

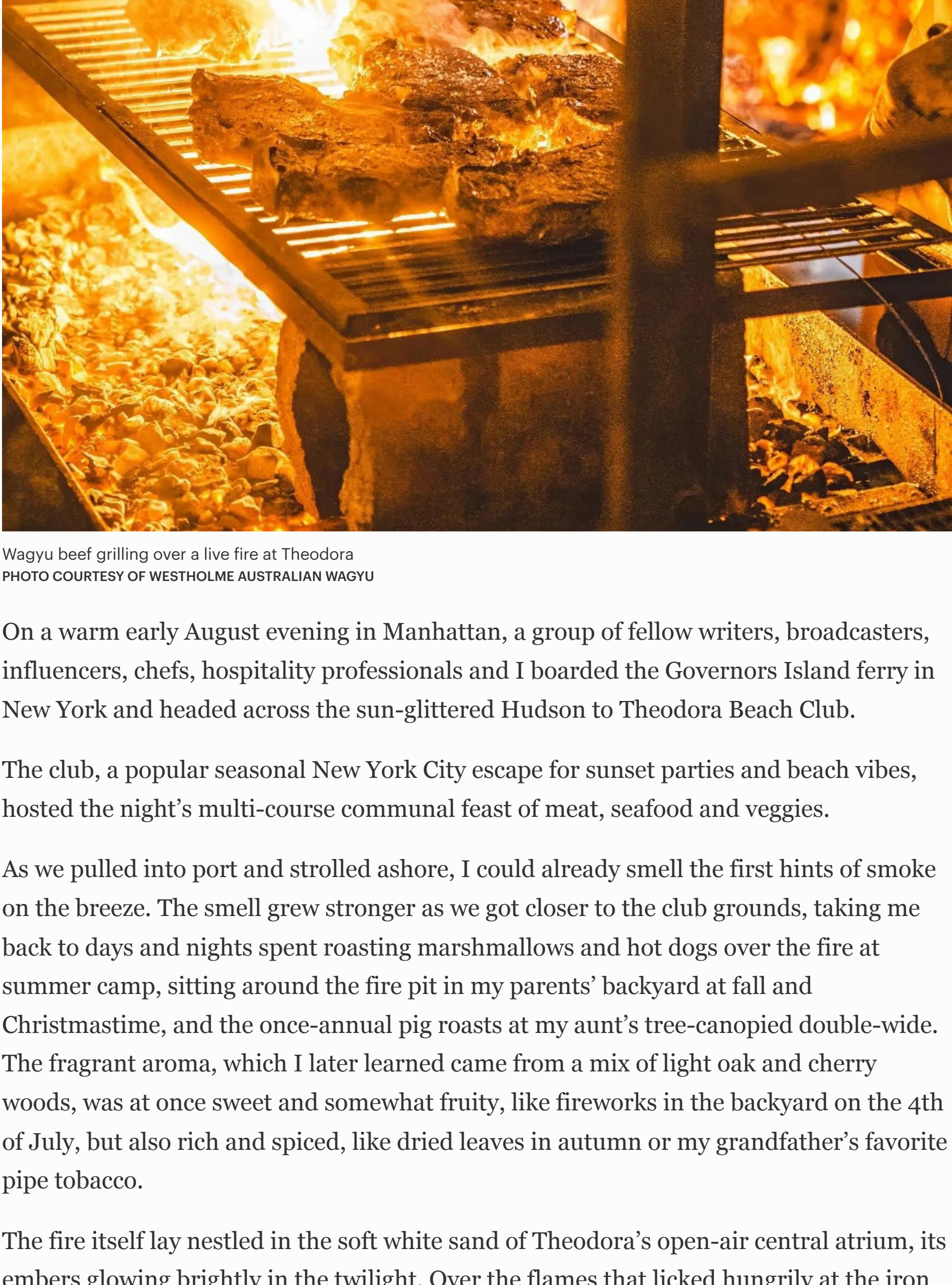
Why Chefs Are Returning To Live Fire To Cook Their Feasts

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Published Sep 22, 2026, 02:12pm EDT, Updated Sep 22, 2026, 03:15pm EDT



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Wagyu beef grilling over a live fire at Theodora
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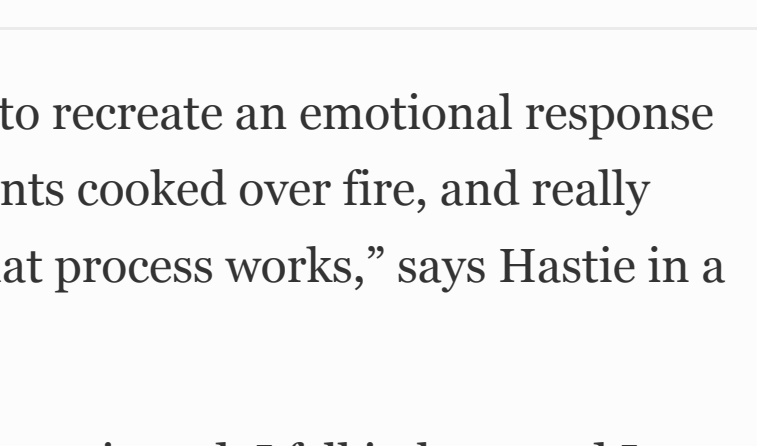
On a warm early August evening in Manhattan, a group of fellow writers, broadcasters, influencers, chefs, hospitality professionals and I boarded the Governors Island ferry in New York and headed across the sun-glittered Hudson to Theodora Beach Club.

The club, a popular seasonal New York City escape for sunset parties and beach vibes, hosted the night's multi-course communal feast of meat, seafood and veggies.

As we pulled into port and strolled ashore, I could already smell the first hints of smoke on the breeze. The smell grew stronger as we got closer to the club grounds, taking me back to days and nights spent roasting marshmallows and hot dogs over the fire at summer camp, sitting around the fire pit in my parents' backyard at fall and Christmastime, and the once-annual pig roasts at my aunt's tree-canopied double-wide. The fragrant aroma, which I later learned came from a mix of light oak and cherry woods, was at once sweet and somewhat fruity, like fireworks in the backyard on the 4th of July, but also rich and spiced, like dried leaves in autumn or my grandfather's favorite pipe tobacco.

The fire itself lay nestled in the soft white sand of Theodora's open-air central atrium, its embers glowing brightly in the twilight. Over the flames that licked hungrily at the iron grills hanging above them stood guest-Chef Lennox Hastie, his brow already sheened with sweat. He was prepping an experience he'd spent years perfecting and had come all the way from Australia to showcase: live-fire cooking.

The author of *Finding Fire* and owner of Firedoor, an award-winning wood-fueled restaurant in Sydney, NSW, Hastie learned his craft in northern Spain, in the Basque Country, under the tutelage of self-taught chef Victor Arguinzoniz, the pioneer of modern wood-fired grilling. After years working in Michelin-starred kitchens across Europe, he says cooking with Arguinzoniz over the scorching heat of an asador (a traditional Basque grill) helped him discover his true passion and calling.



The atrium at Theodora
PHOTO VIA WESTHOLME AUSTRALIAN WAGYU

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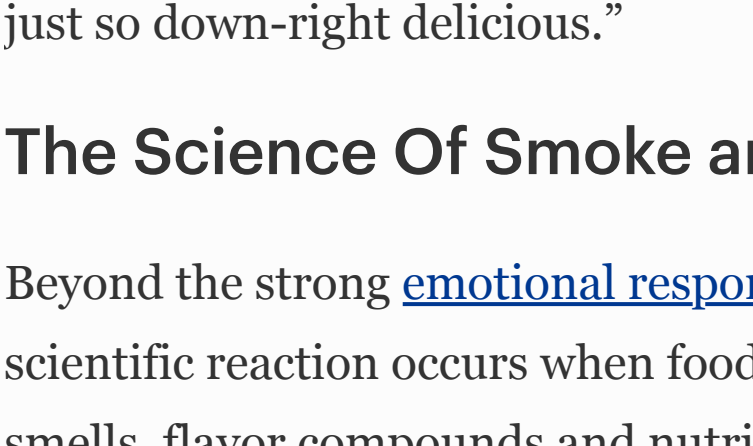
"I watched this man with no formal training cooking to recreate an emotional response from his childhood, from growing up having ingredients cooked over fire, and really highlight the simple beauty and complexity of how that process works," says Hastie in a phone interview.

"It was something that I had never seen before; I was captivated, I fell in love, and I wanted not only to learn but also help this one man on the grill in his endeavor to draw focus to this fantastic style of cooking."

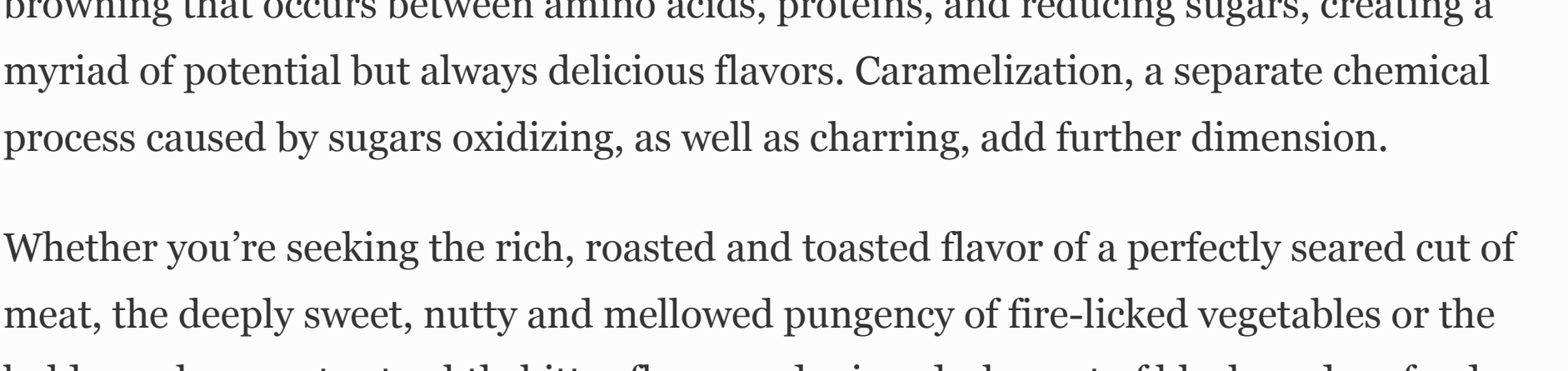
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Chef Lennox Hastie
PHOTO VIA WESTHOLME AUSTRALIAN WAGYU



Hastie and chefs like him insist that [live-fire cooking](#) has forever changed their craft, and that guests who seek it out will enjoy meals that not only change whatever preconceived notions they may have of any one kind of cuisine, but also demonstrate just how much untopped flavor potential live fire can ignite in whatever fare it touches.

"It's completely changed the way in which I cook and brought me closer to every ingredient I use," says Hastie.

"I haven't found another form of cooking that is so true, honest, interactive, exciting and just so down-right delicious."

The Science Of Smoke And Flame

Beyond the strong [emotional response that live-fire cooking kindles in people](#), a real scientific reaction occurs when food touches the flame, creating more and different smells, flavor compounds and nutritional qualities than other heat sources.

The first and most important response is the Maillard reaction, a non-enzymatic browning that occurs between amino acids, proteins, and reducing sugars, creating a myriad of potential but always delicious flavors. Caramelization, a separate chemical process caused by sugars oxidizing, as well as charring, add further dimension.

Whether you're seeking the rich, roasted and toasted flavor of a perfectly seared cut of meat, the deeply sweet, nutty and mellowed pungency of fire-licked vegetables or the bold, smoky-sweet yet subtly bitter flavor and crisp, dark crust of blackened seafood, only live-fire cooking provides the intense heat needed to achieve their best representations. Hastie says that it's the hardest form of cooking to get consistent results from.

"The process only starts with lighting a fire; from there, you're timing all your preparations in harmony with different heats, and observing and responding to every decision and consequence in real time," says Hastie.

"You can't just come in, flick on a gas stove or an oven and dial in a recipe."

Chef Andrew Clarke, a fire-cooking specialist and founder of Acme Fire Cult –a live-fire restaurant in East London –calls it an interactive sport.

"Open-fire cooking is primal; it's in our DNA, but you have to be flexible, you have to adapt, you have to keep trying new things and you can't take any step for granted," says Clarke.

"There are so many different elements that you have to constantly tend to, because when you do everything right there are no limits to what you can reveal in the food you cook."

The Technique of Flavor

Understanding how the wood burns and the flavors it imparts to ingredients is the first step to successful live-fire cooking. Whether it's almond wood from Spain, briar wood from South Africa, apple wood from China and Europe or black walnut from the United States, different woods impart different flavor profiles on different ingredients. Chefs have to choose different types of wood to suit those different ingredients, and consider not only how hot they burn, but also the flavor nuances they bring to every dish.

"Some wood can overwhelm certain ingredients, and we don't want to overwhelm; we want to enhance, to create an interaction," says Hastie.

"When the wood and the embers marry together, and these little puffs of smoke happen after the fat and juices from the food drip onto them, vaporizing and coating the ingredient, that is the magical interaction that you're looking to create."

To achieve that magical chemical combustion, chefs have to know how hot the fuel is, how long it will burn and when and where to add the next round of wood. They have to monitor and understand the fire's heat, knowing where it's hottest and where different food items need to be placed to avoid burning and achieve their best preparation.

"You have to know how to use hot embers, how to react to and use what I call the arc of radiation, of heat that they produce, while also taking advantage of dying embers, smoldering or gently burning logs, flames and smoke, all to create and enhance flavor," says Clarke.

Live fire cooking also doesn't come with the luxury of the equipment regularly used in conventional kitchens today, with timers, sensors, probes, stoves, ovens and cookware all designed to monitor, maintain and evenly distribute heat. Chefs are on their own, and the window for mistakes is wide open. For Clarke, learning to adapt to that unpredictability is half the fun of open fire-cooking.

"Anything can happen, and if you turn your back for a second, you could ruin a meal and burn the whole place down. Adapting to that takes time; it's trial and error," says Clarke.

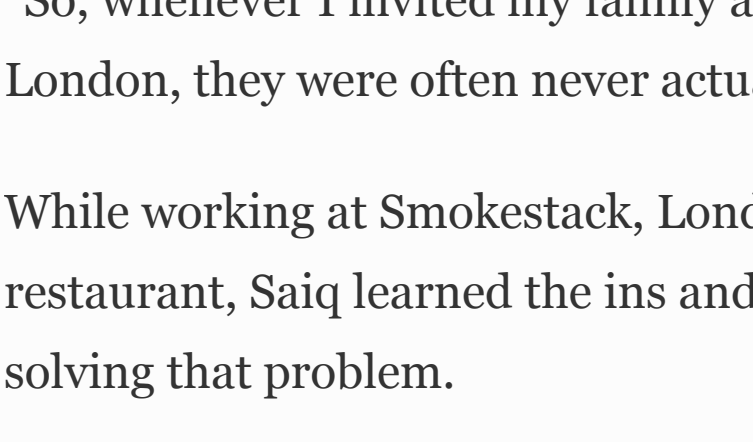
"But while even today I'm still constantly burning things, with live fire cooking you achieve temperatures and flavor nuances that you're just never going to find in a conventional kitchen."

Over the fire at Theodora, Hastie prepared oysters on the half-shell in kumquat syrup, red kangaroo with charred onion and peppercorn, bluefin tuna with tomatoes, fennel, and Tarragon, grilled day boat scallops with charred corn drizzled with XO sherry sauce, charred leeks with hazelnut Romesco, grilled razor clams seasoned with French curry, charred baby romaine, golden Tilefish smoked on paperbark and Westholme Wagyu beef striploin.



Theodora team plating charred romaine
PHOTO VIA WESTHOLME AUSTRALIAN WAGYU

As they cooked everything to perfection, he and his team never looked up their task, never stopped fanning the flames to create the perfect embers, never stopped pooling them and raking them back and forth under their grills, and never stopped moving. Watching them work, stained with sweat, dancing around one another amid sparks, cinders and early evening shadow, their faces often inches from the flame-kissed grills, was like watching smiths at the forge.



Chef Hastie and team at the grill
PHOTO VIA WESTHOLME AUSTRALIAN WAGYU

For Mursal Saiq, chef and co-owner of Cue Point, an Afghan-Texas infusion barbecue pub in London, live-fire cooking is an elemental craft fueled by history, community and culture.

"Homo erectus first using fire to cook is directly correlated to our evolution into Homo sapiens," says Saiq.

"It's a science, an art form and one of the most beautiful and global ways to unite different peoples and share their stories through food."

The Spark Of History And Culture

Born in Kabul, Afghanistan, Saiq and her family evacuated to Mumbai after Operation Cyclone, the long-running Central Intelligence Agency program to arm and finance the mujahideen in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. They eventually settled in Hackney, London, where Saiq grew up alongside people from Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Africa. Her neighbors spoke roughly 89 different languages. One of the most common complaints she heard was that there was never any place good to eat.

"We're still deeply segregated in the United Kingdom, and many pubs and restaurants in London aren't kosher-friendly, halal-friendly, or Hindu-friendly; they don't market to or think about those communities," says Saiq.

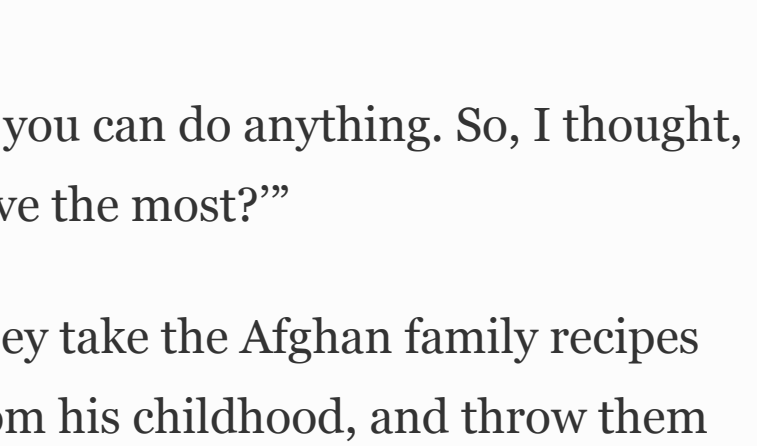
"So, whenever I invited my family and friends out, in one of the most diverse areas in London, they were often never actually able to eat or drink very much."

While working at Smokestack, London's first-ever American-barbecue-inspired restaurant, Saiq learned the ins and outs of Texas BBQ and took her first steps toward solving that problem.

"I learned the very strict method of Texas-style brisket there: the repetition, the Demerara sugar, black pepper, salt, and cooking low and slow, not high and fast," says Saiq.

"I also learned that American barbecue, more than almost any other style of food, took so many different people and stories to create."

[Barbecue as we know it](#), meat cooked over a grill or pit and covered in spices and basting sauce, has some of its roots in the Caribbean. The word barbecue is believed to originate from "barabucu," which in the language of the Taino people refers to the wooden frames they used to cook over a fire. Spanish colonists adapted the word and cooking style, calling it barbacoa, and helped spread it through Europe and across South and Central America. Meanwhile, West and Central Africans had their own versions of the practice, with the Hausa term "babba" describing multiple aspects of cooking over a roaring flame.



Chef Mursal Saiq
PHOTO VIA JUSTIN DE SOUZA

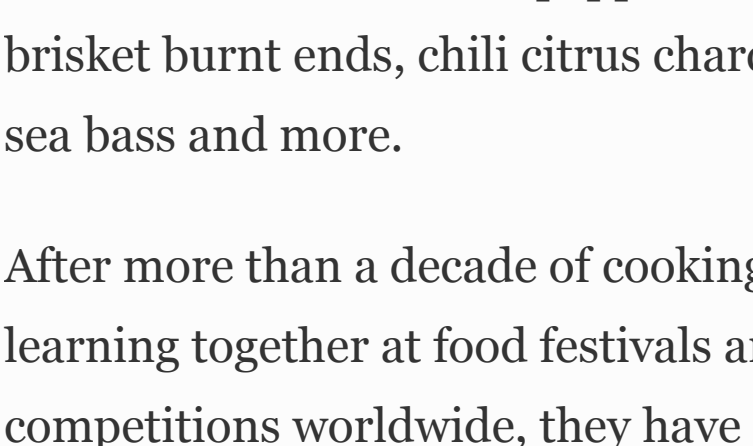
The practice then made its way into North America via enslaved Africans and indigenous populations who shared salting, smoking and cooking methods, which enslaved people later used to [establish the foundation of barbecue](#) as the American tradition it is today. Molasses imported from Dutch and French Caribbean sugar colonies sweetened Tennessee barbecue. The East India Trading Company brought coriander, cumin, and cardamom from Asia, which Texas pitmasters favored. German immigrants brought the mustard that is a staple of South Carolina's famed Carolina Gold barbecue sauce.

Tribal migrations, trade, Spanish and English colonial pursuits, and the resulting slavery and immigration all played a part in the evolution of barbecue in the United States. Saiq says those melting-pot roots are the thesis of her fusion-style cuisine.

"American barbecue is of a world, of a migration process, of a history that doesn't belong to just one group of people," says Saiq.

"Once you master it, you can push it, you can slow it, you can do anything. So, I thought, 'what would happen if I combined the two things I love the most?'"

At Cue Point, Saiq and her co-founder Joshua Moroney take the Afghan family recipes she was raised on, as well as the Guyanese recipes from his childhood, and throw them onto English oak wood and coals in either their open fire grill or their Texas-style offset smoker, where the heat and smoke are separated ("offset") from the chamber in which the meat is cooked. The fire flows over the meat to cook it, rather than being directly under it.



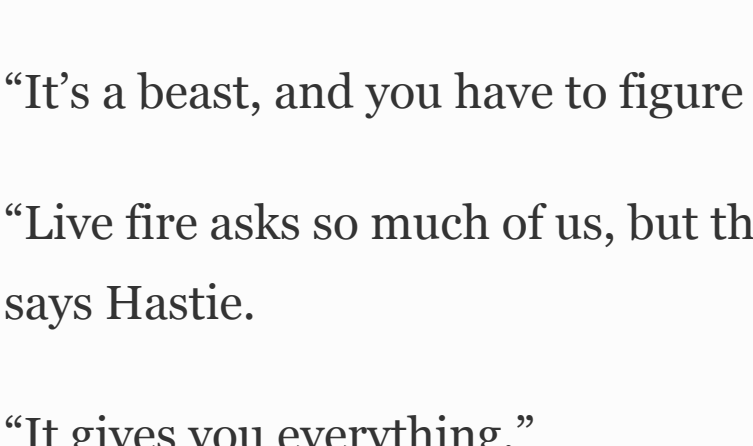
Chef Saiq with Fatima
PHOTO VIA JUSTIN DE SOUZA

of pumpkin smoked then braised in onions, garlic, coriander and ginger, turmeric and chili peppers, along with open-fire madras curry chicken, skewers of chili-pepper chicken or brisket burnt ends, chili citrus charcoal grilled sea bass and more.

After more than a decade of cooking and learning together at food festivals and competitions worldwide, they have attracted diners as diverse as the food they cook. They agree that success with barbecue and live-fire cooking depends on embracing the craft's heterogeneity to create something different, new and inclusive.

"A lot of places are very traditional; they've been barbecuing for generations, they learned from their great-great-granddad, and that's how they're going to do it," says Moroney.

"But I don't see food as traditional; I see it all as swapping, trading and intermingling."



Chef Joshua Moroney with Betty
PHOTO VIA JUSTIN DE SOUZA

For chefs like Moroney, Saiq, Clarke and Hastie, live-fire cooking is the ultimate medium for that kind of change and integration. Fire transforms matter, breaks chemical bonds, rearranges electrons, releases energy and leaves residue on food that is fundamentally altered by the science of combustion. Whether American barbecue, Caribbean or Mexican barbaeo, Argentinian asado, Brazilian churrasco, robatayaki in Japan, South African braai, Georgian mtsvadi, Indian tandoor or the imu pits of Hawai'i, the technique is a global phenomenon.

"That human spirit behind cooking with live fire, that sense of identity, that opportunity to have a different discussion, showcase a different style or get people to try something new is an irreplaceable experience," says Hastie.

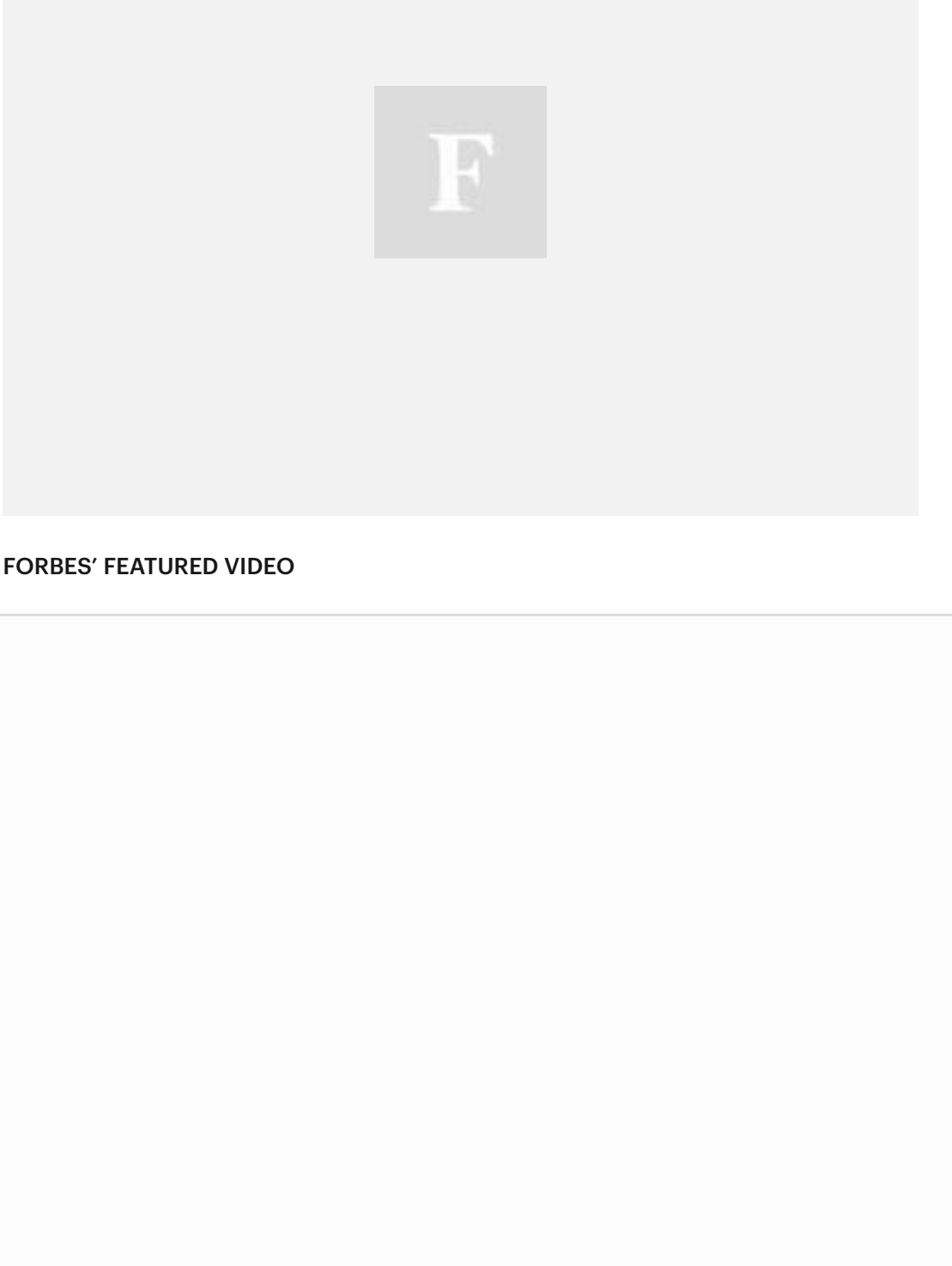
It's an experience united by one reality: chefs don't command the fire; they attend to it.

"Live fire cooking is incredibly difficult and grueling to learn because fire is an element that does so much," says Saiq.

"It's a beast, and you have to figure out how it moves and adapt to it."

"Live fire asks so much of us, but the more you put into it, the more you get out of it," says Hastie.

"It gives you everything."



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