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MISSISSIPPI

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{ chef's corner }

Boiled Peanuts and Green Tomatoes Give Comfort Dose of Home

BY CHEF AND PITMASTER MELISSA COOKSTON

I've been pretty lucky in my life – I was born, raised, and still live in Mississippi. I have a good husband, a wonderful daughter, and four dogs who love me. And I know how to appreciate green tomatoes and boiled peanuts.

In the past few years, I've managed to win some pretty big barbecue awards, and parlayed that success into Memphis Barbecue Company restaurants, two published cookbooks, TV appearances, and being able to travel and taste some of the best food in the world. However, when I need that comfort dose of home, I always look for boiled peanuts or green tomatoes.

When I was younger, my grandfather, Quinton, was my role model and mentor. He is still the best man I've ever known. He had a soft spot for a nice BBQ sandwich or a moist piece of coconut cake, but his true delicacies were fried green tomatoes and boiled peanuts. The times he shared with me a bag of boiled peanuts, fresh from a roadside stand or from the old pot on his stove, were magical moments for a young girl. His peanut patch was the envy of the county.

My grandfather grew up during the Depression in the 1930s, so he was taught from a young age to raise animals and grow crops for survival. It was a way of life for him. When I reached an age where I could walk with some stability, he took it upon himself to teach me those skills. The smells of the smokehouse or peanuts freshly pulled from the ground evoke fond memories that I will always cherish. As a child, the waiting for hams to cure, gardens to bear fruit, or peanuts to boil can seem like forever. That's the great thing about green tomatoes, you don't have to wait on them to ripen. They just have to get big enough to slice and you'll soon be in a Southerner's version of heaven. A just-picked green tomato, firm, fresh, and sporting its namesake vibrant hue still thrills me to this day. No wonder my favorite color, as an adult, is green.

In Mississippi, we can definitely pull a "Forrest Gump" treatment of a few food items, most notably sweet potatoes, catfish, and green tomatoes. For example, everyone knows the ubiquitous fried green tomato, but outside of Mississippi, there are relatively few devotees of green tomato chow chow, green tomato pie, pickled green tomatoes, green tomato pizza sauce for a smoked chicken and truffle crema pizza, green tomato pasta sauce, or green tomato soup. I like using ingredients commonly indicative to the South in ways that create unique dishes that speak to a modern culinary South. I much prefer the acidity and texture of a green tomato to its ripened state. Therefore, a caprese salad at my house consists of green tomatoes, aged balsamic vinegar, homemade mozzarella, and basil picked fresh from my herb garden. Sprinkle a little fresh ground pepper and some sea-salt on that, and you'll have a dish worthy of any restaurant.

Boiled peanuts definitely do not fall into the category of "versatile," they are what they are, a salty, soft treat that is definitely an acquired taste. Frankly, I know of no other uses for peanuts after they have been boiled, and have never even thought about it. I just enjoyed them because my grandfather taught me to enjoy them. WARNING: They are addictive!

For those of us raised in Mississippi, we appreciate the natural rhythms and bounty of our state. We love the sometimes



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glacial pace of life set against the sweltering heat of summer. We understand that the seductive aroma of springtime wisteria is a sign that perfectly formed green tomatoes are coming soon. When I get to enjoy Mississippi as my grandfather taught me, I realize I am very lucky indeed. *dm*

Pitmaster Melissa Cookston is the only female barbeque world champion and the "Winningest Woman in Barbecue." Her passion for barbeque is the natural product of a childhood spent around pit-fire grills and Southern Delta cooking in Mississippi. At 13, Melissa's first job was at a restaurant, and she has remained in the food industry ever since. These early culinary experiences helped define her style of Southern Delta cuisine as one that focuses on fresh ingredients used in new ways and intense flavor prepared with love, care, and passion.

A successful Southern chef and entrepreneur, Cookston owns three locations of her popular Memphis BBQ Co. restaurant across the Southeast. She has served as judge on season 4 of Destination America's 'BBQ Pitmasters,' was named one of 'America's most influential BBQ Pitmasters and Personalities' by Fox News in 2015.

Cookston will release her second cookbook "Smokin' Hot in the South: New Grilling Recipes from the Winningest Woman in Barbecue" (Andrews McMeel), a follow up to "Smokin' in the Boys' Room," on May 10, 2016. She will also head back to compete in Memphis in May that same week.



Green Tomato Pizza
with Smoked Chicken
and Truffle Crema

GREEN TOMATO PIZZA WITH SMOKED CHICKEN AND TRUFFLE CREMA

by Chef and Pitmaster Melissa Cookston

Many grills can handle a pizza, especially if you slightly precook the crust. Pizzas really work well on Big Green Eggs. The ability of a ceramic cooker to hold high temps on a grill gives the pizza a "brick oven" flavor, but usually better! Most brick oven pizzerias use gas to heat their ovens, but on a grill you'll get the authentic wood-fired taste. This dough recipe can handle being rolled thinner to develop a crisp crust. If you like a little more "chew," substitute bread flour to increase the gluten and don't roll it quite as thin.

Sometimes when I'm missing ingredients for a recipe, I substitute unlikely candidates just to see what will happen. The fire-roasted green tomato sauce turned out to be "a winner" and a huge hit with the family, making them happy I didn't have any red tomatoes on hand. Crema is a Mexican sour cream that has a thinner consistency than regular sour cream. Sour cream is a fine substitute, thinned slightly with water.

TOOLS

Big Green Egg or other dry-heat grill holding at 600°F
Ceramic pizza stone
Pizza peel

PIZZA DOUGH

1 cup warm water
1 teaspoon sugar
1 teaspoon active dry yeast
3 cups all-purpose flour
1-1/2 teaspoons kosher salt
1/2 teaspoon dried Italian seasoning (optional)
2 teaspoons olive oil, divided

GREEN TOMATO PIZZA SAUCE

2 tablespoons olive oil
5 medium green tomatoes
1/2 cup thinly sliced sweet or white onion
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 teaspoon kosher salt
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1 teaspoon sugar
1 tablespoon white vinegar
2 teaspoons hot red pepper flakes
1/4 cup fresh basil leaves, roughly chopped
1 teaspoon diced fresh oregano

TRUFFLE CREMA

1/4 cup crema
1-1/2 teaspoons white truffle olive oil

TOPPINGS

Enough for 4 small pizzas
8 ounces smoked chicken
1/2 red bell pepper, slivered
8 ounces fresh mozzarella cheese, cut into thin slices, or
1 cup shredded mozzarella
2 tablespoons fresh corn kernels (drain well if using canned)
4 or 5 fresh basil leaves, lightly chopped

cup in a small bowl. Add the sugar and whisk, then sprinkle in the yeast and let sit until it blooms, 5 to 10 minutes.

In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the dough hook, mix together the flour, salt, and Italian seasoning. Pour in the water/yeast and blend on low speed until combined. Add 1 teaspoon of the olive oil and continue to blend until a dough forms, then keep mixing for 5 or 6 minutes. Lightly flour a cutting board, dump out the dough onto it, and form into a ball. Drizzle the remaining teaspoon of olive oil into a large mixing bowl to coat the inside of the bowl. Transfer the dough ball to the bowl, cover the bowl with a damp towel, and let rise until it doubles in size, about 1-1/2 hours.

While the dough is rising, prepare the sauce. Use 1 teaspoon of the olive oil to lightly oil the green tomatoes and char on a hot grill or on a pan under a broiler, then set aside.

In a small stockpot over medium heat, heat the remaining 1-1/2 tablespoons olive oil, add the onion, and cook until softened, 3 to 4 minutes. Then add the garlic and cook for 2 minutes. Core and chop the tomatoes and add them along with the salt, pepper, sugar, vinegar, and red pepper. Cook for 5 minutes, then decrease the heat and simmer for 25 to 30 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the tomatoes are soft. Stir in the basil and oregano, then, using an immersion blender (or food processor), blend until smooth.

To make the crema, whisk the crema and truffle oil together. Store covered in the refrigerator until ready to use.

When the dough has risen, place the dough on a lightly floured cutting board and knead 4 or 5 times, then cut the dough into 4 parts. Roll out each piece of dough into a 10-inch circle (the thinner the better).

To assemble, spoon about 1/2 cup sauce onto each crust and spread with the bottom of the spoon. Slice fresh mozzarella cheese into thin slices and lay on the pizza, then sprinkle pulled smoked chicken, red bell pepper slivers, and fresh corn kernels over the pizzas.

To bake, prepare a ceramic grill to 600°F on indirect heat, preferably with a baking stone (or precook the crust for 2 or 3 minutes on a pan or until it is cooked just enough to hold together, then add toppings and slide directly onto the grill grates for a little more grill flavor). Dust a pizza peel with cornmeal, add a pizza, and slide onto the pizza stone and grill for 5 to 6 minutes, or until the crust is browned and any cheese is melted. Remove and drizzle the Truffle Crema over the pizza, using a fork. Then sprinkle on the basil and serve.

Melissa's tip: Baking stones make great grilling accessories, but you want to be sure to heat them up gradually and not "shock" them as this can lead to cracking. Just place the stone on the grill as soon as possible while the cooker is still at a lower temperature and let it heat up with the cooker.

Makes 4 (10-inch) pizzas

Run warm water until it is around 110°F, then place 1