 teaspoon soy
1 jalapeño diced



A HUNTER'S CHEF

At his critically acclaimed Louisville restaurant, Seviche, Chef Anthony Lamas goes out of his way to make hunters feel special. Twice a year, he accepts their gamebirds and cooks them for a private buffet. "These guys bring in stuff from all over the world," Lamas says. "I love cooking for them." Lamas has made a Saffron tomato and fennel-braised quail, duck nachos, and pheasant over Carolina Gold Rice. "I've been a hunter since I was a kid," Lamas says. "I love the purity of it all."—Fred Minnick

LAMB CHORIZO ALBONDIGAS WITH MINT CHIMICHURRI



SEASONING BLEND

1 tablespoon fresh minced garlic
1 tablespoon fresh oregano
1 teaspoon smoked paprika
1 teaspoon chili powder
1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
1 teaspoon cumin
1 teaspoon coriander
1 teaspoon black pepper
1 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes

MEATBALLS

1 pound ground lamb shoulder or leg,
proportion 2 parts lean to 1 part fat
2 tablespoons kosher salt
2 tablespoons fresh toasted bread-
crumbs
1 egg
1 tablespoon ice cold water
Zest of 2 lemons
Juice of 2 lemons

MINT CHIMICHURRI

1 cup spearmint leaves
½ cup fresh parsley
½ cup fresh cilantro
1 teaspoon crushed red pepper
Juice of 1 lemon
1 garlic clove
¼ cup olive oil
¼ cup red wine vinegar
1 tablespoon kosher salt
Puree all ingredients and chill in the
refrigerator for a half-hour.

PREPARING THE MEATBALLS:

1. In a large bowl, mix the meatball ingredients well.
2. Add the seasoning blend and integrate into the meatball mix. Allow to chill in the refrigerator for 1 hour.
3. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Roll into 2-ounce meatballs on a baking pan and place in oven for 8 to 10 minutes until browned. Serve with mint chimichurri.

CRISPY CHICKEN LIVERS WITH CARAMELIZED SHALLOTS AND PABLANO DEMI-GLACE

Serves 6 to 8

1 pound chicken livers
1 onion, caramelized
1 quart buttermilk or heavy cream

BREADING

2 cup Flour
1 tablespoon cumin
1 tablespoon coriander
1 tablespoon cayenne
1 tablespoon Kosher salt
1 tablespoon smoked paprika

1. Clean chicken livers and cut into 2 inch pieces. Soak livers in buttermilk or heavy cream, refrigerated for at least 1 hour. Remove livers from soak.
2. Toss chicken livers in flour mixture to heavily coat. Set aside on a plate. Heat canola oil or fryer to 350 degrees. Deep fry or pan fry for 2 minutes. Pull out of oil and set on paper towels to drain for 30 seconds.
3. Add caramelized onions to warm sauté pan over medium heat. Add fried chicken livers to pan and toss together for 30 seconds. Pour mixture into serving dish. Add skewers. Garnish with chopped Italian parsley or fresh oregano and sofrito for dipping.

SOFRITO

1 bell pepper
1 tomato
¼ Spanish onion
1 clove garlic
1 teaspoon achiote (also called annatto)—try the Goya Sazon seasoning.
1 teaspoon chopped fresh oregano
¼ cup olive oil
¼ cup red wine vinegar
Salt and pepper to taste
Puree in blender, refrigerate for 1 hour





SHRIMP & GRITS CHIPOTLE BOURBON ORANGE GLAZE

CHIPOTLE-ORANGE DEMI SAUCE

¼ cup Woodford Reserve bourbon
 1 onion, chopped
 1 tablespoon chopped garlic
 3 ounces chipotle in adobo
 1 cup crushed tomatoes
 1 cup ketchup
 ½ cup rice wine vinegar
 ¼ cup Worcestershire sauce
 1 cup thawed frozen orange juice concentrate
 ¼ cup honey

1 tablespoon paprika
 1 tablespoon chili powder
 1 teaspoon salt

PRAWN MARINADE

1 lemon, squeezed
 1-tablespoon fresh chopped garlic
 1-teaspoon ground oregano
 1 teaspoon ground white pepper
 1 teaspoon crushed red pepper
 1-tablespoon kosher salt
 ¼ cup olive oil

3 lbs Kentucky Fresh Water Prawns (U-10), peeled, washed, and deveined. (You may substitute large USA wild caught shrimp.)

Whisk ingredients together in bowl and add shrimp, tossing with marinade to coat. Cover and refrigerate for 2 to 4 hours.

Next, prepare the sweet corn grit cake (at right).



SMOKED CHEDDAR CHIPOTLE SWEET CORN GRIT CAKE

3 quarts of water
 ¼ cup olive oil
 1-teaspoon kosher salt
 3-quart container of Quaker Quick Grits
 1 6-oz can of chipotle chilies in Adobo
 2 pounds of smoked cheddar cut into 1-inch pieces
 1 1/4 cup of fresh raw Silver Queen Corn cut off cobs (about 4 cobs)
 ½ pound unsalted butter
 ¼ cup flour

1. Bring water, olive oil, and salt to a boil in large pot. Add grits slowly, about ¼ cup at a time continually whisking. As grits begin to thicken, add butter and

chilies. Cook for about 2 minutes and lower heat. Slowly add cheese and stir. Stir in corn and remove from heat.

2. Using a paper towel, generously grease a 1-inch half sheet pan with olive oil.

3. Pour the grit mixture into the sheet pan using a rubber spatula to get excess and spread evenly. Cover with plastic rap and refrigerate for 4 to 6 hours. (May refrigerate up to 24 hours). The mixture will coagulate.

4. Using a cookie cutter, cut the desired

shape to create your mini grit cake. Or cut small triangles using a butter knife. Dust the cake with flour and pan fry in olive oil for about 2 minutes on each side, giving the cake a slightly golden look. Place cakes on sheet pan and finish in oven at 350 for 3 to 5 minutes.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER:

Grill marinated prawns for 2 1/2 to 3 minutes on each side. Place a grit cake in the center of the plate and spoon demi sauce around the grit cake. Place 3 grilled prawns on a plate surrounding the grit cake with decorative tails toward the center.