

Milk crate



Time to bring home the bacon

If our ancient sandal-clad forebears could rustle up some charcuterie, so can we, writes **P.J. Booth**.

I like food and cooking but whether I understand either is another matter. Several years ago I decided to make smoked trout and salmon since I had a new methylated spirits-powered smoker and needed to use it. The results were, if I may say so, quite surprising. The products were so much better than store-bought versions that it was spooky. What are they doing that makes the commercial stuff so bland?

Emboldened, I decided to make smoked bacon. The internet was replete with recipes and videos, although most of these were made by our North American cousins. Baseball hats, overalls and industrial-sized smokers seemed to be essential. So too were kosher salt, proprietary curing products and other things not readily available in Australia.

Nonetheless, the result was very pleasing. This does not mean there weren't mistakes. The less said about smoking duck breast and salmon at the same time, the better.

Then I cured a ham, or so I thought. I was actually making prosciutto but didn't realise it at the time. It was beginner's luck (although I did not appreciate that either) and I was on a roll. I bought books on the subject and when they eventually arrived from overseas, I was disappointed to find they lacked detail and explanation. This was scary stuff and I was scared. Mostly about killing others, less about myself.

Thereafter I experimented with curing techniques (there are not many) and adapted recipes from imperial to metric. I played around with air-dried sausages of various descriptions and whole meat products such as bacon, pancetta, ham and prosciutto.

There were many failures, but after a time they were outnumbered by successes. Fear and loathing were slowly replaced by cautious optimism. Some equipment was bought along the way, such as a mincer, sausage-stuffer and digital thermometer.

One thing above all others remained an issue: how to provide an environment for air-drying. I tried placing the products under the house (they were quickly resplendent in "The Mould of Many Colours") or on a string and pulley high on the verandah (soon a fun park for tiny livestock). Unfortunately, I did not have a 3000-year-old limestone cave in the backyard. Salvation came in the form of a wine refrigerator and things became easier after that.

Why do I tell you these things? Because making your own charcuterie is not hard and I urge everyone to give it a crack.

Charcuterie is a method of preserving meat that is thousands of years old.

At its simplest, it requires only salt – anything else is for flavour or texture.

Despite charcuterie's

antiquity, it remains a culinary technique of modern relevance, unchanged from when it was undertaken by people without electricity and with leather sandals. If they could do it, and more particularly if I can do it, then you can too.

P.J. Booth is a self-taught charcuter and the author of *A Charcuterie Diary*. He will be co-hosting a dinner event at Oakridge Restaurant in the Yarra Valley on June 1 to celebrate the release of his second book, *Feathered*. Tickets via oakridgewines.com.au.

