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HD **Smokin' cold the new cool**  
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Tom Cooper has devoted his life to the technique of cold smoking, tasting both success and failure in the process

Tom Cooper puts some food on the table, things he has prepared and cold smoked in a number of ways. Prosciutto, corn kernels, allspice-smoked shredded carrot, salmon — marinated first in orange juice, hoisin, ginger and Shaoxing **wine** — and blue **cheese**.

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Then, he shows me a grab from Anthony Bourdain's No Reservations television series; the American host and gastro-explorer is in a Madrid bar where a piece of Valdeon arrives at the table in something that looks like a cocktail shaker, except that beneath the famous blue **cheese**, lavender is smoking away.

"That gave me an idea," says Cooper, his accent still distinctly Canadian, despite many years here. And, yes, there is a lavender accent to the **cheese** perceived towards the end of the mouthful.

That's Cooper.

"I'm not a chef, I'm a geologist," he declares, but there's no doubt that the man, like any good chef, is brimming with food ideas. Unlike most chefs, however, Cooper's food always includes one ingredient: smoke.

To Cooper, it's a multifaceted ingredient to add nuance to food, in much the same way as a spice. But it's also a technique, just not the technique raging across the food world, where a menu without smoke is a menu not worth reading.

Cooper is an evangelist of cold smoking, the technique that imparts flavours via smouldering fuels that does no cooking, whatsoever. Just about every smoked food in Australia today is produced via hot smoking, which cooks and layers the food with the flavours of the chosen smouldering fuel.

For more than 30 years, Cooper has been the go-to man in Melbourne for chefs wanting small-scale products with a whiff of smoke. For many years, the figure of Cooper, delivering salmon, tomatoes, ocean trout and anything else was a common one on the food streets of the city. MoVida's signature smoked tomato sorbet with anchovy is just one example.

For his early years in Australia, after arriving in 1979 with a freshly minted masters degree from Cape Town University, Cooper imported and distributed what he knew: Canadian and Scottish salmon, Spanish saffron, Iranian caviar, Canadian wild rice. Geology had to wait; **business** was good. But the rise of Australia's salmon growers and smokers in the late 80s made it a very competitive industry.

Forced to rethink the **business**, Cooper set out on the path that made his reputation. "I became a microproducer," he says, and for the next 20 years, using American equipment, Cooper developed a reputation as the man with "the touch" when it came to niche foods with a touch of smoke.

For Cooper, the mantra is low, slow and cold. “Smouldering smoke is more important than a burning smoke,” he says. “There’s a difference in taste between strength and bitterness.

“The great smoking houses of the UK burn big piles of woods until they smoulder gently for a long time. That smoke particle is very fine as opposed to a coarse smoke particle and this is the problem I have with leaves, particularly tea smoking — it’s coarse and bitter.” Cooper salmon, in particular, became a must-have ingredient on many Melbourne menus. “Many very good restaurants in Melbourne supported me,” he says, “however, the seven-day weeks and seasonal surges took their toll.” So, for the past three years, Cooper has been on a different kind of smoking journey. His many years of producing cold-smoked foods had also made it blindingly clear there was no such thing on the market as a piece of simple, foolproof cold-smoking equipment chefs might use to produce the same results he was achieving. So he developed the clever, if flawed, Kold Smoker.

The benchtop Kold Smoker consists of a four-stage smouldering box with elements on timers, allowing precise duration of the smoking process. A fan system that induces air from outside to push smoke from the smoker box into a refrigerated food cabinet, like a small fridge. And an insulation chamber between the two that keeps the food box at a very stable, chilled temperature.

The concept is brilliant, but early **Chinese** production was problematic. Cooper is working on a new generation that will be manufactured, he hopes, in the US. The project has been costly, the patent process for Australia, the US and Britain alone absorbing huge sums, but there is hope.

In the meantime, Cooper is writing a book on cold smoking and planning a retail **business** at Melbourne’s Camberwell Market.

He tells me of a meal he cooked to demonstrate the application of smoke to **Chinese** flavours ... cured scallops smoked with mandarin peel; smoked pea mash with unsmoked scallops; mussels smoked with kechap manis, the Indonesian sweet soy; green prawns smoked with dried shrimp shells; and watermelon lightly smoked to accompany **cheese**.

“My combinations are just one or two ingredients that combine with the smoke,” he says, sounding more the chef than the geologist. And Cooper’s no great fan of the current hot-smoking craze, which he likens to the “over-oaking” of chardonnay, when wood characteristics all but obscure fruit. “We have this generation of consumers coming through who expect the egg to be cracked with a hammer; if it’s not in-your-face smoky, it’s not smoked,” he says.

“I’m trying to get people to understand the subtleties. It’s like the over-oaked chardonnays from the 80s — all that changed, now they’re refined, they’re delicate. That’s what I’m trying to achieve. I want to talk about the other aspects of smoke — the varieties and the gentleness — not this in-your-face rough stuff.” Cooper, possessed of no mean palate, says he goes to restaurants specialising in smoking and finds so much of what he tries tastes the same.

“That’s the problem with these modern smokers and big barbecues that they’re bringing in from the States. You can smoke lamb or pork belly or jowl or beef and they all taste the same — of smoked flavour. That’s fine but it’s not delicate.

“For me, the refinement of food is a delicate thing.”

**HOW TO SMOKE** There are plenty of ways to hot smoke at home. One, which offers the flexibility to cold smoke as well (provided you **buy** a separate cold smoking box) is the Pro Q (\$599), a rather smart elongated kettle-style barbecue with a water bath buffer built in to keep temperatures at optimum level instead of racing too high.

Weekend A Plus has been test-driving a Pro Q, which can be used with charcoal, or what are commonly known as heat beads, for fuel.

It helps to be familiar with the use of these heat beads, in kettle style barbecues such as the original Weber Kettle, to get the most out of the Pro Q.

But once you have your heat source sussed, it’s really only matter of filling the water bath to moderate the heat, adding your chosen smoking agent (such as soaked chips) and monitoring the internal temperature of whatever it is you are cooking with smoky heat. A temperature probe is essential.

The Pro Q has the added flexibility of being able to operate as a straight grill, or as a kettle-style barbecue without the water bath, for roasting.

If you have the patience, the slow, smoke-roasting method produces lovely meats, particularly chicken, although the imagination could run wild.

It comes with hooks for hot smoking fish hung from the roof of the device, and can be expanded to create more tiers for smoking a variety of meats and vegetables.proqsmokers.com.au

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