

Semester V: Unit 2: Chapter 5.1

INTRODUCTION TO CHARCUTERIE

Charcuterie is “the branch of cooking devoted to prepared meat products such as bacon, ham, sausage, terrines, galantines, pates and confit, primarily from pork.”

Before refrigeration was a common, economically viable practice, chefs the world over were constantly faced with a problem. Meat needed to be preserved in such a way that it could be held, safely, at ambient temperatures for long periods of time.

Their ingenious solution was to develop a range of techniques for meat preservation. These days, those techniques are called Charcuterie. Charcuterie is derived from the term 'chair cuit,' which translates to mean 'cooked meat.' Charcuterie is considered by some to be the art and science of making cooked meat preparations - with emphasis on pork. This ancient art, whose origins date back some 6,000 years, became popular during the Roman Empire when cuisine started to become sophisticated, the art really hit its stride in France during the Middle Ages when charcuterie came into its own. Shops began to specialize in these meat preparations – known as charcuterie - and the people who owned and operated these shops were referred to as 'charcutiers.' They were skilled individuals who not only had to possess the talent to season and cook moist and delicious foods, but they also had to present it in a way that was appealing to customers who passed by or entered their shop. Charcutiers enjoyed great popularity and their customers were always interested to see the new creations being prepared.

Most use salt as the primary curing ingredient, and it's the magic of salt-curing over time that produces the unique flavors of bacon, prosciutto, salami, etc.

Salt does two things. First it draws moisture from the meat, changing the texture and flavor, and creating an environment inhospitable to bacterial growth. Second, it draws proteins from the meat and effectively acts as the glue to hold together a wide range of meat products. Salt is a miracle.

Semester V: Unit 2: Chapter 5.1

A generic formula for cured meat (this could apply to something like pancetta or salami) might look like this:

meat + salt + flavorings = salted meat

salted meat + time = cured meat

Curing meat depends crucially on the second step, essentially drying the meat over time. Under controlled temperature and humidity a salted pork belly will dry and condense into something greater than the sum of its parts, with new flavor and texture resulting from the curing process.





Semester V: Unit 2: Chapter 5.1

