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Going whole hog

Tyler Florence comes to the aid of a local cook with a pig emergency

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By DOROTHY RANDOLL / The Dallas Morning News

FORT WORTH – It's a cold, wet, windy February day – by no stretch of the imagination would anyone consider this barbecue weather. But here I am cooking with Tyler Florence, one of *People* magazine's Sexiest Men of 2003. And we're roasting a pig.



Juan Garcia / DMN

Chef Tyler Florence peels the husk off a roasted ear of corn after the pig is tender and ready to eat. Dorothy Randall (center) called *Food 911* to request help with roasting a pig.

As host of Food Network's *Food 911*, the chef helps people solve cooking emergencies. My dilemma: I wanted to barbecue a whole pig. The Internet is rich with postings on the subject. I also found magazine articles and a few recipes in barbecue cookbooks. With so many different methods, procedures, timing, bastes and sauces, which would produce a tasty pig on the first try? The Food Network Web site (www.foodnetwork.com) posts information on cities the *Food 911* crew will visit for future shows, and when they announced a Dallas taping, I e-mailed for help with the pig.

Phone calls and e-mails followed. Danette Alberts, the production company's local casting scout, taped kitchen auditions. I made the cut.

Chef Florence would show me how to roast a pig using La Caja China, the cutting-edge Cuban cooking box that's been featured in *The New York Times* and *Saveur* magazine.

We gathered at Steve Murrin's West Fork Ranch on the far side of Fort Worth, to add Old West color to the show. The former city councilman's working ranch is the home of the world-record holder longhorn steer and is frequently used for corporate meetings.

We had a brick floor underfoot and a tin roof overhead. The shed had walls on only one side, so the wind whistled through despite space heaters and propane burners.

The crew

A crew of 10 people from Stone House Productions travels the country shooting 50 shows.

On television, you see only chef Florence and his guest. But off-camera, there is a producer, an assistant producer, two cameramen, a guy for audio and one for lighting, a food stylist, a props stylist and a production assistant. Locally, the team picked up a grip and an intern to help with the food prep.

Chef Florence says the crew works "really hard" during the taping season. "But I don't mind pushing myself for nine months so I can have June, July and August off. That's when I recharge."

He is a 1991 honors graduate of the College of Culinary Arts at Johnson & Wales University in South Carolina. He has been a chef ever since and has proven to be a popular commodity.

He's in his fifth season of *Food 911* and also stars in *Tyler's Ultimate* and *All American Festivals*.

A second cookbook, *Eat This Book*, will be released in spring 2005. (The first is *Tyler Florence's Real Kitchen*.) And a concept for Agridolci ("sweet agriculture"), a New York restaurant and gourmet shop, is in the works. Mervyn's carries his line of Real Kitchen Cookware.

Chef Florence's culinary philosophy focuses on straightforward recipes with fresh ingredients. He firmly believes that everyone has time to cook simple meals.

"I'd like to see the words 'drive-through window' removed from the American vocabulary," he says.

He is very hands-on, with people and with food. He's a great one for arm-around-the-shoulders hugs. When he's cooking, he can't resist poking, prodding, testing the food with his fingers and sampling the flavors.

Like many chefs, chef Florence has asbestos fingers. He hovered over ears of corn as they roasted in their husks, turning them frequently with bare hands.

He doesn't wear the traditional white chef's coat. "It's too standoffish," he says. "I have a coat, so I can cook. You don't have one, so you can't." That's not the message I want to send."

In fact, his casual attire for our shoot consisted of rumpled jeans and a zip-up navy sweatshirt.

The show



Juan Garcia / DMN

Producer Audrey Belleza (left), food stylist Kersti Bowser, production assistant Paul Riggs and chef Tyler Florence get ready for the next shoot.

At the filming, more than a dozen shopping bags from Central Market surround the prep table. Unlike shows that are shot in a studio, with a huge working kitchen and large staff behind the scenes, everything for our shoot was prepped and cooked on the spot.

The food stylist and intern chopped and shredded ingredients. Chef Florence worked with them, pan roasting the ancho chiles and cumin on an electric hot plate, adding cinnamon sticks.

The toasted ingredients went into an electric grinder, where they were transformed into dry rub for the pig.

During rehearsal, we made sure all ingredients, bowls and utensils were on the table, and that chef Florence knew where everything was.



Juan Garcia / DMN

La Caja China - the roasting box used to prepare the pig - is made in South Florida.

The layout was planned for eye appeal and convenience: salt and sugar in open containers; limes and oranges halved for easy squeezing; condiment jars with the spoons stuck in. A pint Mason jar of extra forks and spoons for tasting sat within easy reach.

No dressing rooms, star treatment or director's chairs on this set. Twice, the assistant producer dusted a bit of powder on the chef's forehead to cut the glare from lights. That was as show biz as it got.

We had frequent breaks. Between the cold temperatures and the charcoal smoke, the camera lens repeatedly fogged up. That caused an immediate halt: no video, no show.

As soon as a sequence was completed, we did "pick-ups" – close-up shots of a hand picking up each item. They provide the cutaways that are essential for editing.

The big pig

The show's opening sequence was set in the Old Town Market in Lewisville. The old-fashioned look of the shop appealed to the producers: a good setting for chef Florence to establish the rest of the menu as we buy the pig from owner Dickie Grant.

Because the Food Network frowns on showing whole pigs – and to reduce the cooking time – Mr. Grant reduced the 53-pound pig to more manageable pieces: shoulders, hams and ribs.

The original plan for roasting the big pig was to build a temporary concrete-block pit.

As the shoot date got closer, we had help from an unexpected source. A *New York Times* article by Sam Sifton introduced us to La Caja China, a Cuban-style barbecue-roasting oven. It was purported to be especially good for roasting pigs but also suitable for turkeys, chickens, even seafood.

Producer Audrey Bellezza ordered one and had it shipped to Dallas. We used the medium size model, which was 25 by 48 by 20 inches. It can hold up to 80 pounds of pork, six turkeys, or about 12 chickens.

It worked. Despite the miserably cold weather, our pig was finished in less than five hours. And the result was moist, meltingly tender, finger-licking-good succulent pork.

The big finish

The 10 friends we'd invited gathered for the final scene and chef Florence gave them instructions.

"Be enthusiastic," he said. "When we do the 'reveal,' make some noise, smile, don't hang back. Come around with your plates, reach for the food, enjoy it."

As chef Florence and Mr. Grant slid the lid off the roaster, the *oohs* and *aahs* were entirely natural reactions: The pork was beautiful, with its rosy dusting of ancho chile rub and



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The crew and stars of this episode of Food 911 weren't daunted by cold, dreary weather. A pig they came to barbecue and barbecue it they did at the West Fork Ranch on the far side of Fort Worth.



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The show was filmed on Steve Murrin's ranch outside Fort Worth. Helper Edd Chappell (left) plays with the ranch dog while Tim Macklin (center) watches another ranch hand light a fire in the roasting box.

caramelized meat.

It was about 5 p.m. The temperature was 40 degrees. And we stood around, eating some of the best food we'd ever had, off paper plates. The big pig was a big success.

Tyler Florence and *Food 911* had saved the day.

— *Dorothy Randoll / Special Contributor*

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