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The Right Way to Burn Food, According to the Chefs Who Do It Best



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There's a great scene in *Julie & Julia* when Amy Adams's character Julie Powell burns a pot of boeuf bourguignon. It's a comical moment (how do you even burn *a stew?*), but one that has a subtext as well: good chefs don't burn food. We're taught that early on: the best s'mores have golden marshmallows, not charred ones; blackened toast goes straight into the garbage, and there is no greater shame than being The One Who Burned Popcorn In The Office Microwave. Burning food has historically been a sign of failure.

For some time, however, elite chefs have proven otherwise. Argentine superstar chef Francis Mallmann, for one, has turned burnt food into his calling card. On a recent trip to his remote restaurant in the ghost town of Garzón, Uruguay, I started lunch with "bread in the coals"—a salted, buttered flatbread charred to a crisp on one side, served with burnt oranges and dressed arugula on top. Burning the bread added a dimension of texture that complements the aroma and fruitiness of the dressing's extra virgin olive oil. Burning the oranges caramelized the fruit's sugars in a way that made it just acidic enough to counterbalance the salad, but sweet enough to take the edge of the burnt bread's bitterness. It was mouth-watering.

But you don't have to fly all the way to Uruguay to get some perfectly-burnt cuisine. In fact, you don't even have to fly to Miami, where Mallmann has opened Los Fuegos, an Argentinian restaurant at the Faena Hotel in South Beach. More and more, chefs from New York to Los Angeles are experimenting with burnt cuisine on their menus. No longer is charred, blackened food treated like a mistake—oftentimes, it's the highlight of a dish.



Cabbage Baked in Embers
Photo: Courtesy of Josiah Citrin



It is not uncommon to find charred elements of a dish in a sauce or other supporting element. That's the case at Mettā in Brooklyn's Fort Greene, for example, whose chef Negro Piattoni worked for Mallmann in Uruguay for four years and still uses only fire to cook. Piattoni's emphasis on local sourcing, pickling, brining and fermenting makes Mettā's menu stand out, with dishes like smoked cabbage with sour corn and horseradish cream, or beef heart carpaccio served with charred chili paste. There, fire is used to bring out the funkiness of preserved flavors, and to develop the intensity of things like chilis in the chili paste. Chef Kate Williams from Lady of the House in Detroit serves a steak tartar with charred leek gremolata. Chef Rich Landau of Fancy Radish in Washington, D.C. incorporates burnt miso into several dishes on his menu.

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