



Midwest Grill chef shares secrets of Brazilian barbecue

By Sara Feijo
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If you ask Nei Pinto of Midwest Grill how he went from working in the mines of Governador Valadares, Brazil, to cooking top-notch barbecue in Inman Square, he'd say it was a natural progression. Pinto, 51, of Wilmington, grew up in a large household in a small town in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil.

When his family moved to Valadares in 1976 — a city known for its precious stones, such as emeralds, diamonds and amethysts — Pinto, who was one of 11 children, started working in the mines with his father, grandfather and uncles.

After working in the mines for two years, Pinto decided to open a bar, and that's where he learned the culinary arts.

"In the bars in Brazil, appetizers are very popular. There's the chicken croquette, chicken kebab, all of those things," Pinto said. "We call them espetinhos, and then you make all kinds of flavors. And that's how we start cooking stuff. Before you know it, you cook a whole meal. You learn how to make the rice, the beans."

After immigrating to the United States in 1984, he met Joao Pinto, an immigrant from Portugal, who owned a building on Cambridge Street in Cambridge and had a vision of opening a restaurant.

"I thought of opening a restaurant and I bought everything. I was only missing the bar area," Pinto said in Portuguese, adding that he jumped right in when Nei Pinto and two of his brothers proposed a partnership.

The four partners opened the doors of Midwest Grill in 1993, and expanded to a second location in Saugus seven years ago.

In between preparing meats and lobsters on Tuesday, Nei Pinto, who is the restaurant's head chef, talked to us about churrasco—Brazilian barbecue—and why it is so popular.

Q: Brazil is a melting pot of different ethnic groups. Do you think there is a specific ethnicity that has influenced Brazilian cuisine, particularly churrasco? Where does churrasco come from?

A: The churrasco is originally from South Brazil. It's very popular. Now, in the past 40 or 50 years, it's all over Brazil.

Q: How would you describe churrasco, and what makes it so popular? What makes churrasco different from a typical American barbecue?



A: In Brazil, they eat a lot of barbecue. Barbecue is the No. 1 dish in Brazil. And I think for the past 15 or 20 years, Brazil is the No. 1 exporter of beef for the whole entire world, so there's always beef everywhere in Brazil.

What makes this different and unique, and the people in Brazil like it like that, is because it's all-you-can-eat buffet and grill. The main difference is you don't make a mixed grill on the plate and bring it to the table so the meat gets cold. The difference about this that the people enjoy is as the chef comes around the table and slices the meat, the meat never gets cold. It's always hot, and it's very popular in Brazil.

This is the kind of food that you need to have the time to enjoy. You can't go out, like when you go to eat a sandwich or fast food, you have to have at least two hours to sit down and enjoy it because there're about 10 kinds of meat we have, and some places offer more than that —15, 20 kinds.

The secret about the rodizio [all-you-can-eat style where the waiters bring samples of food to customers] is to enjoy every piece you can have for every kind of meat.

The way the rodizio is, the churrasco is different from any other barbecue because it comes straight from the grill to the plate, and back to the grill so that you always eat your meat hot.

Q: What influence have Gauchos had on the Brazilian churrasco?

A: Gauchos are from South Brazil. After the second World War a lot of people from different countries in the world came to Brazil: Japanese, North Koreans, Germans, Indians, Lebanese. The Gauchos are the Brazilian Germans. They celebrated so much their traditions, dance, their independence day. They started to cook half cows, and they started to serve the whole entire family and their neighbors. As they did family reunions and gatherings, they opened businesses and started doing it the same way. Churrasco was all over Brazil, but rodizio, serving around the table, came from the Gaucho.

Q: Are customers surprised to find out that churrasco is so different from regular barbecue?

A: Yes, they ask us how we marinate the meat. On the beef — I don't know any other country in the world that does that — we only use sea salt, so that's a very, very special flavor because the sea salt melts on the meat and just leaves the flavor. And they love that.

They want to know what's the secret, and we show them the bag of sea salt and they say, 'That's what the secret is? It doesn't come from grandmother or grandfather or uncle?' That's what the secret is. We don't marinate the beef. We just sprinkle a little bit of sea salt and that's incredible flavor, and it's very, very popular in Brazil.

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Midwest Grill is open Monday through Sunday from 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Lunch costs \$14.95 and dinner is \$21.95. Dinner on Fridays and Saturdays is \$24.95, but it includes live music.

The Midwest Grill is holding a fundraiser on Thursday, July 24, at 6 p.m. for International Women's Day. Members of the Brazilian Consulate and the Somerville mayor will attend, Nei Pinto said.

