Chef’s Log 31 August 2008
Duroc Pulled Pork Shoulders

OK, another day, another excessive performance. I’m actually a bit embarrassed to prepare this hog report, and I may stop them after this. The day was perfect and could have been spent on the golf course, but I spent it cooking mostly because my old motorcycle injury prevented me from doing much of anything else. It should have been a golf day or a sailing day, but instead it was a day of working with hog carcass. This was not without its merits, in particular I really enjoyed the teamwork that went into the dinner and I really enjoyed the company and companionship of our dinner guests. Still, all things considered, I’d rather that my leg worked and that all shared a tuna sandwich on the golf course with the same people.

Pulled pork appears to be a very simple dish, and in one sense it is the most basic of barbecues, a smoked slab of simple meat, cooked until it is fall-apart tender. Tradition now says it should be rubbed with spices, then smoked over hickory, then pulled apart by hand, not chopped, and served on a roll with a thin and tangy Carolina vinegar-based barbecue sauce and topped with a similarly tangy no-mayonnaise Carolina coleslaw. I got two Duroc two pork shoulders, the heritage red meat pork that barbecues so well, from Mainline Prime. I let them sit for 48 hours in a spicy Cajun rub and then transferred them to the smoker. Here we are just started the smoking process.

After three hours over smoke, the pork shoulders have clearly changed color. The smoker has been kept cool, about 180 degrees. The pork shoulders’ internal temperature is still very low ... that is ... they’re almost raw. But they have taken on the flavor of hickory smoke.
I’ve learned from experience that it is almost impossible to cook the pork in the smoker and retain the necessary moistness ... my machine just does not produce smoke that is wet enough. So ... when the meat is sufficiently smoke flavored I transfer it to a Dutch oven ... just the family term for a large covered roasting pan. It sits in a quart of mop sauce, made from equal parts of vinegar and Victory Hop Devil, seasoned with Cajun rub and jalapeños. A layer of sliced onion keeps the pork from touching the bottom of the pan.
So the Dutch oven goes in the oven for three hours at 325 degrees. Every 45 minutes the mop sauce in the bottom of the pan is ladled over the meat. The shoulders are staying moist; they’re almost steaming instead of baking. After three hours it’s difficult to move the meat out of the pan without the meat falling apart ... we’re almost good to go. But although the meat is cooked and moist and flavorful, it lacks any form of exterior crust now after steaming. A few minutes on the grill at 475 degrees will fix that.

What’s left to do? Now we eat it, with an authentic Carolina coleslaw (made by Jean), baked beans, fresh corn, and a salad of tomatoes and mozzarella. Too much beer, just enough white wine rounded out the dinner. Jean prepared a superb peach cobbler, which we served with vanilla ice cream.
There was considerable debris when we were finished. Once again, Jean did a marvelous job as clean up crew, while I rubbed my belly and longed for the golf course.

And yes, the pork pulled very well. And yes, we ate about half of one shoulder, and no, I have no idea what we will do with the rest of it.

I guess over 54 hours and with the application of successive waves of technology I mastered pulled pork. Yes, it quite possibly was better than any I’ve had before ... not necessarily because
it was better in any intrinsic sense, but because I mastered it the way I want it, with the spices I prefer, and with a Victory Hop Devil rub and a Victory Hop Wallop barbecue sauce. And yes, I supposed that with 8 pounds of pork in the freezer we’ll enjoy this again with no additional effort. I’d be delighted to have the same people come over and join, or perhaps a larger crew to ensure that there are no leftovers.

But it does seem like an odd way to spend a beautiful afternoon.

There will probably be no more daily hog reports for a while. Classes resume this week and now there is work to do.

But I should end this on an instructive note. Now that I know how to make perfect pulled pork with the resources available at home, my advice is “don’t do it!” How many people have a Bradley wet smoker for the first stages of smoking at moderate heat, then a roasting pan to finish the moist cooking, then a large grill that can cranked up to any temperature between 200 degrees and 700 degrees? How many people have the patience to start dinner two days in advance and then commit an entire day to carefully timed, carefully staged cooking operations? I’d put mine up against any pulled pork I’ve eaten, but in the future I expect to buy mine. Matt does a great job at the newly re-menued Victory brew pub / restaurant in Downingtown if you’re in the Philadelphia area, and Blue Smoke or the Jazz Standard in New York are just fine. Or you can help me get rid of the rest of mine some day soon.

ekc