



Summer Flavor School #4: deep, smoky flavor without the meat

Welcome to week #4 of Summer Flavor School! We've covered umami, the aromatic base, and blooming spices, and this week is a fun one: getting deep, smoky flavor without bacon, a ham hock, or a backyard smoker. Baked beans and Southern greens traditionally get their smoky taste from slow smoking or a live fire, while a pot of chili gets it from smoked chilies and spices. Either way, you can get most of the way there with a few plant ingredients plus a couple of clever techniques. Food takes on smoke two ways. It can be borrowed from ingredients that already taste smoky, or made by charring over high heat. Most great smoky dishes use some of each.

Borrowed Smoke: Ready-Made Sources

These pantry staples bring the campfire to your kitchen.

- Smoked paprika, also called pimentón, is the Spanish go-to for warm, smoky depth in beans, stews, and roasted vegetables. A little goes a long way, so add it gradually and taste as you go.
- Chipotle in adobo, which is a smoked jalapeño canned in a tangy sauce, brings smoke, heat, and a little sweetness at once. Look for small cans in the Mexican or international aisle. One or two minced peppers flavor a whole pot.
- Smoked salt adds a gentle wisp of smoke anywhere you'd normally salt. It's the one item here you may need to hunt for, in larger grocery stores, spice shops, or online.
- Liquid smoke is real smoke captured in water, so a few drops go a long way. Find it near the barbecue sauce or condiments. Add it sparingly and taste, since a heavy hand leaves it harsh and bitter, sort of reminiscent of an ashtray.

DIY Smoke: Char It Yourself

You can also create smoky flavor with heat, letting the food itself char and smoke. The idea is the same no matter the equipment: cook a vegetable over high heat well past golden, until the skin or edges actually blacken, and it takes on a deep, smoky flavor you can use in salsas, dips, sauces, and soups.

How to Char Vegetables

Charring sounds intimidating, but it comes down to high heat, long tongs, and a little patience. The method depends on the vegetable:

- Peppers, chilies, and eggplant: lay them right across the grate over a gas burner, where a whole pepper or eggplant is big enough to rest on the bars without falling through. Turn with tongs every few minutes until blackened all over, about 5 minutes for peppers and 10 to 15 for eggplant. Steam peppers and eggplant in a covered bowl for ten minutes afterward, then slip off the charred skins. For small chilies or smaller pieces of vegetable, set a wire rack over the burner so they can't fall in.
- Corn: lay it straight on the grate and turn until the kernels char in spots, about 5 to 10 minutes.
- Tomatoes and onions: halve them and blacken cut-side down in a dry cast iron skillet, 5 to 8 minutes.
- No gas burner? Roast or broil in the oven until the edges blacken, usually 10 to 15 minutes under a broiler.

Isn't Charring Unhealthy?

A common question about charred food is whether it raises cancer risk. Here's the science. The two compounds of concern are heterocyclic amines (HCAs) and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). HCAs form at high temperatures from the creatine and amino acids in animal muscle, so they need meat, poultry, or fish to form at all. PAHs form when fat drips onto flames and the smoke coats the food, which is mostly a problem with fatty meat on a grill.

HCAs require creatine to form, and since creatine is found only in animal muscle and not in plants, charred vegetables produce essentially none. PAHs can form on anything touched by smoke, but they come mostly from fat dripping onto flames, which is why a fatty steak produces far more than vegetables do. The one thing to watch is heavy oil on vegetables over an open flame, since dripping oil can create the same smoke, so go easy on the oil when you're grilling and let the char come from the heat itself. Cooking under a broiler, in a dry skillet, or in the oven sidesteps the issue entirely, since there's no flame for fat to drip into.

The one exception among plants is acrylamide, which forms in starchy foods like potatoes and bread when they're cooked at high heat, so if you're charring potatoes, aim for deep golden rather than truly burnt.

Add Smoke to Your Meals

A little smoke takes plant dishes from flat to "fire":

- Beans and lentils with smoked paprika and chipotle
- Collard greens or kale with smoked salt and a little liquid smoke
- Tomato or bean soups with smoked paprika
- Veggie chili with chipotle and chili powder
- Roasted or grilled vegetables with smoked salt

Smoky Pulled Jackfruit Sandwiches



Jackfruit is a giant tropical fruit, the largest that grows on a tree. Picked young and green, before it ripens and sweetens, it's starchy and neutral rather than fruity, with a firm, stringy flesh that pulls apart into strands remarkably like shredded pork or chicken. That stringy, meaty flesh makes it a natural meat substitute, since it stays firm and chewy through cooking, soaks up whatever sauce you cook it in, and needs no processing to get there, unlike most packaged faux meats. Nutritionally it sits somewhere between a vegetable and a starch: low in calories, naturally free of cholesterol and saturated fat, and a source of fiber, potassium, vitamin C, and magnesium. Look for young or green jackfruit in brine or water, not the ripe kind in syrup, which is sweet and meant for dessert. Asian and South Asian markets are your best bet and usually the cheapest, though many grocery stores now stock it canned in the international aisle.

This sandwich uses both smoke tricks from this issue: smoked paprika and chipotle in the sauce, and a quick run under the broiler to char the edges. Pile it on buns with slaw and you have the barbecue sandwich of the summer.

Ingredients (serves 4):

- 2 cans (14 oz each) young green jackfruit in brine or water, NOT the ripe kind in syrup, drained
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 onion, diced
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 to 2 chipotle peppers in adobo, minced, plus 1 tablespoon of the sauce
- 2 teaspoons smoked paprika
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 cup tomato sauce or passata
- 1 tablespoon molasses
- 2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
- 2 tablespoons maple syrup or honey
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- Salt
- 4 whole grain buns and slaw, for serving

Instructions:

1. Drain the jackfruit and cut the firm core wedge off each piece, then pull the rest apart with your fingers or two forks into shredded strands. Chop the tough cores small and add them to the pot too.
2. Heat the olive oil in a skillet over medium. Cook the onion until soft, about 6 minutes, then add the garlic and cook another minute.
3. Stir in the chipotle, smoked paprika, and cumin and let them bloom for 30 seconds. Add the tomato sauce, molasses, vinegar, maple syrup, and mustard, and stir into a smoky barbecue sauce.
4. Add the shredded jackfruit and 1/2 cup water, and simmer, stirring now and then, until the jackfruit is very tender and the sauce is thick, about 20 to 25 minutes. Mash it a little as it cooks so it shreds further and soaks up the sauce. Season with salt.
5. For char, spread the jackfruit on a lined sheet pan and broil for 5 to 8 minutes, until the edges blacken and crisp. Pile onto buns and top with slaw.

Note: Buy young or green jackfruit packed in brine or water, not the ripe kind in syrup, which is sweet and meant for dessert. Asian and South Asian markets are your best bet and often the cheapest, and many grocery stores now carry it canned in the international aisle.