

The History, Traditions and Techniques
Of
Barbeque

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By

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Some of you may not know that one of my hobbies is cooking. I've had a passion in things culinary going back to my days in Boy Scouts. As with most things, especially when one is self taught, it is a long term trial and error process.

Over the years, I developed an interest in barbeque. Now, I'm NOT talking about grilling a steak or a hamburger on a grill. I'm talking real Western Kentucky barbeque!! The title of my paper is "The History, Traditions and Techniques of Barbeque".

"The story of barbeque is the story of America. Settlers arrive on a great unspoiled continent. Discover wondrous riches. Set them on fire and eat them" Vince Staten, *Real Barbeque*.

Contrary to mythology, barbeque was not an American invention. Barbeque is older than *homo sapiens* and anthropologists even think that it was mastery of fire that permanently altered our evolutionary path and it is this primeval like that makes us still love cooking over a flame.

There are a plethora of spellings but the origins of the word are relatively clear. The Spanish explorer Gonzalo Oviedo was the first to use the word "barbecoa" in print in 1526. Oviedo, travelled extensively in the Caribbean and what is now Florida in the 1500's and he was the first to describe the wooden rack above the ground used by the natives for cooking. He said it was from the Taino dialect of the Arawak American Indians. A website maintained by the descendents of the Tainos says the word barbeque comes from, "A poorly written translation between Spanish and English of the Taino word Barbicu." As we all know, people often have trouble pronouncing foreign words and Barbacoa was the first to appear in print and that is the word that started circulating in Europe. Samuel Johnson in his 1755 landmark *Dictionary of the English Language* included the word 'barbecue'. There are a lot of myths and legends surrounding the origin of the word that I will not bore you with but what I have just related to you appears to be the most plausible and the one most accepted by barbeque historians.

Many do not give the Spanish Empire proper credit for its role in laying the foundation for modern American Barbeque. Their aggressive exploration and exploitation of the Caribbean, the Southeastern corner of North America, Mexico, Central America and the Philippeans brought cattle, hogs, sheep, goats and European foodways, including spit roasting to the New World. Some gastrohistorians have remarked that more than the Spanish, hogs conquered the New World because they became so popular with the natives and the settlers as well.

Returning to, Europe the Spanish brought back gold, tomatoes, potatoes corn, chile peppers and many more foods native to the Americas. Here we see the basic ingredients of contemporary American, Mexican and other cuisines, including modern barbeque.

In 1492, Columbus made the first of four voyages to the New World, landing on an island he named Hispaniola, now known as the Dominican Republic and Haiti and then went on to Cuba and the Bahamas.

Over the next eleven years he came back three more times and His tales of the strange new universe, its people, animals, foods and riches, launched a flurry of explorations by the Spanish, as well as the English and French.

On his second voyage, he probably stopped on the way in the Canary Islands off the coast of Africa and picked up 20-30 cattle, mostly pregnant females descended from Portuguese and Spanish stock brought there a few decades earlier. Within three weeks they were grazing contentedly on the lush greenery of Hispaniola and within a few years the Spanish had taken their descendants to Mexico where the Mexican predecessors of cowboys drove them north in Texas.

During the European explorations of the 1500's, the previously mentioned Arawak tribes were not native to areas now in the United States, but some Arawak tribes moved into southern Florida during the mid-to-late 1600's. "Florida", which was the Spanish name for all of the land they claimed, extending north through modern Virginia and even into New York and west through Louisiana. The English did not settle Jamestown until 1607 and the French did not settle New Orleans until 1690. However, these French and English settlers describe the use by natives of a barbacoa to cook and smoke meats.

The transition from barbacoa to barbeque was gradual. As noted previously, Johnson's Dictionary contained the word barbeque but it was the device the meat was laid on rather than the meat itself. Over time, the meat that was cooked on a barbeque, BECAME barbeque.

George Washington made a diary entry on May 27, 1769, "I went into Alexandria to a Barbecue and stayed all Night." So the tradition of staying up all night with outdoor cooked meat can be traced at least this far back. Washington even hosted "a Barbicue (*sic.*) of my own giving at Accatinck" in September 1773. Menus and cooking method are unknown but pork and ox were popular at the time and whisky would have been served.

The flavor of slowly smoked roasted meat with flavorful sauce grew in popularity, especially in the southern U.S. Almost all southern farms and plantations had smokehouses for preserving meat. Slaves did most of the cooking, maintained the smokehouses and were given the responsibility of preparing open pit barbeques for big celebrations such as weddings, holidays and political gatherings.

Martha McCulloch-Williams in 1913 wrote *Dishes and Beverages of the Old South*. In it she describes a barbecue that is similar to many other accounts from the ante bellum south. "the animals, butchered at sundown and cooled of heat, after washing down well, are laid upon clean split sticks of green wood over a trench two feet deep and a little wider and as long as they need to be, in which green wood has been previously been burned to coals. There the meat stays twelve hours from midnight to noon the next day, usually. It is basted steadily with salt water applied with a clean mop and turned over only once. Live coals are added as needed from the log fire kept burning a little way off. All of this sounds simple, dead easy. Try it---it is really an art.

The plantation barbecuer was a person of consequence; moreover few plantations could show a master of the art. The loan of an artful barbecuer to a neighbor was an act of special friendship---profitable always to the personage lent. Then as now there were free barbecuers, mostly white---but somehow their handiwork lacked a little of perfection.”

Eventually the saplings used to hold the meat over the open pits in the ground were replaced by metal gridirons and before long the pits themselves were being built with stones or bricks, or metal above ground.

How did we transition from the barbeque being an event to being a restaurant? Well one of my sources claims that the oldest continually operated restaurant on the United States was opened by immigrant Jews in New York in 1888... Katz's Deli! His argument, which I don't buy, is that pastrami is brisket that has been salted and pickled to preserve it, then coated with a rub and smoked. The source further opined that since pastrami is Katz's number one seller that makes Katz's the oldest barbeque restaurant in the U.S.

I believe the more plausible story is that in the wake of the Civil War there were mass migrations of freed slaves from the South to the industrial North. Among these migrants was a 15 year old teenager named Henry Perry born in Shelby County TN. When he was 15, he got a job on a steamboat as a cook. He finally settled in Kansas City. In 1907, he opened a barbeque stand and eventually moved it indoors, plying a skill he probably learned in Shelby County. His was the first commercial barbeque stand in what is one of the nation's real hot beds of barbeque. In 1932, Perry was interviewed by *The Call* the leading black newspaper in Kansas City at that time. The article noted that by that time there were over 1,000 barbeque stands operating in Kansas City!!! Perry was “The Barbeque King” not just because he was the first, not because he eventually had three restaurants, but because, as he explained to *The Call*, “the special way I prepare my meats. Cooking only over a fire made from hickory and oak woods the meat gets that delicious flavor which is the cause of the tremendous popularity of barbequed meats.”

Among Perry's disciples were Arthur and Charlie Bryant who opened Arthur Bryant's in 1930. Calvin Trillin, columnist for the *New Yorker* names Arthur Bryant's the nation's best restaurant. Perry died in 1940, but because of his influence Kansas City has more barbeque restaurants per capita than any city in the world.

Of course, other cities and even states in the South, are known for their barbeque, each with their own distinctive styles and sauces. Think Memphis and their ribs, the Carolina's with Eastern North Carolina whole hog with vinegar based pepper sauce, Western North Carolina shoulders with its sweet ketchup based sauce, South Carolina with its mustard based sauce, Western Kentucky, principally Owensboro with sheep being barbequed instead of pork, Big Bob Gibson in Alabama with his mayonnaise based sauce, and Texas where beef is king. I cannot leave out the annual Fancy Farm Picnic in Graves County where each 1st Saturday in August

attendees consume upwards of 30,000 pounds of pork, mutton and chicken barbequed on site, and then stay to listen to politicians get barbequed themselves!!

And right here in Hopkinsville we have our share of great barbeque. The Woodshed, Rutland's, The Barbeque Shack, the Pioneer's and others. In reviewing my notes I recalled that William Turner in *Gateway to the Past Volume 11* included a circa 1932 picture of The Turnaround Barbecue Stand on the Russelville Road just east of Western State Hospital.

Now for the balance of my paper I want to talk about the various techniques of turning meat into barbeque. As noted earlier, the original way to render barbeque was to lay the meat over an open pit dug in the ground suspended by green wooden poles. This eventually evolved into the use of metal grates or gridirons to suspend the meats. Then with the commercial restaurants and barbeque stands health codes forced owners into stone, masonry or metal pits with covered lids. Certainly, open pits can still be found especially in Texas, but they are inside the restaurant under a hood to carry out the smoke. All of these methods employ what is known as direct heat. By that I mean that the meat is directly above the coals or fire and as the fat renders from the meat, it drips down on the hot coals and creates smoke in that fashion.

A more recent technique employs the indirect method. You may have seen this employed by several around Hopkinsville who have large portable pits that look like old propane tanks, which is what they are!! As part of the construction, a box is attached to one end of the pit. To the other end away from the firebox a flue is attached. A fire with wood or charcoal or both is started in the firebox and smoke and heat are drawn through the pit up the flue. The meat is cooked in this fashion but is never directly under the fire.

Another more recent technique that is actually an indirect method is an invention of Herbert Oyler of Texas. In 1968, Oyler started to build wood fired smokers with shelves that revolved around an axle like a Ferris wheel, allowing even heat and smoke and increasing capacity. He teamed with welder and fabricator Arthur Bewley who lined the steel firebox with refractory, a concrete-like material that could withstand high temperatures. These innovations revolutionized restaurant designs.

In 1976, Mike and B.B. Robertson of Marion, IL started fabricating Ferris wheel style pits for restaurants with several more design innovations. Southern Pride pits eventually evolved into an impressive high tech motorized temperature and smoke controlled device that can be run by a computer. They burn gas for heat and logs for smoke. Hundreds of restaurants use them and a similar design by their competitor, Ole Hickory Pits.

Now I'm going to get personal and tell you my methods, which have evolved over twenty-five years, through much study, and yes, I will admit outright theft!! Just kidding!! But I have picked a lot of brains!!

I am a traditionalist, as are most Western Kentucky barbequers, in that I feel the only way to get REAL barbeque is by the direct method of putting the meat directly over live hard wood coals. As an aside, I will ask that some photos depicting several aspects of what I am about to tell you be distributed.

As you can see from the photos, I own two pits and have access to a rather large pit that we put on a 16 foot trailer for large events. These are constructed of heavy steel and once hot, hold heat extremely well. I have one 'burn box' and have access to another larger one. This device is used to burn the wood into coals which drop to the bottom allowing me to shovel the coals from the burn box into the bottom of the pit.

Once the pit is up to temperature, between 200-225 degrees the meat, be it whole hog, Boston butts (which is the top half of a pork shoulder) pork ribs or chicken is placed on the expanded metal grate, bone side down or as with Boston Butts fat side up, so the meat will self baste. This is after the meat has been rubbed with rub that I make and the meat allowed to come to room temperature. This is important because meat that comes straight from refrigeration, being cooked at these lower temperatures takes much longer to BEGIN cooking. (As an aside, I also would recommend to you backyard grillers that you do the same with your steaks for the same reason).

Barbequing is not for the impatient because we cook LOW and SLOW, for that is what turns a lower cut of meat that is inherently tough, into that magical tender, succulent, juicy stuff we call barbeque. One has to constantly monitor the temperature inside the pit, and I do this by placing a thermometer in the pit stacks. Every 15 minutes or so, check the temperature and add coals as needed. This goes on literally for hours! Therefore, it is really nice to have a barbeque buddy or two for company, not required but certainly recommended!

A little over half way of the process, the meat is turned, utilizing rubberized heavily insulated gloves. I have learned, through trial and error that trying to turn over a whole hog is like trying to wrestle a hog, except a lot hotter! Therefore, I have learned to split the hog into two halves down the spine to aid in this endeavor! The process continues as previously stated until about 20 minutes prior to being done in the case of ribs and chicken. It is at this point, that those two meats are sauced with a sauce that is the creation of me and some of my barbeque buddies. The pit is lightly fired once more and after ten more minutes, the meat is turned back to the bone side down and sauced. At this point, I sometimes add a little more fire and sometimes not, depending on how the meat looks. When butts are at 190 degrees internal, they are falling apart, when chickens come off the pit, most of the time I have to take them off with two hands because they are falling apart.

I have learned over the years, by cooking at the temperatures mentioned above, I can have chickens done in 4-5 hours, ribs about the same, butts in 8 hours and a whole hog 8-10

hours. Now, with hogs and butts I generally increase the temperature to between 225 and 250 degrees.

Now, I want to talk about choice of wood. Hickory has long been touted as the only wood with which to barbeque. I have used hickory and it produces fine barbeque. The truth is ANY hardwood will produce good barbeque. However, through years of experience, my preference is slightly green red oak. It produces better coals and smoke, in my opinion. Another more practical reason, is local dark tobacco farmers have made it harder to obtain hickory in any quantity and sawmills want a premium for a bundle of totally hickory slabs!

Barbequing to me is a very enjoyable hobby on many levels. It is time consuming but I've come to the conclusion that the effort is worth it and to see the looks on people's faces as the meat comes straight off the pit convinces me that I'm right! I've also decided that there are no short cuts if one desires authentic barbeque!!

Thank You!!