

# Much Ado about Barbecue

*Got a taste for Texas?  
A craving for Carolina?*

**M**emphis style, Texas style, Carolina style, Kansas City style. What does it all mean? Which style should I be eating? For those of us who love barbecue, this question must be answered. And how hard could it be? There are hundreds of tomes, Web sites, and articles about the subject. With some research, surely I could find the Holy Grail of barbecues and nail it down in simple terms. Little did I know what I was getting into.

There is a segment of the population that approaches this with religious fervor. Each has a special sauce or secret step that makes his or hers absolutely the best. Let's start with some basics, and how even these are often in dispute.

## Where There's Smoke...

At the outset, "grilling" should to be differentiated from true barbecue. Grilling is normally done with tender cuts of meat over high, direct heat for a short time. Barbecue is slow cooking with indirect heat of (typically) less tender cuts, and smoke is a key element. From there, things start to get muddy. With smoking, a method of preserving, the temperature is only about 140 degrees. Barbecue calls for



200 to 220 degrees (although it ranges from 180 to 270 degrees) and smoke is involved. Curiously, that eliminates the pig cooked in a pit at the luau: no smoke.

## To Soak or Rub?

Before being cooked, the meat must be prepared. Two common methods are (liquid) marinade and dry rub. Marinade adds

flavor and almost always contains an acid, often vinegar, which helps tenderize the meat. Caution is in order, as over-tenderizing with a marinade will result in a less desirable texture of the meat. Slow cooking breaks down the meat proteins better than acids or other chemicals do. Dry rubs impart flavor, draw out juices, and form a nice paste on the surface, which caramelizes nicely and helps keep the meat moist. Apply the rub the night before you plan to cook.

A rub is easy to make and adapt to your particular taste. Ingredients commonly found in rubs include paprika, salt, black and/or red pepper, garlic powder, dry mustard, chili powder, oregano, thyme, onion powder, and sugar. The paprika gives a nice dark color to the finished meat. Sugar does this also,

but be careful of the amount of sugar and the intensity of the heat, as it might burn. Also, avoid onion salt or garlic salt; use only the pure powders. Southwest-style rubs often include cumin, coriander, and other peppers. Allspice adds an interesting sweetness. Kosher salt is a good choice, as it is easier to work with in the rub and you will be less likely to over-salt.

Sauces are served after the meat is cooked; they are not used during the cooking process. But more on sauces later.

### Fire It Up!

The cooking apparatus can include all fashion of exotic devices, but a kettle-style grill works just fine. The fuel of choice is charcoal (yes, some are very specific about the brand). Wood chips also apparently give quite acceptable results.

Of course, this sparks the next controversy: What wood should be used? Any pine or resinous wood should be avoided. Hickory is a traditional choice, oak is used in many professional kitchens, and apple seems to be in style of late. Mesquite is often the first choice in Texas and the Southwest, but aficionados in other areas of the country claim it imparts a less-than-

can literally be falling off the bone. A fork can be inserted into the shoulder or butt and turned (pick one) 90 degrees, 180 degrees, or 360 degrees, depending on whose test is used. Alright, alright, here's a rule of thumb: one and one-half hours per pound. Some devotees cook for ten, twelve hours or more to impart more smoke and assure the toughest cuts of meat are fork-tender. The low temperatures and enclosed system help keep the meat moist.

If you are impatient, there are some shortcuts. At the risk of being drummed out of the corps, I will mention a few for those whose time frame is more toward the grilling system: The aforementioned marinades work, but keep in mind the caveat about over-tenderizing. Precooking in a slow oven and then finishing on the grill with some smoke can give an acceptable

mined by the first (dominant) ingredient listed. As I perused recipes, this seemed to hold true. However, many commercial sauces list sugar as the first ingredient! Retail sauces are a big business. There are more than 1,300 kinds, nearly all tomato-based. One of the nation's largest barbecue contests is the American Royal, held in Kansas City. Sauces compete in eight categories: mild or hot versions of tomato-, vinegar-, mustard-, and fruit-based.

### Write Your Own Rules

So, let's sum up. Although pork is traditional, you can use almost any meat, which is pretreated with a marinade or rub; imagination is the only limitation. The heat must be low, indirect, and involve wood smoke. Plan to spend some time cooking. The sauce traditionally is

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*The sauce traditionally is served with the meat after cooking, and certain sauces are historically associated with certain areas of the country.*

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pleasant taste.

The fuel should be placed on one or both sides of the kettle, or around the perimeter to give the desired indirect heat, and drippings will not flare up and scorch the meat. The lid retains the smoke so it can work its magic.

Schools of thought differ on whether the meat should be basted during cooking, let alone how often. (Now, we barbecue folks don't actually baste; we mop. And we do it with an implement that resembles a small mop.) The liquid used is another topic of dissension; at least, there is a wide range of choices. The simplest is nothing more than plain vinegar, a bit of butter, and a few dried peppers. (I have had this barbecue, said to be Georgia style, and could hardly believe how delicious it was with such a basic moppin'.) It is done at intervals that will keep the meat moist, but not so frequently that the heat is released too often.

How long do you cook it? Till it's done! The internal temperature method doesn't work here. The test is if the meat is tender, and there are all manner of standards. It

result. Ribs can be parboiled to tenderize them, and then finished on a grill. Marinades can include liquid smoke. Smoked paprika could be added to the rub.

### What's the Meat?

Another very basic decision is the meat. The tradition in the Deep South is pork shoulder or butt, ribs in Memphis, and beef brisket in Texas, although any kind of barbecue can be found in any part of the country. Turkey, quail, duck, and other meats can be barbecued, but these birds are more often smoked.

### Saucy Attitudes

Now that the meat is ready, we need that sauce. This is what is supposed to really distinguish styles. Vinegar-based sauces in North Carolina...sorry, that's Eastern North Carolina. Western North Carolina tends toward mustard bases. Tomato-based (some say ketchup-based) sauces are farther west.

Early research taught me that sauces were predominately vinegar- or ketchup-based, with a few mustard-based, deter-

served with the meat after cooking, and certain sauces are historically associated with certain areas of the country. Today you will find a lot of overlap; every region is proud of "its" barbecue, and each barbecuer is proud of his or her special basting liquid, rub, or sauce.

As far as my quest for the Holy Grail of barbecue, the bad news is: there isn't one. The good news is: there isn't one. This stuff is for enjoyment and camaraderie and the rules are your own. With a little effort, you can create your own legendary rub and sauce. A barbecue party is great fun; everyone can bring slaw, beans, potato salad, or some other side dish, and enjoy some great socializing during that lengthy cooking period.

Excuse me now, I have to go mop my shoulder—and get a refill. 🍷

*Fred Bondurant, a self-taught cook and connoisseur of good food, was motivated early on by the discovery that dates really appreciated a guy who could cook. Julia Child is his inspiration and he gave his first cooking classes in the 1970s.*



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When I was a small child growing up in Massachusetts, it was widely known that my grandpa was a little off his rocker. It wasn't because he made his own wine, rolled his own cigars, or even because of the goat "lawn-mower" in the back yard.

It was because Grandpa wouldn't grow a tomato unless it had come from

to 1940. *Family heirlooms* (like my grandpa's) are varieties that families have kept for generations. *Created heirlooms* come from two known parents—either two heirlooms or an heirloom and a

with the garden.

I didn't realize until I was elevated to the rank of culinarian just how justified my grandpa had been

in treasuring those heirlooms.

While writing this article I couldn't avoid being catapulted back to that little girl with the scraped knees and the dirty fingernails awaiting the first red orb of

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# Heirloom Tomatoes

Grandpa wasn't so crazy after all

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Greece. Not just anywhere in Greece, either. It had to have originated from the island of Lésvos—and not just Lésvos, but from Mytilene, an ancient Greek city on the Aegean Sea.

His brother mailed him the seeds and Grandpa would keep them in little folded paper packets. If you watched from a distance, you would think he had just purchased something illicit.

Today, those seeds are considered heirloom.

Heirlooms fall into four categories: *Commercial heirlooms* are those that are open pollinated and were cultivated prior

to 1940. *Family heirlooms* (like my grandpa's) are varieties that families have kept for generations. *Created heirlooms* come from two known parents—either two heirlooms or an heirloom and a

hybrid, resulting in a seed that can stabilize desired characteristics and eliminate undesirable ones. And *mystery heirlooms* are varieties produced by the cross-pollination of natural heirloom varieties. The love, care, and extent to which my grandfather went to plant his treasured tomato seed were legendary. He would begin the process in May, tilling, digging, and dropping the precious swag into the holes. Cultivating compost and collecting manure in the summer were favorite times for me. When my parents were wishing school was a mandatory 365 days, I would be dropped off to "help"

the season. I remember the smell of the earth, the heat from the sun, and the scent of the tomatoes. For me it was almost holy. When I finally got my first bite of the fruit, I knew I had just tasted summer. Juicy, meaty, hearty, wet, and warm. All my senses were involved. Those days and that man led me down the path to cuisine of simple pleasure.

Today I am a chef, which means that I am far too busy to get on my knees and spread manure, although I would love the opportunity to do so. I must rely on outside sources to obtain my heirloom tomatoes. There are hundreds of varieties,

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such as Green Grape, Stupice, Green Zebra, Brandywine, Mortgage Lifter, and Cherokee Purple. (I'm giving serious thought to ransacking some old steamer trunks in the attic in search of a little folded packet.) But for me, those jumbo reds were the end-all and be-all to a great summer salad.

My grandfather kept it simple. He would slice a tomato, fresh from the vine onto a plate, then drizzle over it some extra virgin olive oil (of Greek origin, of course). Then he would crack fresh peppercorns with a hammer (I told you he was nuts), sprinkling just enough on each slice. Last, he would dust them with a little salt, and serve. Pure heaven! If I had been especially good and hauled more than my share of muck to his tomato mounds, I was rewarded with a slab of feta cheese to go with my tomato.

You don't need to be a hotshot chef to create a memorable recipe for an heirloom tomato. All you need to begin is a great tomato, and whether you do the growing or someone else who cares enough to cultivate the very best, it all begins with a seed.

So, you see, Grandpa wasn't so crazy after all. 🍅

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