Years ago my MIT undergraduate advisor and his wife Martha invited me to bring a date and join them for dinner. To me Bob and Martha were the height of sophistication, wealth, and generosity, and I was thoroughly intimidated. As usual I hid my lack of confidence with unnecessary bluster. When Martha proudly served the first course, a consommé, I said defiantly to my date, “You eat this. I don’t eat see-through food.”

Of course, I had no idea that we were the test cases for a planned dinner party, or that Martha was as intimidated by the consommé as I was by being there. I later learned that my throw-away remark set Martha’s cooking back by years, and that she did not try serving consommé again for over a decade.

The last time I saw them I proudly brought them a sample of my Memphis Rib rub, a stand-by recipe for almost any cut of pork, and great on hamburgers. Martha sniffed it cautiously and said simply, “Too much paprika.” Well, yes. As you can see from the recipes, both the Memphis rub and the Basic Red rub involve significant amounts of paprika. They do. Good sweet imported Hungarian paprika, and a wide range of other ingredients. Always have. Can’t change that now.

And yet this is Martha. Of Bob and Martha. Criticizing the paprika. Criticizing the essence of my Memphis rub. And in my 42 years of friendship with them, they are almost never wrong. Well, yeah, they have a pretty strange position on global warming and on the Tea Party, but they have been my go-to sources of information on everything from raising children to orthopedic surgery, and on everything from barbecue to auto repair. And they think my favorite rib recipe has too paprika. Payback for “I don’t eat see-through food”? Maybe. But I won’t take chances.

I am now a paprika-free chef, as you can probably tell from the mixed grill below. I’m not sure what I am going to do with all those bags of sweet, hot, and smoked paprika.
The veal rib chops are a bit of a splurge. I’ve just figured out that the exorbitant price of a veal chop at Smith and Wollensky’s is mostly the cost of ingredients. I wouldn’t want to waste the subtle flavor of the veal by burying it under heavy spices, so I used the new cumin / coriander / garlic rub I attempted to crib from Di Shui Dong. But, hey, pork always benefits from a good, swift kick in the ribs, and in our new paprika-free environment I used my spicy sweet and fiery dry jerk rub. I’m pleased with the way they looked as they finished smoking. I think Martha would be pleased as well.
I’m also quite pleased with how the rib chop looked plated, served with a great 1985 Grand Cru Bordeaux that is screaming out to be finished before it turns into cooking wine. We’ll take the small American flags off the table soon, but July 4th weekend was less than a week ago, and the flags will be with us for a while.

And yes, the ribs passed the taste test. The Di Shui Dong rub is subtle enough to complement rather than overpower the veal, and it remains exotic. It was well worth the adventure needed to reconstruct the recipe. Fresh asparagus is always a great complement to veal. The brown basmati rice looks good on the plate, and I am always delighted to have an excuse to use a hot and sweet turnip and cauliflower Indian pickle.

Our first experiment with a paprika-free table appears to have succeeded. We’ll see how the pork chops work out. And we’ll send Martha a sample of the paprika-free jerk rub and see if that meets with approval. There is nothing like twelve ground dried habaneros to provide the kick that’s lost when the rub contains no Hungarian paprika.

Basic Red Rub (Cribbed from Raichlen)
¼ cup raw (turbinado) sugar
¼ cup sweet Hungarian paprika (use the real thing; I buy from Penzeys.com)
3 tablespoons freshly ground black pepper (again, use the real thing)
0 tablespoon hickory smoked salt (Raichlen uses 1 tablespoon, I just omit, since the ribs are going to be smoked over hickory for six hours anyway!)
3 teaspoons garlic powder (50% more than he uses, but you can’t have too much garlic, and, once again, use the real thing from Penzeys)
2 teaspoons onion powder
2 teaspoons celery seeds
½ teaspoon medium hot crushed red pepper flakes (Raichlen uses a full teaspoon of ground cayenne, but I find that using a milder flake and reducing the quantity by half actually helps the balance)

Di Shui Dong 滴水洞) Cuminibs (孜然排骨) —
Best Guess, Take 1 — Initial Dry Rub
1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
3 tablespoons ground coriander seed
3 tablespoons ground cumin seed
1 tablespoon ground tien tsin red peppers, seeds and all
1 tablespoon very hot cayenne flakes
2 teaspoons powdered ginger
3 tablespoons granulated garlic
Di Shui Dong (滴水洞) Cumin Ribs (孜然排骨) —
The Final, Coarse Dry Rub
<<toast seeds in dry pan, grind, and cover ribs before serving>>
2 tablespoons whole caraway seeds
2 tablespoons whole fennel seeds
2 tablespoons whole coriander seeds
2 tablespoons whole cumin seeds
1 teaspoon hot chili flakes <<can be omitted and added to taste at table>>

Dry Jamaican Jerk Rub (Cribbed from Raichlen, Again)
3 Tablespoons Dundicut Chili Pepper Powder (a variant of Scotch Bonnet, not quite as hot, easier for me to find than Scotch bonnet or habanero chile powder)
2 Piquin Peppers (deadly hot and definitely optional!)
3 Tablespoons Crushed Cayenne Pepper
4 Tablespoons freeze-dried chives
2 Tablespoons dried onion flakes
3 Tablespoons dried garlic flakes (50% more than Raichlan uses)
2 Tablespoons coarse sea salt
4 teaspoons ground coriander
4 teaspoons ground ginger
2 teaspoons freshly ground black pepper
3 teaspoons ground allspice (50% more than Raichlan uses)
1½ teaspoons ground cinnamon (50% more than Raichlan uses)
½ teaspoon ground cloves
¾ teaspoon ground nutmeg (50% more than Raichlan uses)