

Into the woods

Pine provides outdoor flavor and fragrance to meats in upscale dishes

BY ERICA DUECY

The piney scent wafting through some upscale dining rooms is not artificial air freshener: Numerous chefs around the country are using Douglas fir, blue spruce and other pine varieties to flavor their food. The culinary applications range from sautéing scallops in pine-infused oil to slow-roasting venison on pine boughs. At Jovia, an American fine-dining restaurant in

the chestnuts. Then he sets the seared meat and roasted chestnuts on top of pine boughs and garlic in a roasting pan. He covers the pan with a piece of dough and cooks it in an oven over low heat.

"The dough seals it and is an awesome cooking medium," DeChellis says of the dish. "The best thing is bringing it to the table and cutting the dough off, so the guest is smacked in the face with this killer perfume of a piney, roast-venison-perfumed forest."

tongue, DeChellis says.

Evergreen aromatics are not new to the kitchen. However, where rosemary sprigs and juniper berries have long been used in cooking, pine needles and boughs more often appear as table decorations than as ingredients. Pine nuts – the edible seeds of pine trees – also are a popular culinary product.

While rosemary and juniper are evergreen shrubs, they are not closely related to pine trees, which are part of the Pinaceae family. Spruce, pine and Douglas fir are members of that group, which includes more than 200 species of trees found mostly in temperate regions of the Northern Hemisphere. The trees are resinous and characterized by linear, needlelike leaves that are arranged on branches in spiral formations.

Neither the U.S. Department of Agriculture nor the Food and Drug Administration has guidelines regarding the safety of human consumption of pine needles. The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene also does not have any regulations prohibiting the use of pine needles in cooking. However, there is not enough information on the subject for the health department to state whether pine needles are safe to eat, according to a spokeswoman for the department.

Douglas fir is the favored pine variety at The Restaurant at Domaine Chandon, in Yountville, Calif. There chef Chris Manning makes Douglas fir-scented chanterelle mushrooms as an \$11 appetizer. The chanterelles are marinated in sake and soy sauce and then baked on a bed of Douglas-fir pine needles.

Manning also prepares a pine-scented rack of lamb, for which he places pine branches into the open fire of the grill and allows them to flame up, adding flavor to the meat. The lamb entrée sells for \$36. Manning has used that technique on several proteins, including venison and other game meats, he says. "You can also scent them by placing the pine needles in a chasseur braising pot and [baking] them, after searing," Manning says.

Lachlan Mackinnon-Patterson, chef and co-owner of Frasca Food and Wine in Boulder, Colo., uses needles from the state tree, the blue spruce, as a flavoring for lamb. He purées the needles with grapeseed oil to make a paste and then rubs it on lamb loins. The lamb is cooked sous vide, then removed from its cooking pouch and brushed clean of any leftover pine paste. Just prior to service, the cooked lamb loins are seared, then sliced and plated with caramelized potatoes, black trumpet mushrooms and lamb jus.

The classic pairing of rosemary and lamb was Mackinnon-Patterson's jumping-off point for creating the dish, he says. "Rosemary goes great with lamb, and pine has that similar, really resinous quality," he says. "I decided just to go for it." The \$30 entrée is very popular when it runs occasionally on the

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PHOTOS: ERICA DUECY

Above and right: Chef Josh DeChellis of New York's Jovia restaurant prepares "venison in the wild," slow-roasting venison over pine boughs, garlic and roasted chestnuts. The venison is plated with chestnut purée, sautéed maitake mushrooms and shredded, sautéed Brussels sprouts.

New York, chef-partner Josh DeChellis says he likes to cook his venison "in the wild." In New Jersey, where DeChellis grew up, he remembers seeing deer in their natural habitat, wandering through pine forests and nibbling on fallen chestnuts. The memory was DeChellis' inspiration for Jovia's popular venison dish, which is described on the menu as "loin of venison, maitake mushrooms, chestnuts and Brussels sprouts" and sold for \$32.

DeChellis first sears the venison loin and roasts



The venison is plated with chestnut purée, sautéed maitake mushrooms and shredded, sautéed Brussels sprouts. The dish is finished with pine-scented venison jus.

The resulting flavor of the meat is subtly woody, more of a perfumed scent than a flavor on the

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menu, Mackinnon-Patterson says.

At Gilt, a swanky new fine-dining restaurant in New York, chef Paul Liebrandt flavors two of his dishes with Douglas fir pine. As part of a \$135 tasting menu, he serves diver scallops sautéed in pine-infused oil. The scallops are plated with black-truffle shavings and tarragon mustard sabayon.

In another preparation, Liebrandt slow-roasts venison loin in the oven on a bed of pine and juniper branches. "It has a wonderful, fresh smell and taste," Liebrandt says of the dish. "It gives a very nice aftertaste to the meat that is fragrant, almost citrusy." The venison is served as part of a \$92 three-course menu.

In Washington, D.C., executive chef Jonathan Seningen of the fine-dining restaurant Oya prepares two dishes using pine nee-

dles. Seningen began cooking with pine years ago when he worked with Liebrandt at the now-defunct Atlas restaurant in New York. At Oya, Seningen smokes salmon bones with pine to make a pine-smoked salmon fumet, which becomes a gelée after gelatin sheets are added to it. The gelée is placed atop a piece of slow-poached salmon and served with crushed fingerling potatoes, capers, pimento and chervil. "The gelée is very thin. You barely see it on the salmon," Seningen says. "It gives the fish a layer of woody, smoked-salmon flavor." The



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Jovia's Josh DeChellis covers the pan of seared venison and pine boughs with dough before slow-roasting it in the oven. "The dough seals it and is an awesome cooking medium," he says.

appetizer is \$14.

Another pine-scented dish at Oya is the pine-juniper poached venison, a \$30 entrée. Seningen ties venison in a cylinder and submerges it in juniper-and-pine-infused olive oil held at 90 degrees Fahrenheit. The venison loin poaches for about 40 minutes and then is removed and plated with roasted burdock and a sauce made from the infused oil plus

fresh anchovy and yuzu.

At New York's upscale Korean fusion restaurant D'or Ahn, chef Rachel Yang serves an appetizer of duck breast smoked in pine needles that is served over arugula salad with foie gras vinaigrette. The \$12 dish is garnished with pickled quince and candied dates dusted with soybean powder.

"It's a very popular dish, perfect with wine," Yang says. "There's a nice bitterness from the arugula with the woody, smoky duck, the sweet dates, and the rich vinaigrette."

Yang, who grew up in South Korea, said she was inspired to create the dish from her memories of eating pine-scented rice cakes in that country. Pine needles often are added to the water when steaming rice cakes there, she says. ■

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