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KC man's rum cake wins acclaim

By ANNE BROCKHOFF
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Anyone looking for Craig Adcock last October would probably have found him baking rum cakes. Not cake. Cakes. Hundreds and hundreds of cakes as Adcock ramped up Jude's Kansas City Rum Cake for the holidays.

His breakneck pace has so far paid off: Adcock expects to sell about 2,000 rum cakes this year, more than double his 2009 output. The evening I stopped by his rented kitchen in Lenexa, the air was heavy with a bakery sweetness.

Bundt pans coated with butter and Missouri pecans lined a worktable, and rum syrup simmered on the stove. Adcock, his long hair tucked into a net, hoisted a commercial-size mixing bowl and doled out pale yellow batter as Dr. John played on his iPod.

Things weren't going his way, though. The rotating racks on the large oven weren't rotating. Adcock can fit 10 cakes in the smaller conventional oven, but only if they're turned partway through baking. The temperature on the big convection oven was set too high, and a batch burned.

"Those are honestly the first cakes I've burned," Adcock said with an easy smile and a shake of his head. "I think we'll just stop there," he later told his assistant, Marisela Ladron, even though they'd finished only a few dozen cakes.

Was he frustrated or stressed? Probably, but you couldn't tell. It turns out Adcock is known as much for his cool as he is for rum cakes, which he sells online at judesrumcake.com.

"I don't get wrapped around the axle about too many things," he said.

Premium spirits

Adcock has always cooked, but food is just now starting to pay the bills. He grew up in Mississippi and spent 12 years in the National Guard. That's where he met his wife and "wizard behind the curtain," Teresa Erb. The couple lived in El Paso, Texas, and then moved to Kansas City in 1996.

He worked for Xerox, Pitney Bowes and Sprint, competing in Kansas City Barbeque Society contests on the side. He started Belly Up Bar-B-Que, a gourmet barbecue and grilling catering company, in 2005. When clients asked for dessert, he made rum cake.

Demand grew, so he created Jude's in 2007. A year later, he quit the corporate world to cook full time.

So, who's Jude? She's Adcock's mother-in-law, Judy Erb, of Overland Park. Adcock uses her recipe; Erb doesn't recall where she got it, only that it originally called for Bacardi rum and boxed cake mix.

Her family tinkered with it over the years, even devising a way to glaze the cake before removing it from the pan, rather than soaking it afterward, giving the exterior a crystalline crunch. Adcock played with the rums, trying 10 or so brands before settling on Rhum Barbancourt Reserve Speciale 8-year-old. It's a weighty Haitian rum distilled from fresh sugar cane juice and aged in French oak barrels.

At about \$26 a bottle, it isn't cheap, but Adcock refuses to downgrade. "The day you start sacrificing quality, you turn into everybody else," said Adcock, who adds rum to the batter and simmers it with sugar and water to

make the glaze.

The result is “just the best damned rum cake ever,” David Rosengarten wrote in the July issue of the Rosengarten Report. In a later interview, the cookbook author and Food Network personality called it “insanely buttery,” with “a great deal of rum flavor.”

“To me, this is no modernity, no tweaks, no bean curd — just a real traditional rum cake that stands out from others,” Rosengarten said.

John McClure, chef and owner of Starker’s Restaurant on the Country Club Plaza, puts it more plainly.

“They’re so good. It’s like crack for a fat guy,” the robustly built chef said. “They’re moist and flavorful, complex and simple at the same time.”

Good vibrations

Adcock’s happy people enjoy his rum cakes, but he also habitually reaches out to food and wine producers whose products he likes, like Paul Lato of Paul Lato Wines on California’s central coast.

“I just called him up and said I loved his wine. I had no ulterior motive,” said Adcock, who helped Lato harvest and cooked for his crew in 2008.

Alan McClure of Patric Chocolate in Columbia, Mo., received a similar call from Adcock, who proposed they tour McClure’s facility and then head to his house to grill and “pop a few corks.” McClure said he was at first taken back by the extroverted Adcock, but the two hit it off and now regularly exchange ideas on how to develop their respective businesses.

“He’s his own character,” Alan McClure said. “I don’t know anyone else like him.”

Some friends don’t know exactly how they met Adcock, only that food, wine and music were probably involved. That was the case for Stretch, the artist who owns Grinders and Grinders West in the Crossroads Arts District and featured Adcock as guest chef at a recent beer tasting.

“I can’t even remember meeting Craig,” Stretch said. “Food was definitely a common denominator. He’s a super cool guy, very mellow.”

Food and music also merged in March, when Adcock and John McClure catered the Midwasteland Takeover showcase at the South by Southwest music festival in Austin, Texas. They set up a kitchen in a downtown alley, feeding 30 bands and countless paying customers vats of gumbo, 600 pounds of barbecue, enough biscuits and fries to soak up 15 gallons of gravy and, of course, rum cake.

It was hard, harried work, but John McClure said Adcock proved a solid partner.

“He’s not going to get flustered or rattled,” McClure said. “It’s not a live or die kind of thing for him, and that comes through. His product is just great.”

So, does Adcock ever resent rum cake for stealing limelight from his barbecue? He says no.

“I’m just grateful for everything that comes my way,” he said.

Right now that means teaming up with Christopher Elbow to occasionally feature Jude’s Rum Cake ice cream at Glacé near the Plaza and exploring restaurant possibilities with Stretch. Wooing potential hotel and cruise line customers. Expanding his line of cakes. Or maybe just popping a few corks so he can grill and chill with friends.

“I do like what I do,” Adcock said. “If you play well with most, you’re going to do OK.”

Barrel-Stave Salmon

Craig Adcock of Jude’s Kansas City Rum Cake and Belly Up Bar-B-Que created this recipe for a winemaker in Santa Maria, Calif., and it has become his signature dish. The salmon fillet is cooked over a curved stave from a used wine barrel, giving it hints of wood and fruit. It also works well with a cedar plank.

Makes 12 to 15 servings

3 1/2 pounds whole salmon fillet, boneless and skinless

Belly Up Bar-B-Que beef or seafood seasoning, or Cajun seasoning

1 cup rum (Adcock uses Rhum Barbancourt Reserve Speciale 8-year-old)

1 cup honey, preferably local

Juice from 1 1/2 limes

2 tablespoons shallots, chopped

1 tablespoon lime zest

1 wine barrel stave or cedar plank, for grilling

Clean the outside of a wine barrel stave (salmon will cook on the top of the curved side) in soapy water. Rinse, and then submerge in water and soak for at least six hours. Prepare cedar plank, if using. Heat grill to medium. Remove barrel stave from water and wipe the top with a dry rag. To prepare salmon, cut the fillet in half lengthwise, from tip to tail, so you have two narrow fillets of equal length. (Leave fillet whole if using a cedar plank.) Sprinkle both sides of the fillets with seasoning. Place salmon fillets on the barrel stave, positioning one on each half of the stave so they come together in the middle. (Tuck any edges or ends that hang over the stave under the fillet.) Center stave or plank over the heat and gently close the grill lid, making sure it doesn't touch the salmon. The lid won't close completely, but that's OK. Meanwhile, prepare marinade.

Combine rum, honey, lime juice, shallots and lime zest and whisk. Cook salmon over medium coals or medium gas heat for 37 minutes.

Remove lid and brush or drizzle marinade over top of the salmon from the center section out to both sides. Replace the lid. Repeat brushing or drizzling glaze every 3 to 5 minutes, until you are out of glaze or salmon reaches desired doneness. Beware of flare-ups caused by the rum. The salmon will turn a beautiful auburn, New Mexico sunset hue. Remove stave or plank from the fire and gently drape with aluminum foil. Allow salmon to rest for 15 minutes, and then place the entire stave or plank on the table. Allow guests to serve themselves with a fork from the plank. Relax and enjoy a job well done!

Per serving, based on 12: 284 calories (17 percent from fat), 5 grams total fat (1 gram saturated), 69 milligrams cholesterol, 24 grams carbohydrates, 27 grams protein, 107 milligrams sodium, trace dietary fiber.

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