Chef’s Log 23 March 2012
The Dinner Party that Had to be Perfect (Part 2)!

Yesterday was all about the advance preparations: buying the meat and the fish, making the marinade and marinating the pork steaks, brining the fish, shaping and rubbing the burgers. Today was about the cooking and the eating.

At 5.00 I fired up the Bradley smoker, with a load of apple wood for a sweet and flavorful smoke for the salmon, the pork steaks, and the Andouille sausage. Everything needed to be timed here; the Andouille was a starter nibble, and needed to come out a little earlier than the other dishes. The pork steaks needed to be started in the smoker but after about an hour they had to be transferred to the Weber, where they could be finished over direct high heat to caramelize and crisp the sugar and honey in the marinade. They will have acquired enough smokiness in the Bradley. Finally, I needed to grill the burgers over direct heat, with no smoke, on the Weber.

The trick is to have as much of the boring cooking in the sealed (and therefore not visible) Bradley smoker done before the guests arrive, and to be doing the interesting stuff over the high heat of the Weber while the guests are here. By 6:30 beer and soft drinks were available, and nibbles of home-smoked Andouille, home-smoked English Cheddar, hummus and veggies were set out. The guests arrived right on time. The weather was perfect, so we could actually talk outside while I finished the grilling.
After pouring some beer I headed to the Weber to finish the grilling. When I got done and started putting the food into plates and bowls and platters, it definitely looked like too much food. So this was the time to make some guesses and think about menu planning for the next dinner. What will get eaten completely? What will merely get sampled? What will be largely ignored?

The salmon is pretty easy and dependable to make, but it’s also unusual, even unique. The interaction of the Cognac, the sugar, the salt, and the smoke is wonderful; it’s not my idea or my recipe, and I’m not bragging. But based on previous experience the salmon will disappear. The rich firm texture will just make the salmon disappear faster.
I guessed that there would be too much pork. It looked great. And, yes, it even tasted
great. But pork is so very lean today that its texture makes it, well, tough to eat. It’s not
marbled, as in marbled beef. It’s granite, as in built to last forever. My brother Peter
has stopped making the Ginger Garlic Honey Pork as a pork dish and started making
boneless chicken thighs, using the pocket where the bone was as another place to stuff
the marinade. The skin crisps wonderfully, the marinade provides the flavor that the
chicken lacks, and the texture is wonderful. This is probably the winning idea. And yes,
the market response to the pork supports Peter. I am going to be eating the pork for at
least another week.

And the burgers should be in the middle in terms of demand. Challeningly fiery,
boringly burgers. Wonderfully spiced with Raichlen’s rubs. They’ll go, but not as fast
as the salmon.

The table looked pretty full, even before most of the beers came out. This is definitely a
good thing!
The guests were charming and delightful. Everyone was familiar with China. Many were familiar because they were Chinese, but even our Anglo guests had a deep interest in China, and one even spoke excellent 汉文. Not everyone knew very much about beer, which allowed me to turn the dinner conversation to beer, to beer tutorials, and then to a rambling unfocus group on the introduction of western beer to China. I thought it was great fun. Jean and I hope that I did not bore anyone terribly.

A partial list of the beers and a short summary of the discussion follows.

- **Victory Reitzen Platz Terroir de Tettnang** — this was a hyper-hoppy single field, single grower Pils, made with Tettnang hop from a single grower. It’s the grand daddy of every industrial beer, from Bud to Tsing Tao. Consensus: great stuff but China is not ready.

- **Lost Abbey Inferno** — A little more hazy than the mass market in China might accept, a little more yeast flavored and wheat flavored. Great. Might work.

- **Pretty Things Lovely Saint Winefrid** — Incredibly intense malt, espresso, bitter chocolate flavors and modest alcohol combine to make this plausible for China.

- **Sam Adams Weihenstephaner Infinium Collaboration** — Great looking bottle, but the half sour flavor might scare the average Chinese drinker. But yes, the unique bottle, and the Champagne-style cork and cage, were seen as great pluses.

- **Scaldis Prestige de Nuits** — The most expensive beer I have ever bought, opened for the first time. Gorgeous presentation, in a corked and caged Champagne bottle with a silkscreen label. Initial impressions, including mine, were of a red-wine rampage over a basically sound Belgian stock. No one finished. Interestingly, I came back to this a couple of hours later and found it to be extraordinary. I think like a red wine, this beer needed to breathe before being served!

- **Allagash Interlude 2010** — After the surprise disappointment of the initial reactions to the Prestige I decided to open something I knew would be perfect and opened an Allagash Interlude. This starts with a remarkable Belgian-style tripel and then subjects it to secondary fermentation with Brettanomyces yeast while in the bottle. Fully sour, and yet complex with notes of white wine and red grapes. The surprising big hit and a great recovery after the Prestige.

- **Mikkeller Weasel Beer Geek Brunch** — This is perhaps the weirdest beer concept on earth. It is a good, indeed a very good, coffee stout. Unlike most coffee stouts, the coffee for this beer has been processed by weasels. As in eaten by weasels. As in the individual beans are removed from weasel droppings, cleaned, roasted, and used to make the coffee extract that is used in the beer. Hmmm. It pours a little lumpy, too.

- **Lost Abbey Angels’ Share** — A strong, dark very high alcohol dessert beer, aged in used brandy barrels. Perfect.

- **Lindemans Pêche** — A really sweet fruit lambic. Lambics are made with whatever wild yeast and bacteria fall into the wort before fermentation. They are frightfully sour. Some clever marketing guy discovered that if you made them syrupy sweet you could sell them in almost unlimited supply in the US, one of the largest beer markets in the world, and this one was sweetened with fresh ripe peaches. One of the women guests called it a girlie beer and found it delightful. I always think of it as peach pie in a glass, and I always find it delightful too.

As always, we finish with a happy group shot over the debris.
Normally I hate the posed “Welcome to Huawei” look of most group photos. But the expression on Jean’s face as I flipped over a vase of flowers was priceless!
Graeter’s strawberry chocolate chip ice cream lived up to expectations, and was wonderful with fresh papaya and fresh strawberries.

Jean of course made everything look perfect. I’m mean, what guy would have thought of red, yellow, and orange sweet peppers to serve with hummus? Likewise, it would never have occurred to me to garnish anything; I’ve never understood the point of watercress or parsley on salmon, but, yes the table did look better as a result.

Lots of work. Lots of courses. Lots of different steps on the prep, enough so that I put together a spread sheet for master control of the planning process and did sensitivity analyses.

And great fun. We’ll do it again.

I’m going to go downstairs and have Ginger Garlic Honey Pork and papaya for breakfast. And then I am going to have to deal with a serious pile of barbecuing equipment that all needs to be cleaned! Good morning!