

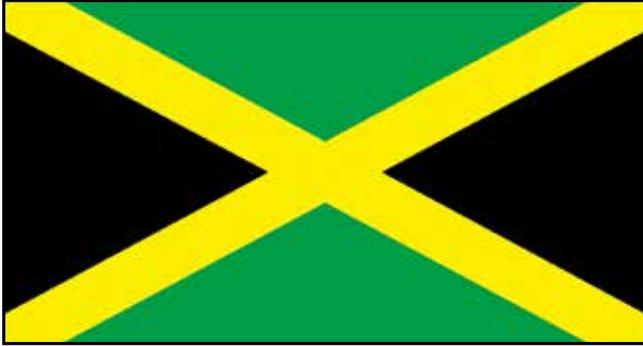
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World-class jerk

By Mike Mitchelson

Being a jerk master isn't a bad thing when it comes to barbecue.

What makes Jamaican jerk barbecue so different from other barbecue?

"Well, you smelled the stuff," said Gary Feblowitz, perhaps the most Jamaican jerk-obsessed person on the continent, whose company, Pimentowood.com, is the only U.S. importer for the pimento tree products used to create authentic Jamaican jerk barbecue.

Gary demonstrated pimento power last month in front of his Golden Valley office, smoke curling from a barrel-shaped charcoal grill. It was a rather unremarkable, low-tech piece of equipment, aside from the Jamaican flag emblazoned across the lid ("Just used some engine paint," he said), and the attached "smoke box" on one side, which produced that spicy-sweet smoke that pushed its way into the grill, and, subsequently, into the sauce-smothered chicken that was slow roasting inside.

It's true. One can smell the difference of pimento smoke from the more biting hickory or mesquite before tasting it. With Jamaican barbecue, there's the traditional rubs and sauces made with various combinations of native Jamaican ingredients, including ginger, allspice, thyme, scallions and Scotch bonnet peppers, but it's the smoke from burning pimento wood ties it together.

A piece of pimento wood on its own smells of cinnamon, cloves and perhaps a dozen other spices that make it distinctive from any other wood used for smoking. And the taste the smoke delivers? Much of the same, with the obvious "smoke-y" undertones, which surround the sauced meat, and turned the halved chickens Gary cooked tender and gushing with juices.

Jamaican barbecue's unique qualities have inspired at least



Cinematographer, jerk master and Pimentowood.com founder Gary Feblowitz.

one new local restaurant—Smalley's Caribbean Barbeque in Stillwater, one of two new ventures owned by Tim McKee and Josh Thoma (of La Belle Vie and Solera fame) and former La Belle Vie cook Shawn Smalley. Feblowitz supplies the pimento wood and other products for them. Business received a second boost from a New York Times article in July extolling the virtues of Jamaican jerk and explaining why, during the summer, smoke billows from converted oil drums throughout the Bronx. Gary's commentary was just four sentences in the article, but that increased demand for pimento wood so much he moved his garage operation into an office and warehouse.

Becoming a jerk master

Gary and his wife, Domonique, have very different lives outside of Jamaican jerk barbecue. Or, one could say those other lives led them to Jamaica. The well-traveled pair is also the team operating HD Wave Productions, a television documentary production company. Gary began his filming career at WCCO TV and won 14 Emmy awards for his work. He began shooting his own documentaries in 1997,

including the first live footage of Sumatran tigers in the wild. He shot the pilot for Andrew Zimmern's Bizarre Foods in Thailand, and three seasons' worth of Food 911 with Tyler Florence.

It was in Jamaica about 10 years ago that Gary and Domonique got married, and in the process discovered they loved Jamaican barbecue. When they returned to Minnesota for their wedding reception, they realized how much they would miss it.

"The reception was on a boat on Lake Minnetonka," Domonique recalled. "We had ordered jerk chicken as the entrée, and it was chicken breast with pepper on it. We were mortified."

With each return to Jamaica, the Feblowitzes tried to figure out the flavor combinations. But no amount of spices they brought back and experimented with could duplicate exactly what was cooked on the island. They finally determined it was the native pimento wood used on the fire.

The experimentation turned into obsession, and, throughout the decade of perfecting authentic jerk recipes in the Midwest and building the successful HD Wave Productions, the Feblowitzes also managed to clear the red tape and delays of the U.S. and Jamaican governments to import pimento tree products into the United States. And when the Feblowitzes say the entire tree, they mean just that—not a scrap is wasted, all the wood, leaves and berries are used. (The pimento berry, which can be dried and used whole or ground into allspice, have been used for centuries as medicinal aids. For cooking, the soaked leaves form the foundation for cooking, the berries can be part of the jerk rub or sauce, or thrown onto the hot coals for additional smoke flavoring.)

"We take all of the tree when we take it," Gary said, adding that the trees cut down are past their seven-year fruiting stage, and would be cut and burned anyway. We also plant three trees for each one we take. It's a very sustainable operation."

With HD Wave's success, most of the profits of the pimento wood business go back to the pimento farmers in Jamaica. "The people in Jamaica work really hard, and do this well," Domonique said.

At the moment, Smalley's is the only restaurant using the product in wood-fired grills, but Gary is counting on the increased notoriety from media attention and their booth in the International Bazaar at the State Fair to increase demand. He's trademarked a pimento-wood cooking plank and is working on manufacturing pimento wood charcoal.

The products were only available online, but with building interest, it will be available retail at Kitchen Window stores. "We're experimenting with that (retail)," Gary said, adding that it's a higher-cost product than more traditional wood for the grill. "It's still very much a gourmet thing. It'll never be a Wal-



Gary and Domonique Feblowitz.

Mart kind of product. It's not for everybody, more the serious barbequers."

Spreading the word (or taste) of authentic Jamaican jerk can be a challenge—some of that authentic heat needs to be watered down for the uninitiated. But there are enough jerk recipes to please all pallets—mild and hot—but all with that unique notes of Jamaican allspice and cinnamon, and infused with the spicy smoke of pimento wood. "Jerk chicken to Jamaicans is like a hamburger to us," Gary said. "They laugh when you ask what the recipe is—there are many, each family has one, so you're always trying to perfect it."

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