

He Preaches the Gospel of Rub

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Chris Capell's grilled salmon and peaches get spicy rubs before going over the heat. Capell makes homemade rubs in his basement in Fairfax. (By Gerald Martineau -- The Washington Post)

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In the past few years, everything in Chris Capell's life has gone up in smoke, which in this story is a good thing. Except for the one time it wasn't.

That was in 2006, when an ember from Capell's grill rolled 20 feet; his house in Fairfax caught fire and burned down, displacing him, his wife, Jennifer, their 13-year-old twin daughters and the headquarters of his Dizzy Pig Barbecue, purveyor of exotic rubs.

There is, however, a happy ending. No one was hurt. Capell, 47, rebuilt bigger and better on the same lot. And the barbecue rub business is growing.

Dry rubs, which are made of herbs, spices, sugars and salt, basically serve as a dry marinade. They go hand in hand with barbecued and grilled foods, creating a flavorful crust. Capell's life began to head in the rub direction in 1999 when, he says, his brother-in-law "wouldn't shut up" about his dark-green ceramic smoker-grill marketed as the Big Green Egg. Capell had been a gas-grill guy but gave in and bought his own charcoal-powered egg.

Capell now has six of them in various sizes. On one side of his driveway is a perfectly maintained lawn with nice landscaping. The eggs are on the other side, along with a barbecue pit, large wooden spools that serve as tables, an overturned canoe and some coolers.

That is what can happen when barbecue becomes a passion.

A few months after Capell bought his first egg, he got to know other Big Green Egg enthusiasts via their online community. (A lot of people call the BGE phenomenon a cult, Capell says, because they are so devoted to their grills.) It was in one of the online forums that he met Canadian Mike Kerlake, who had developed recipes for a couple of dry rubs. Capell, a graphic designer, decided to trade his vocation for his avocation.

They went into business together (Capell has since bought Kerlake out), and Dizzy Pig was born. Capell abandoned graphic art for barbecue rubs full time in 2003. But first he created the company's colorful logo.

"I didn't want a dumb cartoon pig with an apron and violin" for the logo, Capell says. "We wanted to build a company on good karma and fun." So he created a pink pig with a green tail and snout, with an eye-catching pinwheel background. The pig wears no clothing and is instrument-free.

Dizzy Pig's 10 rubs reflect global cuisines and have names such as Jamaican Firewalk, Swamp Venom (Cajun-



Southwest) and Shakin' the Tree (lemon-pepper). Red Eye Express is coffee-flavored. "It adds a nice, malty flavor," Capell says, "and it smells incredible when it's cooking." Even Dizzy Dust, the company's all-purpose rub, has an "edge," he says.

The rub he's most proud of is Tsunami Spin: "There's nothing like it out there." It contains ginger, sesame seeds, galangal root and fenugreek and bears the Asian influence of his Vietnamese wife and her family of cooks. He calls Raging River the most versatile: a mix of maple, citrus and herbs and spices that was originally designed for salmon.

The all-natural, gluten-free rubs use turbinado sugar (raw and steam-cleaned), which has a higher burning point than regular sugar, and kosher salt. Iodized salt, according to Dizzy Pig literature, creates "unattractive streaks on your meal." Capell says many commercial rubs are 50 percent or more salt; Dizzy Pig rubs are about 20 percent salt, and he has just introduced salt-free versions. None of his rubs contains MSG or anti-caking agents.