

# Roasting a Pig Inside an Enigma

By SAM SIFTON

THE note came from a friend. It was brief and irresistible. "Have you heard about this item?" it asked. "It can roast a 50-pound pig in four hours."

There are a number of ways to cook a whole pig. One method is to place the carcass on a rotisserie above a heat source and spin it slowly into the night. Greeks do a similar thing with lamb. Another technique is to dig a shallow trench in the ground, line it with rocks, build a fire to heat the rocks and place a pig above them, then cover the whole with wet canvas and sand, the way New Englanders do for clambakes on the beach. Southern barbecue cooks will slide a butterflied pig onto a covered grill and cook it slowly in a smoky braise. This method takes an extremely large grill and, really, if you want to do it properly, you need to wear overalls.

None of these methods take less than eight or nine hours. None work well during a Northeastern winter.

The message, which had come via e-mail, had a link to a Web site run by a Cuban-American named Roberto Guerra, [www.lacajachina.com](http://www.lacajachina.com). The item described on Mr. Guerra's site was called La Caja China - a Chinese roasting box. This turned out to be a rectangular plywood wheelbarrow lined with marine-grade aluminum, with a steel top upon which you could build a fire and under which you could cook a pig, or a great number of chickens. There were three sizes available, with the largest priced at \$250.

I wanted it immediately, the way a child would a model airplane, or a trip to the moon. I bookmarked the site and came back to it nearly hourly for the next few days, daydreaming about roast pig.

I also began to shoot off e-mail notes and to make phone calls, inquiring about La Caja China in particular and so-called Chinese roasting boxes in general. That they are Cuban seemed self-evident. They are made by Cubans. But what makes them Chinese?

Mr. Guerra, who was born in Cuba and who lives and works in Miami, related a story about how the Chinese Army tortured its prisoners with heat and how somehow this had led Cubans to develop a sort of cooking that in turn resulted in the invention of the box, by his father, in the early 1980's. This yarn seemed apocryphal at best. Mr. Guerra and I were talking on the phone, but it did not seem impossible that he shrugged his shoulders in agreement.

John Willoughby, the executive editor of *Gourmet* magazine, also had no answers. But he was ecstatic about what the box could accomplish. He'd had, he said, some pig cooked in one that very weekend, prepared by a fellow named Jesus Lima, of the Jamaica Plain neighborhood in Boston. "It was like pig candy," he said. Mr. Lima, he said, had called the device "a chinee box."

I called Mr. Lima. His box, which he built 12 years ago after seeing similar versions in South Florida, is stainless steel, with a plywood exterior and a stainless-steel top on which he places coals. He has cooked more

than 80 pigs in it, he said, and has always called it a chinee box. I asked him why. "That's its name," he said.

Bobby Flay, the television personality and former Joe Allen dishwasher who is the chef and an owner of Bolo and Mesa Grill in Manhattan, said he had tried pig from one of the devices in Miami, cooked by the chef Douglas Rodriguez. "The coolest," he declared, adding that he had purchased a small version, La Cajita China, for his weekend home on Long Island. "It is just awesome," he said.

And Jeffrey Steingarten, the courtly and obsessive gastronomic enthusiast who writes about food for *Vogue*, was intrigued by La Caja China to the point of distraction, sending

what seemed like daily e-mail messages on the subject. "Semper Pigatus" was the heading on one of his messages. (Mr. Steingarten ended up buying the largest box and engaging Paul Bertolli, the chef at Oliveto in Oakland, Calif., to have a pig from the Napa Valley Lamb Company slaughtered for him to cook in it. "The pig was actually eviscerated in Yuba City," Mr. Steingarten added in what he said was the interest of full accuracy.) But he had no idea, at least at that juncture, why the boxes, whether sold commercially or made at home, were called Chinese.

Sidney Mintz, the great food anthropologist at Johns Hopkins University and author of "Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom," was similarly stymied at first. But in a later e-mail message, casting about for ideas, he told me that 150,000 male Chinese contract laborers were brought to Cuba in the 1850's. They came alone, he said, without family or wives. "As should be clear to all," he added, "without women, culture is mostly not perpetuated." Chinese Cubans who later left the island and opened restaurants in America cooked Cuban food, or Chinese food, or both. But, he said, there was no real mixing of the cuisines - no plantain fried rice, no Shanghai clams in Cuban black bean soup - and to his knowledge there was no real basis in fact for saying that the Chinese roasting box, of Cuban origin, was of Chinese descent.



Thomas Jackson

**REVISITING THE BARBECUE PIT** La Caja China, a device known as a Chinese roasting box, can roast a whole pig below a fire

That said, Mr. Mintz added, "My Caribbean experience tells me that calling something 'chino' or 'China' is a way, perhaps especially in the Hispanophone places, of saying it is clever, exotic, a contrivance, desirable. I could hazard only a bum guess why."

This last echoed something I had heard from a Cuban chef of some standing, Maricel Presilla, of the restaurant Zafra in Hoboken, N.J. "Cubans like to call anything that is unusual or clever Chinese," she said. "And this is true all over the Caribbean. Pretty much any culture there, whether Cuban or Puerto Rican or Dominican, they have somewhere some kind of thing like this - a caja China."

As it turns out, it is not just in the Caribbean that pig roasting boxes abound. John Laudun, a folklorist and assistant professor of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, had a great deal to say about cooking pigs in boxes. Cajun microwaves, he called the ovens, and said they were greatly varied in design and size.

"There is more ingenuity in the sheet-metal shops of South Louisiana," Mr. Laudun said, "than in all the fashion houses in New York City."

The Cajun microwave, he continued, was but one example of this creativity. "Some of these things are very high-tech affairs," he explained, with elaborate winch systems for moving the pig in and out of the heat.

But the basic technique was the same as with La Caja China: place a pig in a closed environment beneath rather than on top of a heat source. Mr. Laudun said Cajun microwaves could be found for sale on the Internet. One site offered them for \$450, plus \$150 for shipping.

I bought La Caja China for just over \$300 including shipping, and had it sent to my home. It came in two heavy boxes and took an hour to assemble. When it was complete I gave it a pat and headed off to the supermarket for practice materials.

In Miami, Mr. Guerra had told me, whole pigs are readily available at grocery chains like Publix. In and around New York City, this is not the case. I settled for two picnic hams weighing 15 pounds apiece and ordered a whole pig for a following weekend. "You want that heavy?" asked the butcher at the IGA. Both Mr. Lima and Ms. Presilla had said that a 70-pound pig was ideal for a family roast. I asked for a pig of that weight. "That's a little pig," the butcher said. "You'll have fun with that."

An afternoon of largely unattended cooking followed. There is a kind of rack within the roasting box into which you can load the meat and, in fact, strap it into place; it keeps the flesh off the bottom of the oven and allows the heat to surround the pork completely. I placed my hams into it, unadorned and skin side down, then put the cover on the oven and unceremoniously dumped a little more than 15 pounds of charcoal onto the top, in accordance with the instructions stenciled on the side of the box. The charcoal rested there in the manner of road salt at a highway department depot. It was a large pile. I divided it into two piles at either end of the grate, again in accordance with Mr. Guerra's instructions, and lighted them with a huge

whoosh of accelerant. No smoke would ever touch these hams, so the chemical tang of the burning lighter fluid would bother no one but my neighbors.

A quarter-hour later, when the fires were raging, I used a garden rake to spread the coals across the top of La Caja China. They smoldered malevolently but looked a little lonely. I added another 10 pounds of charcoal, then went inside the house and sat on the couch.

When I awoke an hour later, I added more charcoal to the pile, and an hour and a half after that I moved the top of the oven to a resting place on the long arms affixed to the front of La Caja China. The hams inside the box were golden and sweating and soft, and smelled divine. I turned them over, replaced the top, added some charcoal, and returned to the couch.

And so it went, both with the hams and, a few weeks later with the whole animal, which the butcher sold for \$130 and carried to the trunk of my car for no charge: periods of rest, punctuated by periods of fire making. When I cooked the whole pig, I burned through 40 pounds of Kingsford charcoal in about four hours, then moved to oak logs, which burned bright in the gathering gloom of a thunderstorm. (It took about five and a half hours to cook the animal; it was cold outside, and this dissipated some of the heat. There was also some rain.) In both cases, the results were splendid, particularly in

the case of the whole pig, whose skin caramelized beautifully in the last hour of cooking, after I'd turned it over, under the searing heat of the coals.

Pig candy, Mr. Willoughby of Gourmet had said of the result. He was right. Before cooking my whole hog, I used a large veterinarian's needle to inject the animal with a kind of Cuban mojo brine, from a recipe Mr. Guerra thoughtfully sent me when I told him I needed one. The brine was salt, sugar and water, plus lime and orange juice used in place of sour orange, and it left the meat with a delightful top note, a citrus melody above the pork. The meat, served with garlicky black beans and white rice, along with plenty of rum and cold bottles of Coca-Cola, served as a kind of gastronomic vacation - a trip to Cuba on a plate.

That's my New Year's resolution exactly: **more Cuba on a plate.**



Thomas Jackson

**ANTICIPATION** A whole pig, injected with a citrus brine, cooks in about five hours in this specially design roasting box.