

March 5, 2019

We're Living in a Golden Age of Classy Pork Rinds

By REBECCA ROTHBAUM

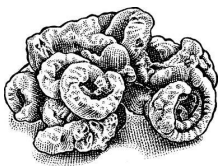
The salty snack gets a makeover, with high-end ingredients and vegan options; 'Hmm, let me hear more about this'

A buzzy snack is popping up in supermarkets across the country alongside kale chips and quinoa puffs: pork rinds.



Ryan Farr, the CEO and founder of 4505 Meats, started making chicharrones in his kitchen, in part as a response to the food waste he saw as a chef and butcher. PHOTO: 4505 MEATS

Even longtime fans might not recognize their new place in the foodie food chain.



New brands are seeking to transcend the rind's reputation as a greasy gas-station staple by using premium ingredients like humanely raised pork and Himalayan pink salt. If that's not enough to provoke a serious case of cognitive dissonance, there are even vegan alternatives.

A mini-manifesto on the packaging of Pork Clouds Cinnamon Ceylon rinds touts their lack of preservatives. It also encourages customers to pair them with a craft beer, or "chop for a most curious crouton." (Bacon's Heir, the Atlanta-based maker of these rinds, also makes gluten-free pork panko.)

"These are the pork rinds you could bring to a dinner party and not be embarrassed," Bacon's Heir founder and president Brett Goodson says.

Rinds, their chewier cousins, cracklings, and chicharrones are the latest foods to get a full makeover to please the kind of Whole Foods shoppers who wouldn't be caught dead buying groceries in a 7-Eleven. If upscale biscuits and jerky exist, what's to stop crunchy crisps made of fried pork skin?

Bill Smith, of the acclaimed, locavore-minded Chapel Hill, N.C. restaurant Crook's Corner, laughed when he learned that pork rinds had gone gourmet.

"We've always eaten them, but it's hilarious that they've become somehow chic," he says.

Ana Ulin, a 39-year-old software developer in Palo Alto, Calif., grew up eating freshly fried rinds in her native Madrid. She says she was surprised and a bit amused when she began noticing pork rinds in her local groceries "marketed as a hipster thing."



Snacklins may look like pork rinds, but they are vegan-friendly, made from yuca and mushrooms. PHOTO: SNACKLINS LLC/MARRINER MARKETING

But since sampling some of the new breed of rinds several years ago, she keeps a supply at home, usually the Bay Area brand 4505 Meats, which makes chicharrones in several flavors, including jalapeño cheddar. Ms. Ulin says they remind her of her childhood, plus they're low in carbs and filling. "I feel less guilty eating them than a bag of potato chips."

Ryan Farr, a chef and butcher, founded 4505 Meats 10 years ago out of his kitchen, selling bags at local groceries and farmers markets.

The turning point came about three years ago, when the brand switched from the kind of clear plastic bags used by mass-market porkrind makers to a heavier, opaque version with a design that Mr. Farr describes as artisanal. It's emblazoned with its commitment to humanely raised pork, free of added hormones or antibiotics, and the motto, "Go Pig or Go Home."

"I have definitely seen a big swing among consumers from 'No, I don't eat that,' to 'Hmm, let me hear more about this,'" he says.

Mr. Farr started out selling 1-ounce bags for \$5. Now his suggested retail price is \$4.99 for a 2.5-ounce bag. (By comparison, Walmart sells a 4-ounce bag of chicharrones from Turkey Creek, a traditional brand popular in the South, for about a dollar.)

Nutritionist Lisa Sasson, a clinical associate professor in New York University's Nutrition and Food Studies department, cautions against pigging out on the snack. "I would never use the word 'healthy' to describe them," says Ms. Sasson.

The fatty rinds appeal to snackers looking to lower carbs and increase protein in their diets.



EPIC pork rinds tout premium ingredients such as pink Himalayan salt and antibiotic-free pork. PHOTO: ANDREA ROMERO/EPIC

EPIC Provisions, founded by an Austin, Texas, couple who had trouble finding snacks to fit the paleo diet, offers pork rinds (fried and baked) and cracklings, which now come in five different flavors, including chili lime and maple bacon options never sampled by our Paleolithic ancestors.

Maria Carolina Comings, business unit director at General Mills, which bought EPIC, says pork rinds were a logical step for EPIC, which tries to limit waste by using as much of the animals that go into its products as possible. The company also sells jarred animal fats, including bison tallow and duck fat, and bone broth. The rinds are one of EPIC's fastest-growing segments, Ms. Comings says.

Ted Lee, who has co-written Southern cookbooks with his brother, Matt, sees the new-wave rinds as the latest manifestation of a decades-long infatuation with unpretentious Southern food. He recalls the earlier craze over country ham: That humble dish even landed at chef David Chang's Momofuku Ssäm Bar in New York.

"I have no problem with pork rinds becoming the next avocado toast," Mr. Lee says.

At least one expert at the University of Mississippi saw this fatty fad coming. John T. Edge, is director of the Southern Foodways Alliance, an organization based at the Center for the Study of Southern

Culture in Oxford, Miss. He notes that rinds have always been tied to hog slaughter, from the age of family farming to today. "They have always been a simple, elegant, frugal food that is both hyper-traditional and thoroughly modern."



A new generation of pork rinds are coming in flavors like sea salt and green chili. PHOTO: 4505 MEATS

Samy Kobrosly is among those to have recently reconsidered pork rinds. He was between restaurant gigs when his friend, Logan McGear, the former chef and owner of the Washington, D.C., barbecue restaurant Smoke & Barrel, challenged him to come up with a vegan version of chicharrones. The task required Mr. Kobrosly, who is Muslim, to sample his first rind.

"That airiness, that crunchiness and that saltiness you get with a pork rind is very unique," he says.

Although his vegetable version—an amalgam of yuca, mushroom and onion—never wound up on Smoke & Barrel's menu, the two men realized they had a marketable snack. Today, shoppers can find Snacklins at more than 450 Walmarts, plus Whole Foods and a smattering of other grocers nationwide.

The product's porky association proved too much of a hurdle to selling a low-calorie, vegan snack. Recently, the three-year-old company dropped its tagline "Cracklins without the pork." The name, a riff on cracklins, remains.

"Pork rinds are just not appetizing to some people," says Mr. Kobrosly, who goes by the title of chief snack bagger. "Stereotypes suck."

KNOW YOUR PORK RINDS

Many new pork rind brands label themselves as cracklings or chicharrones, which might lead would-be snackers to wonder what the difference is. Alex Stelzleni, an associate professor at the University of Georgia's Meat Science and Technology Center, explains:

WALL STREET JOURNAL

Pork Rinds

The term pork rinds simply means pork skin, without fat, whether raw or, as Dr. Stelzleni, put it, “what you’d find in a bag, fried and puffed up.” To get that airy quality, the skin is rendered of its fat and fried twice.

Cracklings

According to Dr. Stelzleni, the Southern term cracklings (or the more colloquial cracklins) is synonymous with pork rinds, though there are regional differences. In some areas, cooks will leave a bit more fat on the skin for a chewier or crunchier texture, which is what you’d find in the Southern staple crackling cornbread.

Chicharrones

Popular in much of the Spanish-speaking world, chicharrones are fried pork skin or a combination of pork skin and some fat and lean meat, typically from the belly. However, Dr. Stelzleni says, variations abound from country to country. “Even in Mexico, what are called chicharrones changes as you go from the northern to southern states,” he says. In some countries, chicharrones are even made from other meat, like chicken.