

# Chapter 1

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## Faces of Barbecue: A Pit, a Plateful, a Party

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Chronicling a short history of barbecue
  - ▶ Delving into the four regional barbecue styles
  - ▶ Looking across the oceans for inspiration
  - ▶ Identifying the big differences between barbecue and grilling
  - ▶ Injecting thousands of flavors with three techniques
  - ▶ Glimpsing surefire barbecue techniques
  - ▶ Getting your barbecue bearings and getting creative
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**A**n unmistakable reaction tears through my body when I get barbecue on the brain. Just talking (or reading or even writing) about it incites a bone-deep craving, making my mouth water and my stomach plead.

I know I'm not alone. Barbecue stirs up a visceral reaction everywhere you go, causing cravings that spur enthusiasts to drive all night or get on a train to get their lips around their favorite ribs. The passion that barbecue incites has created deep friendships and broken others when spats over recipes heated to boiling. Ever heard of chicken soup doing that?

Barbecue is a way of cooking, a party, or the food itself — succulent servings of slow-cooked pork shoulder shredded and mixed with sauce or dry-rubbed ribs with a crackling bark full of paprika, cayenne, and cumin. It's food for laid-back Sundays with friends or raucous family gatherings, for baptisms and funerals and anything in between. It's a way of life for the cooks who travel from competition to competition and those who stay put, running generations-old family restaurants. It's no less lifeblood for the devotees who make more-than-weekly trips to a favorite rib joint or for hobbyists who cook their own barbecue at home.

In this chapter, I run through some of the theories about barbecue's origins and fill you in on the very basics of the cooking method that begat the lifestyle.

## *First, There Was Fire*

Before it became the holy grail of barbecue flavor, smoke was good for keeping away the bugs, and the earliest Americans built fires under their meat while they dried it on frames in the sun to preserve it. Turns out the meat tasted better after the smoke wafted into it, and so started the practice of infusing meat with the flavor of smoke.

Believe that? You have no reason not to, and it's at least as plausible as any of the 47 or so other theories about how barbecue came to be.

The mysteries of barbecue extend far beyond the origin of the word. (Does it come from the French for "whiskers to tail"? Is it a description of the frames used for roasting meat over fire in the West Indies? Dunno — and neither does anybody else.)



### **Smoking for preservation: How wood works wonders**

Somewhere, somehow, some long-ago human figured out that drying food over smoke kept it from rotting, at least for a while longer than doing nothing would have. Smoking food worked well enough in pre-refrigeration days, but the reason wasn't pinned down until much later.

Heat sets free a number of organic acids (including acetic acid, or vinegar) from wood. When those acids fly up onto the meat via smoke, they condense on its surface and change the balance of the meat. The result is a surface pH level that's too low for bacteria to be able to make themselves at home.

Wood smoke also is heavy in *phenols* — high-acidity compounds that prolong the period of time before meats turn rancid.

As you may guess, not all the many chemicals in wood smoke are good for human consumption or respiration. Lucky, then, that the low temperatures you use for slow smoking don't release as much of the unhealthy compounds from wood as high heat does. Keeping the meat as far as you can from the wood as it smokes also cuts down on the opportunity for the harmful compounds to get into the meat and, therefore, into you.

In the upcoming sections, I tell you a few things that are known, believed, or completely fabricated about the start and progress of barbecue. In the brazen and lively world of barbecue, lies and half-truths are as good as facts. Sometimes better.

## *Facts and fibs about barbecue*

Some do-it-yourselfers build smokers out of old refrigerators, which is a little ironic: Had refrigeration become a part of everyday living earlier, barbecue might not exist. Without it, people had to preserve meat by salting the bejesus out of it or by smoking it, and that smoking process opened the door for the pits and stands and restaurants that do heady business today.

Barbecue first took hold in the American South and used primarily pork because that's what was available. As barbecue moved across the country, urban conditions in Memphis led cooks to focus on ribs, which took less time and space (and consequently, money) to cook.

In Texas, where cows are common as dust, beef brisket became the definition of barbecue. (I tell you about brisket and the other common cuts of meat that are used in barbecue in Chapter 4.) Heavy German influence in the area helped bring sausage into the barbecue norm, and hot links (spicy smoked sausages) grew to be another Texas barbecue trademark.

The best of all the barbecue traditions melded in Kansas City, and restaurants and hobbyists all over the country maintained and modified barbecue practices in search of their particular definition of perfection. Many will tell you they've found it, and most of these "perfect" barbecue concoctions come from wildly different approaches — including serving crackly pig skin in shredded pork sandwiches; dousing ribs with sauce as a final touch while they're still on the heat (or cooking them in nothing but rub); and using mustard-, vinegar-, or tomato-based sauces.

Everyone thinks his own barbecue is the best. Everyone is right.

## *From pit to pellet smoker*

With scarce resources, resourceful settlers dug pits and cooked their food over hot coals — a far cry from the high-tech barbecue rigs that the pros use to mimic the results of those centuries-ago methods.

Barbecue spread westward across the United States, just like everything else, and morphed a bit along the way. (Check out the upcoming section, “Touring the Four All-American Barbecue Regions.”)

Holes in the ground gave way to homemade smokers cut from metal barrels. Industrialization brought nicely engineered and executed home charcoal smokers — and later, gas and electric models — into mass production. (Chapter 2 tells you about the current options for barbecue equipment.)

From its simple beginnings, barbecue has become, of all things, a sport, drawing competitors from around the United States to weekend contests where hundreds slave over mobile pits they paid thousands of dollars for in hopes of taking home a trophy, a small check, and big-time bragging rights. What a shock to anyone who just wanted to be able to chew her meat without an overlong struggle.

## ***Touring the Four All-American Barbecue Regions***

Great barbecue happens everywhere, but some human yen to codify things begat four regions of barbecue in the United States. Each region has some significance in the story of barbecue, but none is entirely separate from the others. Although the differences among them are a matter for considerable and vehement discussion, the details of the traditions in the various regions have more in common than they don't. But try telling that to a Tennessean turning up his nose at a Carolina-style, vinegar-sauced, shredded pork sandwich with coleslaw on top.

Throughout this book, you find recipes for barbecue from each of the regions (and from elsewhere). The following sections give you some idea about how each area distinguishes itself.

### ***Carolinas***

Squealers fared well with little attention in the Carolina climate, and barbecue from this region reflects that. Primarily pork, often shoulder or whole hog, barbecue in the Carolinas most often means sandwiches. Those sandwiches contain chopped pork from pretty much every part of the pig, including the crackly skin.

Pork in North Carolina is dressed with a touch of vinegary sauce in the eastern part of the state, more generously mixed with vinegary tomato sauce in the west.

Order barbecue in South Carolina and you're most likely to find a mustard-based sauce atop your shredded pork. Wherever you go, it's served on chewy white bread.

## *Memphis*

Ribs are the crux of the Memphis barbecue tradition, and many pit masters there serve them *dry* (cooked with a rub but without sauce). But dry isn't the final word on ribs, and sweet, sticky sauce tops a good portion of those you find in Memphis.

Ribs are a product of the move from the country into the cities as farming became mechanized. Because they're small, ribs cook much more quickly, with less fuel, and in much less space than a whole hog. Although ribs popped up quickly in other urban centers like Chicago and St. Louis, they are forever tied up tight with Memphis barbecue.

## *Texas*

Before same-day shipping to mega grocery stores, people cooked what was available, and in Texas, what's available is beef.

Beef brisket is the hallmark of Texas barbecue, which also strays from the Memphis and Carolina styles by including ham and sausage. Ribs make it onto barbecue platters here, too.

Brisket is a tough cut of meat that's a challenge to master. True Texas pit bosses took to the coarse, amply muscled cuts because of the great finished product that slow smoking provides. They usually give it a douse of rub (or just a sprinkle of salt and pepper) before cooking it over mesquite, slice it across the grain, and serve it with a side of smoky sauce and a slice of white bread.

## *Kansas City*

That thick sauce you find in bottles, the one taking up most of the shelf space in grocery stores' barbecue sauce sections — that sauce is the product of Kansas City.

Most everything else in Kansas City started somewhere else. Its spot at the center of the country positioned it to be the melting pot of barbecue styles, where brisket is as common as a rack of pork ribs. One unique local offering is burnt ends, the bits of brisket from the thin edges that cook quicker than the main part and hang tightly to deep, smoky flavor.

Sauce is the end-all, be-all of barbecue in Kansas City, and sauce means heavy on the tomatoes, light on spice, and full of tangy sweetness. (Think KC Masterpiece, the biggest-selling sauce and a product of Kansas City physician Rich Davis.)

## *Smoke 'Em If You Got Time*

The hallmarks of barbecue are smoke flavor and low-and-slow cooking. Despite so many people insisting upon calling what they do on their gas grill “barbecuing,” the practices behind barbecuing and grilling are at odds: Grilling means hot-and-fast cooking and barbecue is its opposite.

Barbecue requires patience at just about every step of the process, from adding a dry rub to the meat before you cook it to letting meat sit a spell before you cut into it.

### *True barbecue is slow*

Barbecue cooking may have come about in part as a form of multitasking. Carolinians cooked whole hogs over low heat because it was the best way to ensure that every last bit got cooked without ruining any of the faster-cooking parts. Legend says they also did it because doing so enabled the cook to run off and see to other tasks.

Barbecue cooking requires a temperature somewhere around 250 degrees. (Significant argument surrounds the “correct” cooking temperature. Some argue for 300 degrees or so, others for something in the neighborhood of 180 degrees. As long as you keep the temperature from fluctuating, you can cook great barbecue at about any stop along that range.) By contrast, you grill using a fire that’s a good 500 degrees.

Barbecue cooking also owes something to poverty. If everybody in the South had been able to afford tender cuts of meat, high-and-fast cooking would’ve been fine. The need to turn the dregs of a pig into something tender and tasty brought about the slow-cooking technique.



Cooking meat slowly, at low temperatures, is what makes tough meat tender. Slow cooking gives meat's fat time to render and its connective tissue time to break down. Both those processes lead to softer, easier-to-chew, and more delectable cooked meats.

The story behind your pulled pork sandwich may not be entirely appetizing, but the result is the reason people travel hundreds of miles or plan their vacations around their favorite barbecue spots.

## *True barbecue is smoked*

Without smoke, there is no barbecue. *Smoking* means adding seasoned hardwood to a fire so that it heats up and smokes, releasing its flavor into the meat.



The smoke flavor that ends up in your ribs or brisket depends on the wood you use; pecan is going to give a flavor much different from apple, for example.

You add wood usually in the form of chunks or smaller chips that have been chopped and dried for the express purpose of flavoring your barbecue. Then again, you can run around your backyard picking up sticks from under your oak tree and throw those onto the fire.



One of the hallmarks of slow-smoked meat is a pink ring and, in many cases, a pink tinge throughout the meat. The ring around the edges of the meat comes about because of the gasses released from the smoking wood, which react with the muscle tissue to create the color. A pink tinge in deeper areas arises because of the way the proteins within the meat unfold at lower temperatures. Cook at high temperatures, and the meat's color seeps out early, but when the meat creeps up on the temperature required to loosen the pigment, the color has nowhere to go because the other elements of the meat have already settled in and shut themselves off.

In Chapter 2, you can find out everything you need to know about using wood when you cook.

## *Making the Most of the Meat*

You can accomplish a lot in the way of tenderizing and adding smoke flavor to meat by cooking at low temperatures over charcoal and wood. You achieve even better results when you mix up some marinade or a great rub to work a little cayenne or curry into the meat.

## Converting barbecue techniques for backyard grilling

This book is about barbecue, and most of the recipes within it come from true barbecue pit masters, but you're cordially invited to do with the information you find here whatever your heart and stomach desire.

If you want to oven-roast a chicken dressed up in one of the rubs you find in Chapter 6, knock yourself out. If you think shrimp would do nicely doused in one of the marinades from Chapter 7 and then plunked on the grill, you might just be onto something. Want to dip french fries in one of the rich, tomatoey sauces from Part III? Please do.

Any cook worth his sea salt is an innovator. Every technique in this book was new at some point, and there's not a reason under the sun why you shouldn't feel free to experiment, as well.

If you want to try cooking true barbecue but aren't interested in investing in another piece of cooking equipment for your backyard, try utilizing your grill as a smoker. It requires no special equipment but aluminum foil, and I show you how to do it in Chapter 2.

In the following sections, I tell you about the three most-used methods for giving zing to any meat you cook.

### *Seasoning with rubs*

A *rub* is a dry marinade that you sprinkle or pat onto meat before you cook it. Rubs can contain just about anything, and they usually include some salt and sugar. You leave them on for a few minutes before you cook or as long as overnight. As meat cooks, the heat pulls open its pores, and the flavors of the rub seep right in.

Rubs help produce *bark*, a crisp and flavorful crust that also helps hold in meat's moisture.

You find out more about rubs in Chapter 5; Chapter 6 gives you recipes for rubs of all kinds.

### *Marinating: The power and the glory*

*Marinade*, a light liquid that you soak meat in before you cook it, does as much good for the texture of meat as it does for the flavor.



Most marinades are made up of an acid (vinegar, lemon juice, or some such) and an oil. The acid helps break down the fibers to tenderize the meat, and oil helps hold the acid against the meat so it can do the most good. The rest is flavor — whatever combination of seasonings you like.

Marinades tend to work fast, propelling a lot of flavor and good tenderizing effect into meat. They can be vehicles for intense tastes or subtle ones.

I tell you more about marinades in Chapter 5. In Chapter 7, you find recipes for marinades both traditional and exotic.

## *The big finish: Sauces*

You can call pretty much anything liquid a *sauce*, and depending on who or where you are, your definition of true barbecue sauce may be very different. (Get a taste of those differences in “Touring the Four All-American Barbecue Regions,” earlier in this chapter.)



Different kinds of sauces are appropriate at different stages of the cooking process. You don't put a sugary sauce on food before it has been cooked through, for example, because it burns right around it.

In Chapter 8, I fill you in on the ways you create and use various kinds of sauces. Then in Chapters 9 through 11, I give you a slew of recipes for sauces of all kinds from each of the barbecue regions and beyond.

## *How the Big Guns of Barbecue Do What They Do*

Prying pointers out of barbecue cooks is no easy task. Secretiveness is part of the fun and show of barbecue. Cooks guard their sauce recipes and rub mixtures with the ferocity of a mother bear guarding her cubs, but they throw in taunts and flat-out lies to toy with their predators.

Are the recipes in this book exactly as their authors make them? Hardly. You can bank on their being amended just enough so that you get a great result that's not *quite* the one the recipe's author gets. (All the more reason to play around and make it your own, as I recommend in the upcoming section, “Getting Creative As You Cook.”)

## Tomato or not tomato — that is the question

Barbecue may well have been around since the 17th century, and although tomatoey barbecue sauce has for much of the eating (if not barbecue-cooking) public become synonymous with *barbecue*, tomatoes were a much later introduction to the cooking style.

Although plenty of evidence shows that they were eaten elsewhere earlier, tomatoes didn't become a staple in American kitchens until the mid-19th century. That may be because of legends that they were poisonous. Depending on whom you ask, that myth took hold because the plant is a member of the nightshade family, which includes truly poisonous plants, or because the high acid content caused lead to leach out of flatware and cause sickness.

Another legend has it that Puritans turned up their noses at the tomato because it was thought to have aphrodisiacal properties. (In French, the tomatoes were referred to as *pommes d'amour*, or love apples.)

Tomatoes therefore came late to barbecue (but came with a vengeance, if the lineup of sauces on grocery store shelves is to be believed). The first settlers in the eastern region of the Carolinas wouldn't have even considered adding tomatoes to their sauces. To this day, the preference in the Carolinas is for vinegar- or mustard-based sauces.

Despite all the big talk and the energy spent hanging on to signature recipes, the truth of the matter is this: About 95 percent of what everybody does is the same. The nuances make for different flavors, slightly juicier meat, a nominally sweeter smoke flavor, and a ton of bullshitting over beers.

So, no, you don't get every detail you might want from a successful barbecue cook, but you get what you need. In the upcoming chapters, I share that information with you — details about choosing wood for smoking, as well as balancing a rub, marinade, or sauce, and more.

## Concocting rubs and sauces

Even though sauce recipes are held precious, the basic formula for creating sauces gives you everything you need to know to start working out your own recipe (which you, in turn, can refuse to share).

Any sauce starts with a *base* that provides the underlying flavor and holds everything together. That base may be ketchup, vinegar, mustard, tomato paste, chili sauce, or anything along those lines (or a combination of all of them). From there, add some sweetness

with sugar or molasses, and then throw in the spices you like. I give you a lot more detail about building sauces in Chapter 8, and you find sauce recipes of every stripe in the rest of Part III.



They may not admit it to you, but a lot of competitive barbecue cooks start out with bottled sauce and doctor it to their taste. Playing around with a sauce you know and enjoy is an easy way to start experimenting without investing too much time in building sauce from scratch.

Rubs follow more or less the same formula, starting with something fairly neutral that will mix easily with the primary flavors you want in the rub. Paprika generally fills this slot. To that, you add salt, sugar, and whatever combination of spices tickles your fancy. You want something with a little kick, like cayenne pepper, chili powder, or even curry powder, and you want some lower-profile seasonings like cumin, black pepper, or garlic powder. You can toy around with it easily until you like the way it hits your tongue.

Chapter 5 runs down the finer points of putting together a solid rub from scratch.

## *From meat to magic*

The slow-cooking process that takes even the saddest cut of meat and turns it into a dream-invading delicacy relies on time and a steady temperature. The equipment you use to make that happen depends on how much and how often you intend to cook, along with how much money you want to spend.

The unfortunate fact is that the less-expensive versions actually require the most barbecue smarts to produce great results. Spend more money, and you usually get better temperature control. Without that, you end up a slave to your thermometer, regularly checking in and adjusting your vents or adding charcoal to bring the temperature back to its sweet spot.

Reasonably good barbecue smokers start out at around \$200, and high-end equipment can easily cost tens of thousands of dollars. You find out about choosing a smoker in Chapter 2. Using one to its best advantages is a topic I cover in Chapter 4.

## *Getting Creative As You Cook*

Color me slow, but I'd been out on my own for several years before I figured out that a recipe was just a suggestion, not a make-or-break

set of dictates. Cooking became a lot more fun when I realized that tripling the garlic or cutting back on sugar were fine-and-dandy ideas that led to results that I preferred over the original recipes.

This book has a ton of recipes, but cooking that's limited to a list of directions has little pleasure in it. I hope you use this book as a jumping-off point to creating the rub, sauce, or marinade that strikes you just right.

## ***Behind every great recipe: An experiment***

Chocolate chips came about because Ruth Graves Wakefield tried a last-minute substitution. Thinking semisweet chocolate would melt into her cookie batter, she was surprised to pull from her oven blonde cookies with chocolate bits sprinkled throughout them. That was in the 1930s. Today, chocolate chip cookies are the world's most popular.

No doubt some experiments yield results you couldn't, in good conscience, feed to friends. Even if only one out of five tries gave you something to brag about, going out on a limb would pay off. But by using the advice in this book, which includes basic tenets to blend rubs and marinades by (Chapter 5) and standards by which to stir up sauces (Chapter 8), you have all the information you need to proceed down the do-it-yourself route without worry.

When you have a little information about how and why the components of barbecue do what they do, you can confidently put your own signature on any of them. Barbecue is all about bragging rights. You can't earn them without a little experimentation.

## ***Benefiting from others' trial and error***

Turns out mint doesn't belong in a spice rub. It gets bitter and doesn't play well with other common seasonings. Now you know, and you don't have to make that mistake.

Given that barbecue has been a mainstay of American cuisine for centuries, a lot of knowledge has built up around it (despite cooks' best efforts to guard their secrets). Rely on the tidbits that you find throughout the book to guide your own forays into cooking.

Others' missteps mean you're every bit as free to experiment but can do so with less fear of retribution from the tasters. This book gives you advice and recipes you can rely on to make cooking as fun as eating.

## *Incorporating contemporary and exotic recipes*

Many of the techniques that are now intrinsic to barbeque started out in other areas of the world or drew upon cooking knowledge passed through centuries and from family to family or culture to culture. But cooking techniques and trends change all the time — especially given the current boom of food TV and the endless food-centered Web sites and blogs.

If you're cooking to satisfy a barbecue competition judge, you'll follow a strict set of rules outlining what barbecue really is and is not, but if you're cooking just to satisfy yourself and your friends, then the only rules that matter are yours.

The recipes in this book pull some long-lost influences back into the barbecue fold and throw in some modern twists, too, by calling on a couple great chefs who know at least as much about how barbecue happens in Korea as they do about Carolina or Memphis methods.

Experimentation is a big part of the spirit of barbecue, and I hope you find in this book the inspiration and means for running some experiments of your own.

