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Chapter 1
Taking a Closer Look at Barbecue

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As long as humans have had fire, they've been cooking meat over an open flame and eating barbecue. Barbecue is the great equalizer. Politicians use barbecue to rally people to their causes, and barbecue has brought people together in social gatherings for well over 200 years. No matter your race, color, creed, or religion, you can gather with your family and friends around a table and enjoy a great meal of barbecue.

Barbecue Beginnings

Ah, how it all began. I guess you could say that the first time a cook put a piece of meat over a live fire, barbecue was born. No telling when that was.

Barbecue has many definitions and meanings all around the world. In the United States, *barbecue* is defined as meat cooked at a low temperature for a long period of time using wood or wood charcoal as the primary heat source. In many other parts of the world, it may be just grilling meat over wood either hot and fast or low and slow. In some areas, it may be stewing in a pot over wood coals. One thing that is a common trait is that wood or wood charcoal is always involved. In Australia, it may be iron wood; in California, fruit wood; in Tennessee, hickory.

The popularity of barbecue has swelled and retracted and swelled again. Fortunately, in recent years, a resurgence of artisanal barbecue has taken place, with folks doing it the old-fashioned way and new restaurants sprouting up all across the United States.

Barbecue in the United States and abroad

As far as modern-day barbecue is concerned, Christopher Columbus encountered it when he came to the new world in 1492. Indigenous people were cooking meats over an indirect heat source of green wood, which allowed the meat to cook without burning and to cook low and slow. The Spanish-speaking people refer to this as *barbacoa* — what we now refer to as *barbecue.*

This low-and-slow technique was also witnessed by Hernando de Soto when he was treated to a feast by the Chickasaw tribe near what is now Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1540. From there, the tradition made its way to the colonies, specifically Virginia and the Carolinas.

In other countries, *barbacoa* or *barbecue* is meat hung over a direct live fire or a live fire pit to cook.

No matter where you eat barbecue in the United States, what makes it barbecue is that the meat has been cooked over wood or wood charcoal for a long time at a low temperature.

From humble beginnings to art form

Barbecue was born from humble beginnings. Plantation owners took the best cuts of meat from the hog and left the toughest pieces of meat for the men and women they enslaved. The method of cooking these tough cuts at a low temperature for a long time — low and slow — helped take a very tough piece of meat and turn it into a tender delicacy.

The traditional method of cooking barbecue involved either making a pit with brick or stone and cooking the meat over coals or digging an actual pit in the ground, filling it with coals, and cooking the meat on top of that fire.

Over the years, barbecue has evolved. It went from holes in the ground to stone pits; then to brick pits, smokehouses, metal pits, gas-assist pits; and now even wirelessly controlled pellet pits. A lot has changed over the years. One thing remains constant: Fire is the element that ties the evolution of barbecue and the tools used.

As of late, due to the increasing popularity of sanctioning bodies and competitions on cooking shows, barbecue is popping up all over the United States, with thousands of enthusiasts located in various regions across the country. In fact, barbecue has become such a phenomenon in the United States that excellent barbecue places are now popping up in areas that traditionally never had a barbecue heritage.

Going for a Regional Spin

Barbecue tends to be a tradition throughout the South, but four premier regions known as the Barbecue Belt really define barbecue in the United States: the Carolinas (North and South), Kansas City, West Tennessee, and Texas. That's not to say that there isn't great barbecue all around the country. More and more great barbecue joints are popping up everywhere, but these regions, more than any other, really define the nature of barbecue in the United States.

I look at each of these regions (and some others) in the next sections, talk about the distinct flavor profile of each region, and fill you in on what each considers true barbecue.

The Carolinas

Although the Carolinas started out as one province, the area was settled by people from all over Europe, leading to several distinctive barbecue styles in the two modern-day states. I explore these differences in the following sections.

North Carolina

North Carolina is known as the first region in the United States with a distinctive barbecue style. North Carolinians started eating barbecue very early on in the country's history. The barbecue tradition expanded from here west to other regions, including West Tennessee, Texas, and on into Kansas City.

In a state defined by barbecue, North Carolina has not one but two distinct barbecue flavors and styles: an eastern North Carolina vinegar sauce and a red, Piedmont-style or Lexington dip sauce.

GOING WHOLE HOG IN EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA

Eastern North Carolina is the land of whole-hog cooking. Typically the barbecue sauce used on that hog is vinegar based with added ingredients such as salt and pepper, red pepper flakes, or a hot sauce.

Sometimes the sauce is mopped on the hog as it cooks, but often the whole hog is chopped so that parts from all over the hog blend together sometimes even including the skin. After the meat is chopped and blended together, it gets doused in the vinegar hot sauce so familiar to the area.

Sandwiches are topped with a chopped mayonnaise coleslaw.

DIPPING INTO PIEDMONT STYLE

A Piedmont-style or Lexington dip sauce also starts with a vinegar base — apple cider vinegar to be exact. You add tomato ketchup and other ingredients to sweeten the sauce and give it a red color.

The Piedmont style isn't as sharp as the eastern Carolina style — it's more akin to a Memphis-style red barbecue sauce.

Lexington-style North Carolina barbecue is typically a whole shoulder of the hog — what's called a *pit dip.* The red sauce used in Lexington-style barbecue is typically also used for the slaw, in order to make a red slaw that tops a sandwich.

South Carolina

The style of cooking barbecue in South Carolina is similar to that of North Carolina, but mustard prevails thanks to the many German settlers in this area. Whether for whole-hog barbecue or pork shoulder, mustard sauce rules.

Mustard sauce is typically a yellow-mustard base along with apple cider vinegar and spices added to inject a certain level of kick.



TIP

If you have leftover barbecue in South Carolina, you make Brunswick stew. Barbecue hash also seems to be making a comeback in the region.

Kansas City

If West Tennessee–style barbecue and Texas-style barbecue had a baby, it might be called Kansas City. Kansas City is the first big region to marry two styles of barbecue into one uniquely regional style.

The Kansas City barbecue scene started when Henry Perry from Memphis moved to Kansas City in 1907. By 1910, he had saved enough money as a porter to open the Eat Shop, where he took the tradition of West Tennessee barbecue, which consisted of pork and chicken, and added in beef. That business later evolved to be Henry Perry – King of BBQ, and at one point he had three locations. Upon Perry's death, his apprentice Charlie Bryant took over; he later sold the business to his

brother, Arthur Bryant. Bryant changed the name of the restaurant to Arthur Bryant's and the name remains today. Another protégé of Perry started the famous Gate's BBQ in Kansas City as well.

Kansas City barbecue is typically thick, sweet, and tangy. A Kansas City sauce starts with a tomato base but often adds ingredients like molasses, brown sugar, or even Worcestershire or soy sauce. The sauce tends to be a thick, dark, rich sauce familiar from most grocery-store brands.

Kansas City–style ribs are generally wet and sticky. The uniquely different burnt ends from the point of a brisket, doused in sweet and sticky sauce, make this a special region with multiple styles, including some of their own.

West Tennessee

West Tennessee barbecue is typically pork shoulder that's been slow-cooked, typically over charcoal, with a tomato-based sauce. Sometimes that sauce is sweet; other times it's tangy.

The West Tennessee–style sandwich is made with pulled pork topped with sauce and coleslaw. *Pulled pork* (pork cooked to a temperature that's hot enough to allow the meat to literally be pulled apart in your hands) originated in West Tennessee. (Meat's collagen breaks down at 192 degrees, and the absence of collagen makes it very tender.)

Cities in West Tennessee, including Lexington and Henderson, have a long tradition of whole-hog barbecue. To cook a hog Tennessee style, you need not one but two fire pits — one to burn the coals and one to cook the hog. You burn down live coals and then shovel the coals under the hog to smoke it.

The fire pit to make the coal can be a burn barrel or a separate chimney dedicated to burning down wood. A pit is usually crafted with a grated, elevated bottom so that the coals fall through. You put wood in the top, and the coals fall through the grated floor as the wood burns. You then scoop out the hot coals and shovel them under the hog.

The difference between a West Tennessee whole hog and Carolina hog is the fact that, in West Tennessee, portions of the hog are pulled off as they're requested. You may want part of the ham or shoulder or, if you really know what you're doing, you ask for some middlin' meat or belly.

These two different styles of cooking a whole hog produce two different results but make equally delicious sandwiches.

In Memphis, which is about as far west as you can go in Tennessee, the sauce is tomato based, typically with added ingredients such as apple cider vinegar, molasses, brown sugar, and other spices to make it a tad bit sweet or give it a tangy bite. A Memphis barbecue sandwich has sauce and slaw and is typically middle of the road with a hint of savory.

Texas

In Texas barbecue, beef is king. Texas is cattle country, and out of that tradition was born beef barbecue. They like to do it big in Texas, and they like big cuts of meat. Brisket is king, and beef ribs are the crown princes of barbecue there.

Texas barbecue is cooked low and slow, typically with a rub that consists of only salt and pepper and produces a product that is moist and juicy and melts in your mouth.

The ribs in Texas are different as well. They're beef short ribs or plate ribs, and one rib can be over a pound of meat. Cooked in the same tradition as brisket with a salt-and-pepper rub, ribs have a mouthwatering flavor and texture that is uniquely Texas.



REMEMBER

In most places in Texas, *sauce* is a dirty word. Barbecue is sliced, put on a slab of butcher paper, and served with no sauce in sight. To Texans, the meat either stands on its own or doesn't stand at all.

Other important players

Barbecue is a cultural phenomenon second only to apple pie or baseball. You don't get more American than barbecue, and that comes in many different shapes and forms all around this great country. Barbecue's popularity has spread across the United States; it's not just the four premier regions anymore. Here are some examples:

- **Alabama:** North Alabama has become a staple in the barbecue world, defined by the white sauce applied to a smoked chicken or turkey.

  Alabama white sauce was made famous by Big Bob Gibson in Decatur, Alabama. (I include his restaurant in my ten-best list in Chapter 20.) It has a mayonnaise base and is thinned with either white vinegar or apple cider vinegar. The other ingredients include black pepper, maybe lemon juice, and sometimes sugar.

You can find many variations on Alabama white sauce with various ingredients — check Chapter 13 for my recipe. Experiment on your own and see what stands out to you.

- **Georgia:** Georgia now has its own barbecue community defined by a mixture of different styles. Texas, West Tennessee, and Kansas City styles are all present in the Georgia market.
- **Kentucky:** Kentucky has its own unique take on barbecue — mutton defines Kentucky barbecue to a T. Simply put, mutton is lamb barbecue, and it's unique to Kentucky.

  The lamb is slow-smoked just like a pork shoulder, a whole hog, or even a brisket, and it's often pulled and coated with sauce.


TIP

When Kentuckians have leftover mutton barbecue, they make *burgoo,* a stew made with mutton barbecue very much in the tradition of Brunswick stew, which was born out of South Carolina barbecue.

I could go on to name almost every state in the country and talk about the different styles of barbecue there. You find distinct barbecue styles from California to New York. People have the barbecue bug, and they're coming up with their own spin on what was once a very narrowly defined American tradition. Generally, barbecue in states that aren't defined by a particular region or a particular style are an amalgamation of multiple styles of barbecue.

The abundance of different styles of barbecue — more than you can count — gives the citizens of the United States the unique opportunity to try a new style in almost every state they visit. Barbecue, simply put, is a great American tradition no matter which way you slice it or pull it.

Applying Heat to Meat, Slowly

Barbecue is all about time and temperature. The low-and-slow cooking process gives the meat time to break down its internal structure and become tender. Consistency in your heat source and enough time are key elements to this formula.

Smoke + heat = magic

With barbecue, smoke and heat make the magic. In order to have both smoke and heat, you need wood. That wood can be in the form of coals you burn down in a pit and shovel under your piece of meat. It can be in whole logs you put in a pit. You can use carbonized wood, commonly called *charcoal.*

For your smoke source, you can use logs, chunks, or chips. These three sizes of wood are readily available at most hardware stores. Logs give you the slowest burn of the three, chunks are next, and chips burn fastest. What you use depends on the type of smoker or grill you have and the size constraints. None of the three is preferred — you just need to understand that they have differences.


REMEMBER

Nearly always, you cook barbecue over *indirect* heat. You place the meat off to the side, not directly over the burning wood.

The one sure thing is that if you don't have heat and you don't have smoke, you don't have the great American tradition of barbecue.

Keeping it low and slow

Barbecue is not rocket science — no need to be intimidated. You may think you'll never master the craft of barbecue, but it's a very simple process.


REMEMBER

Barbecue takes time. It takes the right temperature, and it takes consistency. If you have the patience to make sure that your barbecue cooks for the right amount of time at the right temperature consistently, you can make great barbecue.

You need to be aware of some key temperatures when you cook barbecue:

- **Cooking temperature:** Traditional barbecue is typically cooked at a temperature between 190 and 250 degrees. A good middle-of-the-road temperature to aim for is 220 degrees.
- **Internal temperature of the meat:** In order for your meat to be done, it needs to hit a specific temperature. That temperature varies according to the type of meat. Chapter 3 has a table with the desired internal temperature for each type of meat.

There's a science to barbecue, and if you're willing to study and understand the time and temperature techniques, you can make great Q!

Starting with Great Ingredients

As with any cooking, the better the ingredients you start with, the better the resulting food. If you start with the cheapest cut of meat, chances are, you'll get just what you paid for. There are only so many ways that cooking can enhance meat. Try to start with the best meat you can afford.

Sourcing and choosing meat

When cooking great barbecue, start with a good cut of meat. You don't have to be rich, and you don't need a personal butcher. You *do* need to understand the basics of what you're looking for.

With some forms of barbecue, meat selection is everything. A prime example of this is beef. When cooking great beef barbecue, top grades are extremely important. Waygu or prime produce a seriously superior barbecue to lower-grade cuts. For beef, it's all about the marbling.


TIP

Any cut of pork generally has enough fat content to produce great barbecue. You don't need a super-premium, super-expensive cut. Pork butt — the typical barbecue cut — is very forgiving.

With any meat, ideally you want to find fresh cuts that haven't been frozen. If all you can find is frozen, make sure that it was flash frozen, which preserves the integrity of the meat. This is especially true for seafood — you don't want seafood that has any fishy smell to it.


TIP

You can source meat from a variety of places. If you have a great local butcher, see what she has available. If you don't have a butcher in your neighborhood, check your local grocery store. The big-box retailers typically have larger cuts of meat. Your local grocer typically cuts those large cuts of meat into smaller cuts that are more palatable to someone feeding a family of four.

To understand what to look for, head to Chapter 5, where I explain meat cuts complete with illustrations.

Keeping your spice shelf fresh

Spices are key to modern-day barbecue, but one thing is for sure: If your spices are old, they'll flatten or dull the flavor of your meat. Figure out what spices you use the most, and make sure that you always have them on hand, fresh. Spices typically have a shelf life of about a year when stored in a cool, dark place.


TIP

One way to keep your spices fresh is to use a table-top vacuum sealer after each use. If you have a vacuum sealer and good spice company in town, especially if you make your own rubs, look into buying the spices you use in bulk. This can save you both money and time, not to mention saving you multiple trips to the grocery store.

A great resource for spices in general and how to pair meats with spices is *The Flavor Bible*, by Karen Page and Andrew Dornenburg (Little, Brown and Company).

The book pairs different spices with different foods and vice versa. It's like a dictionary for spices. It includes the meats and other foods they complement.

Preparing the Meat

Certain pieces of meat are fine straight out of the package, but a brisket, for example, usually needs some trimming. In this section, I explain how to prep your meat before you cook it.

Trimming the fat

Most cuts of meat you find at a retail butcher counter are already trimmed so they have about ¼ inch of fat. However, if you buy a large cut of meat for barbecue, you may need to do some additional trimming.

Even ¼ inch of fat may be too much for your taste, so you may want to trim the meat down to the muscle structure of your meat. (Chapter 5 has information on trimming.)

Trimming can often enhance the flavor of your barbecue by making sure that your bark adheres to the meat without any waste. *Bark* is the outer crust of spices and fat that forms on meat as it cooks. It can sometimes make the meat look burnt, but bark is the essential element of flavor when barbecue is cooked properly.



TIP

A good, flexible boning knife is a must-have for trimming meat. A thin blade lets you get to the areas you want to trim and get right up against the edge of the muscle structure. (I talk about necessary — and unnecessary — tools in Chapter 3.)

Adding spices or liquid

Sometimes you just want the meat to stand on its own with no seasoning or alteration of the pure taste of the meat. However, more often than not, you want to add a bit of flavor or promote juiciness that you may not get with the plain cut of meat. Rubs, brines, and marinades are good ways to achieve an extra layer of flavor to take your dish over the top. Here's what each of these does:

- **Rubs:** A *rub* is a mix of seasonings, sometimes including sugar, that you typically apply to the piece of meat right before throwing on the smoker. Some recipes call for the rub to be applied several hours in advance, but those are the exceptions.

Choose the rub you like for the cut of meat you're smoking and rub it in thoroughly by hand to ensure that the rub adheres to the raw surface of the meat.


TIP

Oftentimes in competition barbecue, pitmasters use plain yellow mustard as a base against the raw meat before applying the rub. The mustard helps the rub adhere to the meat. As the meat cooks, the mustard dissolves, essentially turning into vinegar while the rub sticks to the meat.

- **Brines:** A saltwater-based brine penetrates below the surface and throughout the meat. You can inject seasoned salt water or submerse your meat in it for up to 24 hours.
- **Marinades:** A marinade flavors the surface without penetrating too deeply. You typically place meat or vegetables in an oil-based seasoned bath for at least a couple of hours before you cook it.

Turn to Chapter 12 for recipes for rubs, brines, and marinades.

The Moment (or Hours) of Truth: Cooking

When you're ready to get going, make sure you take the steps to have a smooth and productive cook. The next sections tell you what those steps are.

Getting the grill or smoker ready

It may take a few hours to get your grill or smoker ready. Preheat your grill or smoker and get it up to the temperature that you need to cook.

Use a charcoal chimney or a wood- or paper-based fire starter to get your coals started. You can choose from several varieties of wood- and paraffin-based starters on the market.


WARNING

Avoid lighter fluid at all costs. You can find an easy way to get coals started without too much fuss and mess and avoid the off-putting odor and aftertaste that come with lighter fluid.

Make sure that the charcoal you use is high quality, clean, and dry. Charcoal that sits outside can get damp, and if it gets damp, it can gets moldy, which can affect the flavor of your cook.

Likewise, make sure that the wood you use to smoke is dry and handy so that you don't have to interrupt your cook to get more wood. Lay out the amount of wood you think you'll need to keep the smoke consistent throughout your cook.

Decide on your cooking method ahead of time:

- **If you're cooking over indirect heat on a grill,** get the fire started at least half an hour to an hour before you want to start cooking. By starting early, you get a sense of how many coals to add at what intervals to keep your temperature consistent and even. You place the fire to one side of the grill and cook on the other side.

  Figure out how you can add fuel to your fire without disrupting your cook. Some grills have a hinged grate that allows easy access to the coals in the grill. Others have a door to the fire box that you can open without disrupting the grate. If you have to lift the grate — and maybe your meat — to add fuel, just make sure that you plan for it ahead of time and have any tools you need close at hand to make it quick and seamless.

- **If you're using a smoker,** get your fire started an hour or two before you put the meat on to cook. That way you heat up the outer walls of your smoker, which can seriously affect the time and temperature of your cook.



REMEMBER

Never underestimate how outside weather can affect your cook or the temperature of your smoker or grill. Smokers and grills with thin walls can be especially affected by the ambient air temperature, which can also greatly affect how that smoker or grill performs or how the temperature varies.

Altitude is another factor that can seriously affect the time of your cook, so if you're at a higher elevation than recipes are written for, take that into consideration. (All the recipes in this book were written for an elevation of 575 feet.)

Setting up for success

To set yourself up for success, plan out the elements you need to have a successful cook. Gather all the elements of your cook before you get started. Understand exactly what tools you need, what smoking method you're using, what meat you're cooking, the type of wood you're using, and how long you're cooking the meat.

There's nothing worse than being in the middle of a cook and realizing that you're missing a key ingredient or a key tool. Barbecue is about time and temperature, so the more prepared you are before you start, the more consistent your cook can be, and the better the results you end up with.

COOKING UNDER PRESSURE: COMPETING ON CHOPPED

In 2012, I was a contestant on the Food Network's cooking competition show *Chopped.* I remember it as invigorating, humbling, nerve-wracking, and fun. And I gained a healthy respect for the damage a simple shrimp head can do.

The format of *Chopped* is pretty simple and pretty tough: Four chefs are given a basket of mystery ingredients and 20 minutes to make a dish that incorporates all four ingredients. The baskets for my cohorts and me included tomatillos, *chayote* (a thin-skinned squash), Hawaiian blue prawns, and hatch-chile-flavored taffy. I had never seen or heard of chayote, so I tasted it. It's a bit bitter, a bit tart, and it has a pear-like consistency.

Now that I knew what I was dealing with, I set to work. I put four prawns on the grill, then headed to the well-stocked pantry to grab cornmeal, cream, butter, tarragon, and rum. I put the corn meal in boiling water to make grits and added cream, butter, and tarragon. In the meantime, my prawns had burned, so I had to start over. I pulled off the heads of four new ones, peeled and butterflied them, and put them on the smoker.

I threw the tomatillo and chayote into the food processor and pulsed a few times. It could be some sort of relish to go with the shrimp and grits, I thought. On to the taffy: My idea was to melt it down in the rum and use that as a glaze on the shrimp. I moved my grits and got the rum going. As I grabbed the taffy and threw it into the pan — whoosh! — the rum lit up in flames. I saw the camera guy come in for a close-up, so I tried not to act too surprised and like I meant for all this to happen. The taffy started to cook down and make a nice pink flambé.

I pulled the prawns off the smoker and put them on the grill. This time I watched them so they didn't burn. As I was getting ready to apply the taffy glaze, I decided that would take too long. So I put the glaze into the relish mixture in the food processor and pulsed one last time.

I wondered what exactly I'd made, when it dawned on me that it was a chow chow — a vegetable relish. I'm from Tennessee, so this was a Tennessee chow chow with low-country shrimp and grits.

With two and a half minutes left, I was golden. I just needed to plate the food, and I had plenty of time. I plated the grits, put a shrimp on top, and spooned on the chow chow. I felt great. And I had 30 seconds to spare, just enough time to add a garnish.

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I'd seen shrimp heads with the tentacles waving on many fancy dishes. So, the four plates each got a shrimp head next to the grits. As the countdown ended, it struck me that nice, pink shrimp heads were one thing, and raw blue shrimp heads were not only unattractive but a health hazard.

So, yes, I was the first to go. The judges liked my dish but couldn't get past the food-safety issue posed by the raw shrimp heads. I didn't blame them. I hung my head and muttered "Bizzle Bap," my catchphrase. I was certainly disappointed but also glad that I'd at least finished in time. I made a bonehead mistake, but I presented a tasty dish. I'm glad I had the experience, but I probably won't look to repeat it anytime soon.