Cajun Microwave proves big hit at show

By NORA ADAMS
Special to FOOD

The delicious cooked pork called Cochon du Lait can be prepared in the time-consuming traditional manner over an open fire or it can be cooked with less effort and time in a Cajun Microwave.

Guests at the FOOD FOCUS shows had the opportunity to sample pork cooked in a Cajun Microwave, to look at the one built for The Advocate and to take home a drawing of one.

Publisher David Manship helped cook the pigs served at the shows and said using a Cajun Microwave is easy and fun, giving the chef more time to spend with guests. Manship said he and the other cook, photographer John Ballance, didn’t even turn the pig during cooking. Manship said the pigs came from Scallan’s Meat Market, where they were injected with a mixture of seasonings.

A Cajun Microwave is an oven designed for outdoor cooking with the heat source on top. However, they don’t all look alike and range from simple, inexpensive devices to more elaborate versions.

The Cajun Microwave in its simplest form is a wooden box with a metal top to hold charcoal. Some are lined with metal. Handles make the box easier to transport. Some are mounted on carts at waist level and have rubber wheels.

A drip pan is underneath the grate in some models, while others may be built at a slight angle with a hole for drainage. The box itself may be made of...
plywood, oak or cypress, and it may be lined in stainless steel or another type of metal. The top, actually a pan to hold charcoal, is also of metal.

A.J. Labello of Denham Springs has made Cajun Microwaves for himself and friends, cooked on them and eaten meats cooked in them. “It cooks pretty quick . . . meat is delicious,” he said.

“It cooks from the top down. The first time you see one, you wouldn’t think it would work,” Labello said.

Since the Cajun Microwave is “more an oven, you don’t get a smoke flavor,” he said, noting, “Smoke doesn’t get to the meat. It’s outside the box.”

Labello said a friend, Ralph Willie of Grosse Tete, came up with the suggestion to build a Cajun Microwave, and their first effort was used to cook a small pig for Thanksgiving dinner at the shop where he works. He is an employee of Clovis Hendry, which does industrial sheet metal work.

“Our first one was too small,” he said, pointing out that the meat will burn if the oven is too small, so their next version was deeper. He said the temperature can be controlled by the “amount of fire.”

Labello said the flavor of the meat depends on the seasonings used, being careful that they not overpower the flavor of the meat. He also recommends basting the meat to help keep it moist. He said the meat only needs one or two turns.

Labello said if you are making a Cajun Microwave you should give some thought to the type of metal you will use, considering whether it will rust and avoiding anything that might poison you.

While popular for cooking pigs, some cooks have also used Cajun Microwaves to prepare venison, chicken, brisket, fish, sausage, rabbits and squirrel.

“The range is wide. A lot of people use different things,” noted retiree Ken Conrad of Breaux Bridge, who has cooked on Cajun Microwaves.

He has this advice for cooking on a Cajun Microwave: “You can’t lift the cover too often. That’s the secret.” He suggested lifting the cover no more than two or three times.

 Conrad said it took 4½ to 5 hours to cook the pig. He said the Cajun Microwave he used has an oak box lined with zinc and a grill on the bottom to place the meat. The top that holds the charcoal is made of cast iron, he said, and the cooker is big enough to accommodate a pig.

Farmer Steve Mitchell of Hessmer built one of the Cajun Microwaves used to cook at the Jeanesonne family reunion held in Marksville in September and has made them for himself and his family. He has one made with three-quarter inch plywood and a top of thin sheet iron. The wooden box isn’t lined with metal, but has a grill and drip pan. He said the material you use “depends on what you want to spend.”

Mitchell made a smaller one to accommodate brisket and chickens.

Capital City Press employee Blaine Stockwell built the Cajun Microwave used at FOODFOCUS shows and used resourcefulness in building his first one. The plywood box is lined with metal plates of the type used to produce The Advocate, and the lid is an angle iron frame holding a metal mold used to cast cement anchors for newspaper vending boxes. Stockwell put a grate he found “lying around” the carpentry shop in the bottom and built the oven at an angle so juices can run out instead of going into a drip pan.

Ballance explained, “A Cajun Microwave is not a smoker. . . . It’s a portable oven.”

A 100-pound pig cooked on an open fire might require 12 hours, while a Cajun Microwave cuts the cooking time in half, he said. And, a split pig cooks faster than a whole one.