

NOT ALL THINGS BURNT ARE CARAMEL!

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I'm an avid cooking show follower to the extent that I find solace watching cooking shows on television. Partly, this is due to my daytime job as an educator in the area of food and service management that drive my curiosity and passion about the gastronomic world. So when I watch cooking shows, I don't just collect recipes but I learn, relearn, and sometimes I doubt.

Based on my observations, some chefs on television has been abusing jargons so much so that viewers might start to believe the wrong things right. Get what I mean? My current concern is the usage of the word 'caramelization'. The moment we read 'caramel', most of people can relate it to the deep, complex sweetness, rooted from basic sugar with a bit more character than plain ones. Definitely, caramel is the outcome of cooking white sugar on its own until it turns amber.



The degree of the darkness of the amber hue directly indicates the quality of the caramel. When the cooked sugar became too dark it will result to a bitter mess that is normally undesirable. Simply put, caramel comes from sugar that is let burnt to a certain (desirable) point.

Then came along the cooking shows chefs, gaily cooking the steaks and all kinds of meat, waited until the meat charred and voila! This is the exact line they will pull "look at that meat caramelizing!" and they will carry on bragging how the meat will also have the sweet caramelize taste - and I doubt that!

I believe there is a possibility that the chefs might be confused between caramelization and Maillard reaction! Maillard reaction is the browning of protein due to exposure to heat.

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Hence, when we talk meat, do we talk about sugar (carbohydrate), or protein (amino acids)? I believe meat is always associated as to being one of the main protein sources, rather than carbohydrate. Though Maillard reaction does involve sugar, the amino acids content is what making it distinct from caramelization.

Some school of thought have also suggested that the charred marks on meats, that are caused by heat, are possibly carbon! That too, is a far cry from being "caramely sweet"! Think satay and grilled fish, would you relate the char to caramel? But then again, it would not sound appetizing if the Chef said "look at that meat doing its Maillard reaction!".