

VOGUE

FEB

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The Mayhem,
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People are Talking about

cooking large

Why cook for two, Jeffrey Steingarten asks, when you can cook for 40 and show the clan just how sexy roasting a whole beast can be?



WILD THINGS: COWS, PIGS, SHEEP, AND OTHER MEGAFUNA READY FOR THE FEAST.

The biggest problem in roasting a 70-pound pig at home is not being able to lift it. This gets more serious when the pig is floppy and wet, and even worse when it's greasy. I roasted one this past August as a birthday present for my wife, who had reached an age at which I, a year earlier, had spent the entire day weighing the pros and cons of defenestration. I can't remember which side came out on top.

The second biggest problem is buying a pig of that size in an American city, and the third biggest problem is finding an oven large enough to roast it in. My wife had not previously realized that a 70-pound roast pig was just what she wanted, though she offered surprisingly little resistance. The motive, the courage, the inspiration to undertake such a daunting project must nearly always come from a man. It is in our genetic makeup, our gender memory, our primordial purpose to want to cook large. That's what it says right here in *The Cambridge World History of Food*:

"Game, particularly large game, is often shared widely, whereas gathered foods tend to be acquired and consumed within the family. . . . [There are] ancestral associations of men with hunting, of hunting with high social status, and of game with generosity and display. [Capturing game] attracts more effort and attention than

the harvest of vegetable foods, and its procurers were often rewarded with favorable attention ranging from *subtle deference to sexual favors*. . . . [emphasis mine]."

In America, our need to share large, whole, roasted animals is typically limited to the Thanksgiving turkey, a far cry from what anthropologists call the "megafauna" of prehistory. I have long felt the need to get into megafauna but never knew how.

And then, six months ago, the breakthrough came. My friend Sam Sifton, who runs the food section of *The New York Times*, telephoned with one of his periodic flashes. "You've got to go to this

Web site. OK? Ready? L-A. C-A. J-A. Then China." A brief question period followed, mistakes were made and corrected, and suddenly it appeared: La Caja China, Spanish for "The Chinese Box," at www.lacajachina.com. But what was it exactly? "I'll call you back," I said.

As you can see for yourself, a Caja China (pronounced, roughly, CA-hah CHEE-nah) is a plywood box on wheels. It is

lined with stainless steel and has two metal handles, not unlike a wheelbarrow. The box itself is large and rectangular, four feet long and two feet wide and deep. This is the roomiest of three models and holds a pig weighing up to 100 pounds. You must assemble it yourself. In exchange for your labor, you pay a reasonable \$250, without shipping, without pig.

Oddly, or so it seemed at first, the fuel goes on top. First you set your pig onto the bottom of La Caja China. Then you seal the box with a large metal tray upon which you build a large charcoal fire. And in precisely three hours and 40 minutes your gigantic pig is done! To pig lovers, to lovers of all large, roasted animals, to all fans of megafauna, "done" means crispy and crunchy and pungent on the outside, succulent and gently flavored on the inside.

La Caja China is manufactured in Miami by a Cuban-American family, a father and son. The Web site is written in both English and Spanish but not in Chinese. The adjective *china* means "Chinese" but is used here to describe something mysterious, miraculous, magical. Roasting a 100-pound pig in three hours and 40 minutes is, from a Cuban viewpoint, nothing short of a miracle.

I telephoned Sam and counseled against La Caja China. It is essentially a roasting pit on wheels, I pointed out. Yes, its capacity is larger than the ovens in either of our kitchens, larger indeed than in anybody's kitchen. But the fatal flaw seemed to be this: In La Caja China, the thing to be cooked is hermetically isolated from the fuel, the charcoal. (The heat is radiated downward through the lid and onto the pig.) And so the flavor of the pig, its skin and its flesh, will be no more savory than if it were roasted in a gas or electric oven of great capacity. There will be no tang of bit- food ▶ 139

food

People are Talking about

ter smoke, no bosky perfume. Sam seemed to agree. I consulted with Mike Mills, one of America's great barbecue cooks. "In the deep South," he said, "a roasting box like that is called a Cajun Microwave. It does a fine job at what it's designed for—which is, you understand, a long way from real barbecue." I understood.

And yet, in the weeks that followed, my laptop inexplicably migrated time and again to www.lacajachina.com. I called Sam. He had already bought a Caja China, put it together, and roasted a pork shoulder (injected first with an orange juice—and-garlic marinade). The results were very fine, he said, crispy and juicy. I decided him for having wimped out with a measly pork shoulder. It probably weighed less than a large turkey. That was the point. Bosky

I cleared the idea with my wife, appropriately downplaying the enormity of what we were about to get ourselves into

or not, La Caja China still possessed a compelling and ineluctable pull for both of us, the promise of fulfilling our gender's primordial destiny, our genetic genius for roasting megafauna with fierce fire and presenting it to the clan.

I telephoned Roberto Guerra at La Caja China in Miami with endless questions. I dithered. And then, at last, I pounced. Five days remained before my wife's big August birthday. I had bought a few nice presents, but I needed a grand gesture. More crucial, I doubted that I would soon come upon a more convincing pretext for a cooking project of this size, cost, and potential to disrupt our lives. I was due out in San Diego that very afternoon—we recently rented a home there after selling our own in order to catch the bottom of the market. In one smooth and supremely efficient hour, I cleared the idea with my wife, appropriately downplaying the enormity of what we were about to get ourselves into, placed my order with Roberto, made a list of 40 friends who would constitute the clan, secured the services of two helpers for the party itself, and drew up a shopping list sufficient to meet all eventualities, including both partial and total failure of La Caja China. Packing my stunning new Kasumi slicing knife (with wiggly Damascus surface) in honor of my wife's practice of keeping our West Coast cutlery in tiptop shape by soaking it overnight in a pile in the metal sink before cramming it into the dishwasher, I headed for the airport.

In the car I pulled out the shopping list and was snagged by the very first line: "One big pig." I reviewed the possibilities. I have connections in the barbecue world, but my connections generally use pork raised in confinement on inhumane factory farms, which I try to avoid—except when there is a plate of real barbecue sitting right in front of me. I might have called Bill Niman at Niman Ranch but foresaw, accurately as it turns out, that their cooperative of hog suppliers, mainly family farms in the Midwest, was not likely to do a rush job. As the exit for JFK drew into sight, I decided to sacrifice an old friendship and fall on the mercy of Paul Bertolli.

This is a man who clearly knows his way around a pig. Paul is chef-partner at the restaurant Oliveto in Oakland, California (and was Alice Waters's head chef at Chez Panisse for ten years), where he takes delivery of one or two pigs every Monday and makes delectable sausages, prosciutto, and salumi from them. Paul's beautiful new book, *Cooking by Hand* (Clarkson Potter), has a thick and important section on pigs. Paul was out. I left a message—OK, a cry for help—and boarded the plane.

The next morning, as the sun tried in vain to penetrate the shroud of fog that, contrary to San Diego's carefully cultivated reputation, regularly smothers the coast, Paul was on the line. Not even men-

tioning my lack of advance planning skills, with which he has become familiar, he got down to business. He buys most of his pigs through Niman Ranch, but for an urgent need such as mine, he telephoned a farmer, Don Watson in Calistoga, at the northern reaches of the Napa Valley. Watson offered one of his fine, young, free-range pigs slaughtered the next day in Yuba City and trucked to Oliveto. There Paul would prepare the animal for La Caja China, opening it completely down the front, then severing the ribs along the spine and who knows where else so that the pig would lie flat. He would also remove the head and feet, pack the pig in a huge picnic cooler, and call U.P.S. All that was needed was my assent.

I assented. My wife's birthday pig would arrive with a day to

food spare. A few hours later, La Caja China arrived in two cardboard packages. In the evening, my wife and I sat together on what she insists on calling the front porch—

really more of a stoop—and started putting it together. The Caja is very nicely and minimally designed from utilitarian materials. The instructions are clear, especially to someone like me who was forced to take both shop and mechanical drawing in high school. (What were they thinking?) Nearly all the pieces must be attached to one another by long bolts pushed through pre-drilled holes and secured with wing nuts. Our model had badly drilled holes, and we were forced to smash the bolts through them with a heavy hammer, not included. Roberto Guerra acknowledges this problem and promises that by the time you read this the Caja will be manufactured to tighter standards. I believe him. There is nothing phony about the Guerras. Many hours later, we finished the Caja, then wheeled it around to find a level surface. The driveway was as close to flat as we could come.

Meanwhile, Paul Bertolli was generous with his porcine wisdom: You don't just roast a pig. You must ready it. You must nurture it, even in its deceased condition. At a minimum you must brine it, which makes for a tastier, juicier roast. Paul favors a concentration of 3 percent salt and 2 percent sugar of the total weight of water in the pig, brine, and ice (which you need in the absence of a giant cold box, unless you wish to die from eating rotten pig). I believe this calls for algebra. What with the demands of mechanical drawing and all, my algebra is really weak. So Paul sent me an Excel spreadsheet he had devised. The goal is to achieve an equilibrium of salt and sugar between the water in the pig and the water around the pig. (You will also want to add flavor to the brine—vegetables, citrus, spices, and herbs.) Without human intervention, this can require days of soaking, particularly in the large, dense muscles—the hams (the haunches and thighs) and the shoulders. It is here that you need to inject the brine. Paul had me buy a large syringe and a needle with many holes along the shaft. I was ready.

The pig arrived in its white plastic picnic cooler, also known as an ice chest, though there was no ice inside. I dragged it to the carport—isn't that the name?—between the driveway and garage, removed the pig from the cooler, hosed down the cooler, hosed down the pig, replaced the pig in the cooler, and covered it with 25 pounds of ice, half the projected weight of the total brine. Paul had thoughtfully included the head in a heavy, clear plastic bag, which I respectfully placed in the freezer.

To say that I removed the pig and replaced it is to forget that being able to lift the pig is half the battle. At (continued on page 232)

Donna Karan New York stores. Right: trench also at Etro Boutique, Coral Gables FL. Echo scarf. Bag at Stella McCartney, NYC, Los Angeles. Prada sandals. **222:** Trench, \$4,590. All jewelry by Amrita Singh, Craft Caravan, Fred Leighton, Lorraine Schwartz, and Loree Rodkin. Bottega Veneta bag. Fendi sandals. Fendi boutiques. **223:** Left: trench coat, \$3,048. Also at Emilio Pucci Boutique, Palm Beach. On both: all jewelry by Amrita Singh, Craft Caravan, and Lorraine Schwartz. In this story: vintage floral dresses from Southpaw Antique Clothing & Textiles, NYC. Antique silver necklaces and bracelets from Barbara Trujillo Antiques, Bridgehampton NY.

Index 224: For more information on Elegant Cheese Cakes, visit www.elegantcheesecakes.com. Ring, \$40,000. **226:** For more information on Cherry Pie, call (310) 204-6699. Luisa Beccaria silk dress. Flower girl's "Maryanne" dress.

COOKING LARGE

(continued from page 139)

first it kept slipping through my hands and falling back into the cooler. Then, after I had learned by trial and error how and where to grasp it, it sprang right out of the cooler and flopped onto the concrete floor. When my wife returned from work, we finally got the pig to lie still on a long plastic table we found in the garage. That's when I injected its larger muscles with dozens of shots of brine. At last, I slipped the pig back into its cooler, where it landed with a great briny splash.

Nearly a day later, as we prepared for the arrival of our guests, we laid the pig on the plastic table and sandwiched it between two wire grids, included, which we then squeezed together with a quartet of included S-hooks. The pig's arms and legs splayed out in all four directions. We lowered the drip tray to the bottom of the Caja and set the massive white animal—skin side down—onto it. With great excitement and no small amount of fear, we fitted the lid, really another very large rectangular tray, into the top; set a metal grid onto that; poured sixteen pounds of charcoal briquettes onto both ends of the grid; saturated them with lighter fluid; and lit them with a match. The flames rose nearly to the wooden roof of the carport. I always use pure hardwood charcoal and never start it with gasoline or whatever it is that comes in those cans. But the instructions that accompanied La Caja China, which are also attractively stamped in red and blue in Spanish and English onto the Caja's plywood sides, are completely explicit and unyielding. With a large pig hanging in the balance I was not inclined to deviate from them by so much as a whisker. Besides, the foul vapors from both the briquettes and the petroleum would never make contact with the pig, securely sealed into its plywood tomb.

After an hour, we added nine pounds of charcoal. Unaware of my weakness in ad-

vanced planning skills, our guests began to arrive. Yes, this was the time for which we had invited them, but it was long before the pig would be ready to eat. Another hour passed. We added more charcoal. The wonderful aroma of roasting pig had begun steaming out of little cracks in the Caja and perfumed the driveway and the street beyond, a cul-de-sac that ends at the rim of a beautifully wild canyon. As I had not paid enough attention to parking the Caja on perfectly level ground, the pig's juices overflowed at the lowest corner of the drip tray, or so we surmised, and leaked onto the driveway, where Sky King, our priceless golden retriever, and a neighbor's dog joined in the cleanup.

By now the sun had set on La Caja China and on the increasingly bumptious guests. Things were approaching their dramatic and hard-won climax. At last, the moment had come to open the Caja and for the first time in three hours glimpse the roasting pig. It was beyond compare, a breathtaking sight, the shoulders and hams dark and full of juice, the ribs caramelized and starting to separate. When we turned the pig, we saw that the vast sheet of skin covering its back was still moist and soft, a pinkish white. Only 30 minutes later, it became a burnished brownish gold and preternaturally crispy.

Soon our pig was stretched out on the plastic table, skin side up, freed from its wire grid. The crowd was rapt. I stood at the ham end, my Kasumi flashing in the dying light. I began to dismember our megafauna. The crunchy skin came off in large strips. Much of the meat was falling from the bones. I detached the two hams and two shoulders and lifted off two tender fillets along the backbone; one guest volunteered to slice a shoulder as I flipped over the midsection and began separating the ribs into tiny roasted pork chops. Guests were encouraged to pull off whatever morsels they coveted. Sky King was honored with the pig's tail.

Catherine Malandrino limited-edition dress, \$1,500. Feather "Rena" bag with crystal detail. To special order at Badgley Mischka, Beverly Hills. "Chandra" dress, \$15,850. Dior Boutique, NYC. Boy's wool blazer, shorts, and cotton oxford shirt. Silver-plated champagne flutes. Links of London, NYC. Manolo Blahnik "Pippa" sandals. **229:** Neil Lane Collection ring, \$26,500. Neil Lane Jewelry, Los Angeles. Bag at Kate Spade stores. Delman "Vote-S" pumps. Cashmere cable tube top and turquoise seersucker ball skirt. Silk sleeveless top and mini. "Camilla" clutch. Scarves at A Mano, Washington DC; Gump's, San Francisco. Satin strapless ball gown with tulle ruffled bodice that cascades down the back. **Last look 234:** Platinum, diamond, and conch pearl multistrand necklace, \$165,000. Tiffany & Co. ALL PRICES APPROXIMATE.

We had poured the pig drippings into a large bowl, and in the kitchen another guest volunteered to skim off the fat, leaving the most concentrated, savory, sweet, meaty pork broth imaginable. Half of this was poured into another bowl, where I mixed it in equal parts with a tart Mojo Criollo made from Roberto Guerra's recipe, a mixture of sour oranges, cumin, salt, garlic, pepper, and oregano. Thus, our guests had a choice of two sauces. They vastly preferred the Mojo Criollo to the pure pork juices, which I found ambrosial enough in themselves. We also prepared irresistible Cuban sandwiches—the thick crunchy skin and the moist pork flesh chopped together into quarter-inch pieces, piled onto a sweet dinner roll, and flavored with tangy Mojo Criollo. Remembering the anthropological literature, I was ready to receive the entire range of well-deserved rewards from *subtle deference to sexual favors* (emphasis mine) but had to content myself with the former.

The days that followed felt like sleepwalking compared to the primal excitement and sensual pleasure of roasting a 70-pound pig. This is a happy ending that has still never quite ended. Our neighbor across the street, an architect, built a clever device to help keep the Caja level. We've roasted several small lambs and a kid, though these were perhaps small enough to fit, halved, on our three-foot-long barbecue grill, which I am eager to try. Roberto Guerra invented a metal smoke box that you hang inside the Caja, and I used it successfully over Thanksgiving. The last time I fed Sky King a bowl of dry dog food, he looked at me disdainfully—the powerful megacook he had once worshiped had turned back into a lowly shopper-gatherer. □

BABY, IT'S YOU

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wearing as an example of a fashion item she loves. "I tried it on with the person who was with me, and I loved it so much but said,