

WHISKEY

CHEFS ARE FINDING
MORE WAYS THAN EVER TO INCLUDE
A FAVORITE DISTILLED BEVERAGE IN THEIR COOKING.

BY CAROLYN WALKUP



Whiskey is not just for sipping anymore. Chefs are bringing it into the kitchen and using this favorite libation in a slew of dishes.

Albert Schmid, CEC, CCE, CCA, beverage management chair at Sullivan University's National Center for Hospitality Studies in Louisville, Ky., sees a marked increase in this trend nationwide. "It adds a new dimension and can go in any direction," says Schmid, author of *The Kentucky Bourbon Cookbook* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2010).

"The quality of whiskey from craft and small-batch distillers has been raised over the last decade," Schmid notes. He finds it a natural ingredient to use in cuisines from Southern to Asian and French.

IN THE KITCHEN

Schmid recommends substituting bourbon for brandy in many French-based recipes. Bourbon's additional flavor nuances from charred-wood barrel aging add more complexity to a dish than brandy does, he says.

Some of the recipes from his cookbook illustrate the range of bourbon's culinary possibilities. Examples are apricot and Kentucky bourbon grilled chicken, pan-seared salmon with chipotle honey-lime bourbon glaze and Kentucky bourbon brownies.

For the chicken preparation, Schmid first makes a marinade of bourbon, Dijon mustard, brown sugar, soy sauce and Worcestershire sauce, in which he marinates boneless, skinless chicken breasts for a few hours.

When the chicken is on the grill, he bastes it frequently with a sauce of apricot preserves, white wine vinegar, Worcestershire sauce, Dijon mustard, honey and red pepper flakes. A garnish of toasted almonds completes the dish.

Ingredients in Schmid's chipotle honey-lime bourbon glaze, which he features with pan-seared salmon, are bourbon, honey, chipotle chili powder and lime juice. He drizzles the pan sauce over the salmon and garnishes it with candied lime zest.

Whiskey enhances the flavor of mahi mahi at O'Donovan's in Chicago. Chef Victor DeLeon reduces the sauce in the pan, seasons it with fresh-ground pepper and bay leaves, and adds a touch of cream and butter at the end. He serves it with grilled seasonal vegetables.

At Bristol Bar & Grille in Louisville, Chris Ross, executive chef, does a bourbon-braised pork shoulder served with roasted garlic smashed potatoes, slow-cooked collard greens and fried sweet potatoes. Ross prefers bourbon to wine for its greater complexity of flavors.

After roasting the pork shoulder, Ross deglazes the pan with bourbon and bastes the roast. The sauce is a classic veal demi-glace, but with bourbon instead of red wine. He recommends using a good-quality bourbon, although he admits that "even the cheaper ones are still pretty good to cook with."

Ross also makes bourbon pan-seared sea scallops with grits, bourbon barbecue sauce and crispy fried onions.

PROTEIN POWER

The innovative small plates menu at Acorn in Denver includes executive chef/owner Steve Redzikowski's maple whiskey tomato sauce with oak-grilled pork belly, figs, Fresno pepper jelly and Thai basil. The chef recommends any kind of bourbon combined with maple syrup, brown sugar and organic heirloom tomatoes.

Giving his Moxie/bourbon-barbecued steak tips a Maine accent is Brandon Blethen, executive chef of Robert's Maine Grill in Kittery, Maine. Moxie, a locally produced soda similar to root beer,

Opposite: Bourbon-braised pork shoulder at Bristol Bar & Grille.

IN THE PANTRY whiskey

adds sweetness and spice to the barbecue sauce. Blethen marinates the steak tips cut from the tenderloin in the sauce before grilling them. He serves them with mashed potatoes and vegetables.

Whiskey marinades and sauces flavor a variety of proteins on menus all over Chicago. At Hubbard Inn, Bob Zrenner, executive chef, makes braised chicken thighs, a dish he varies with the seasons. He prefers the thigh to the breast because of its more intense flavor and better ability to retain natural juices.

Year-round, Zrenner's basic preparation is to season the thighs and brown them in whiskey with a mirepoix and fennel. He deglazes the pan with bourbon or rye, then adds enough chicken stock to cover the thighs. He simmers them in the oven till tender. In winter, Zrenner may add pickled peaches or other fruit for tartness.

Squab grilled over whiskey-soaked applewood is a specialty at *Mélisse* in Santa Monica, Calif. Chef/owner Josiah Citrin uses an economical brand of bourbon to soak the wood, and does the same preparation in the fall with wood pigeon. He ups the quality of bourbon to a 12-year-old variety for his poaching liquid, and serves the squab with charred cabbage, a puree of kohlrabi and whiskey/vanilla-poached quince.

DRESS IT UP

Some chefs also incorporate whiskey into salad dressings, as does Brian-Lee Steinsiek, sous chef at *Bourbon House* in New



Orleans, with the Maker's Mark house salad. Using a good-quality bourbon on a clean ingredient such as lettuce allows its purest flavors to emerge, Steinsiek says.

The dressing combines bourbon with shallots, garlic, dried red onion, extra virgin olive oil, local cane sugar vinegar, Creole mustard and wildflower honey. Finished with a pinch of parsley and salt and pepper, the dressing adorns a simple salad of chopped romaine, heirloom cherry tomatoes, sliced cucumber and shaved red onion. Ground Romano is sprinkled on top.

LET'S DO BRUNCH... AND DESSERT

Bourbon for brunch could become a new trend, considering that some playful chefs like to mix it into their French toast.

Two examples are a Scotch whiskey French toast with butter-scotch sauce at *LAVO* in New York, courtesy of John DeLoach, executive chef. Bourbon-custard French toast is part of the Texas Benedict plate at *Delicatessen* in New York. Michael Ferraro, executive chef/partner, loads the plate with barbecue pulled pork, poached eggs, Hollandaise and the toast.

Bourbon in desserts is a no-brainer, from whiskey buttermilk pie at Louisville's *Main Street Café* to bourbon pecan pie and bourbon macarons at *River Oaks* in Memphis, Tenn., to a Nutella ice cream sundae at *LAVO* in Las Vegas.

At *River Oaks*, chef José Gutierrez adds a little bourbon to a variety of ingredients in his macarons, which may also be flavored with orange, lemon, hazelnut, pecan or walnut, dark cherry, peach or mint.

Jack Daniels or any comparable oak-aged whiskey works well in *LAVO*'s Nutella ice cream sundae, according to chef Marc Marrone. "Jack Daniels is my personal choice because of its vanilla notes," he says. ■



Above: *River Oaks* serves a bourbon pecan pie. Top right: Pan-seared salmon with honey/lime bourbon glaze.

CHICAGO-BASED WRITER CAROLYN WALKUP SPECIALIZES IN FOOD, BEVERAGE AND RESTAURANT SUBJECTS OF NATIONAL INTEREST FOR TRADE AND CONSUMER MEDIA.