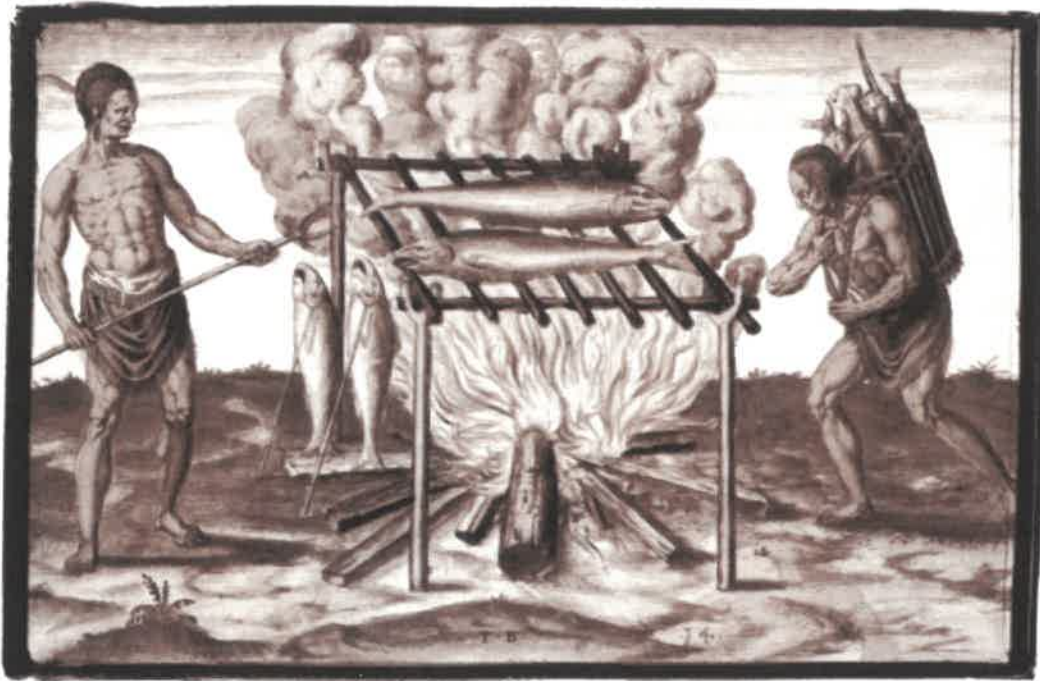


Theory of Barbecue

Barbecue History

The origins of barbecue are hazy and controversial. In the U.S., the early British settlers cooked the first known barbecue in the colonies of Virginia and North Carolina. Whole hogs were slow roasted over wood coals. Barbecue sauces were typically vinegar seasoned with pepper. This probably originated from the British fondness for sprinkling vinegar on dishes like fish and chips. These early barbecue sauces contained no tomato products whatsoever. In fact, at the time, tomatoes were considered to be poisonous. The introduction of tomato-based sauces came much later, as the tradition of barbecue migrated westward with the new settlers and was influenced by local tastes.

Barbecue is believed to have originated in the islands of the West Indies. Because meats spoil quickly in tropical climates, the native Taino practiced two basic techniques for storing meats: "corning" or salting and drying or smoking. They placed fish and meat on a wooden lattice and roasted or smoked them over an open fire. The Spanish called this grill a barbacoa from which we get the English word barbecue. Slaves from the islands took their cooking methods with them to the mainland.



Taino Barbacoa

As barbecue spread throughout the new world, primarily the south, it took on regional flavors and preferences. Today, there is a huge debate about what constitutes "real" barbecue, and how it should be properly cooked, seasoned and served. The proper use of sauce, and even whether it should be used at all, is another huge controversy. Regardless of the regional variations in its preparation, American barbecue shares a common heritage: it is prepared from less expensive, sometimes tough, fatty meats that are made edible through a slow cooking process that renders the fat and makes the meat tender and succulent. The southern poor, who could not afford the more expensive cuts of meat and were forced by necessity to make what they could afford into something edible, developed barbecue.

What is Barbecue?

While there is regional debate about what constitutes "real" barbecue, there are some characteristics of barbecue that are pretty much universal, although there are exceptions. First off, many confuse grilling with barbecue. This is so common, that the word *barbecue* has become associated with grills. Grilling is fast cooking at high temperatures over direct heat with smaller often more expensive cuts of meat. True barbecue is characterized by the phrase "low and slow". Meat is cooked at low temperatures, typically 200°F to 250°F (93°C to 121°C) for long periods of time. And the cuts of meat are much larger and less expensive. Spare ribs are typically cooked for 6-8 hours. Larger cuts, like beef brisket or pork shoulder, may be cooked for 12 to 14 hours. This long cooking time at low temperatures causes the fat to render slowly, breaking down the collagen, leaving the meat moist, succulent and tender.

Regional Barbecue Styles

Regional barbecue styles fall into a few major categories:

- North Carolina (Eastern and Western)
- Memphis
- Kansas City
- Texas

North Carolina Barbecue

North Carolinians are convinced that barbecue originated in their state and that their method of cooking barbecue is the only true, traditional way. Even in North Carolina, however, opinions vary between the eastern half of the state and the western. The only thing they have in common is that both east and west cook pork barbecue over wood that has been burned down to coals and shoveled under the pork. After cooking, the pork is chopped and seasoned with a vinegar based finishing sauce, or dip. In the east, they cook whole hogs. In the west, they cook whole shoulders. While the easterners groan about the westerner's use of tomato based sauce, the sauce used in western North Carolina has a small amount of ketchup added, just enough to turn it red. It is mostly vinegar and bears no resemblance to the thick, sweet, tomato based sauces used in other regions. Found east of Raleigh, NC, Eastern Carolina sauce is made with vinegar, salt, black pepper, crushed or ground cayenne, and other spices—and nothing else. This is a very thin, acidic sauce that penetrates deeply into the meat. Unlike with tomato/sugar-based sauces, this sauce does not "burn" on the meat. It can be applied throughout the cooking process for a tender, melt-in-your-mouth experience. Western Carolina sauce is the same basic recipe as Eastern Carolina, with the addition of small amounts of ketchup, molasses, or Worcestershire sauce and, perhaps, some spices. Found west of Raleigh, in the Piedmont belt, this vinegar-based sauce has great flavor, works extremely well as a marinade on chicken, shrimp, pork and beef, and has a nice afterburner kick.

Memphis Barbecue

In Memphis, ribs are king. Ribs are prepared two ways: dry and wet. Dry ribs are seasoned with a barbecue rub and are not basted with sauce while cooking, or afterwards. Sauce is served on the side. Wet ribs are also seasoned with rub but are basted with sauce while cooking or dipped in sauce afterwards before serving. As with most barbecue subjects, there are fanatics devoted to both styles. Memphis-style barbecue sauce embraces all three of the major ingredients—vinegar, mustard, and tomato.

Kansas City Barbecue

Pork and beef are seasoned with a dry rub or wet marinade and then cooked over hickory wood before adding extra sauce. KC style barbecue sauce is thick and sweet, with a tomato and sugar base. It is the basis for many of the well-known national brands, including Kraft, Heinz, Hunt's, K.C. Masterpiece and Cattlemen's.

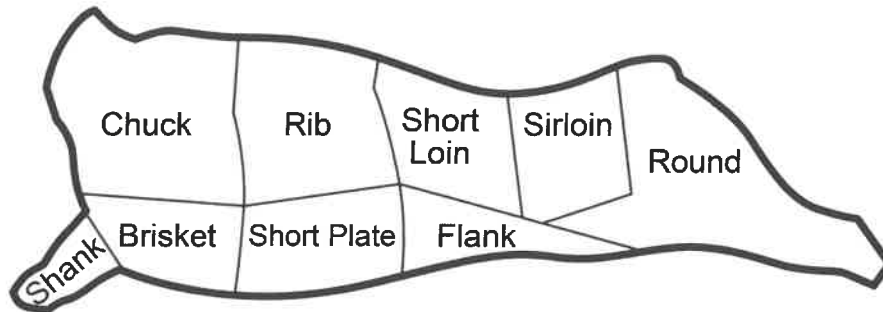
Texas Barbecue

In Texas, barbecue is traditionally beef ribs and brisket, but pork cuts are now commonly found as well. Sauces range from thick, spicy, tomato-based sauces to thin, hot-pepper-based sauces, to thick and dark sauces that have a south-of-the-border flair.

Barbecue Meat Cuts

The debate about the definition of true barbecue extends to the cuts of meat used. Throughout most of the south, barbecue is made from pork. In Texas, however, barbecue is mostly beef. Cuts traditionally used for barbecue are pork or beef ribs, beef brisket, pork shoulder, chicken, and in Eastern North Carolina, whole hog.

Beef



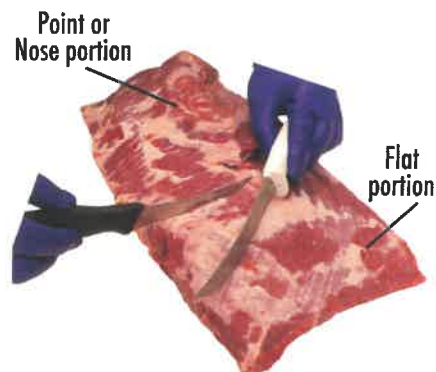
The beef cut most commonly used for barbecue is brisket. Beef brisket comes from the chest of the cow. This chest muscle is a working or locomotion muscle that contains a large amount of collagen and connective tissue associated with it. Thus, brisket is one of the toughest cuts of beef. It is also one of the most difficult cuts to barbecue properly. In Spanish, the cut is known as *pecho*.

For barbecue, buy a whole, untrimmed brisket still in the vacuum packaging. This is referred to as "packer cut" or "packer trimmed" brisket. A whole brisket is comprised of a *flat* portion and a *point* (nose) portion. Every brisket is unique—no two are identical.



Brisket in Vacuum Packaging

The flat is just that: sort of a flat, rectangular piece of meat that makes up the majority of the whole brisket. This is the portion that is cut across the grain into slices and served on a plate or in a sandwich. The flat portion is often seen in a supermarket meat case, separated from the point and with most fat removed, ready for braising in the oven.



Difference in grain direction in flat and point or nose portion of brisket.
Knife placement illustrates direction of grain in each major portion.

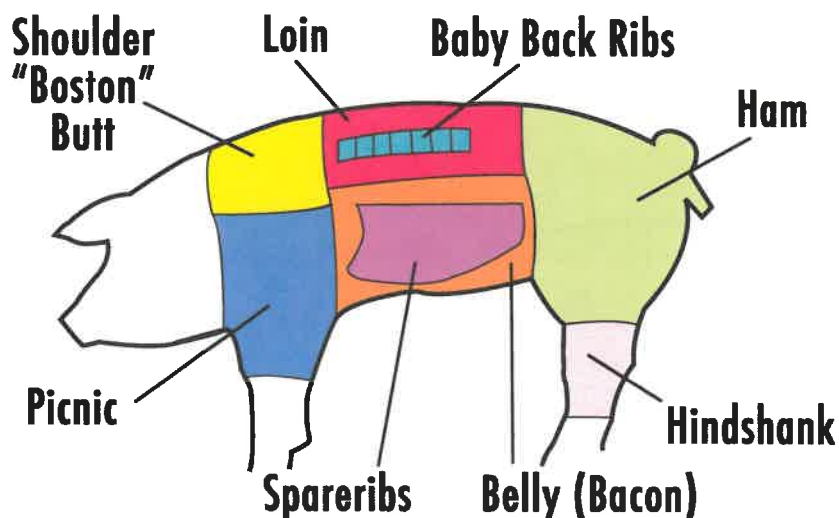
The point is a lump of meat that partially overlaps one end of the flat. It is quite fatty on its surface as well as within the meat. It also contains a lot of connective tissue between the meat fibers. It can be sliced, but its loose texture after cooking makes it a better choice for chopped brisket sandwiches.

A very thick vein of fat running between them separates the flat and point. This fat extends over the entire surface of the flat, becoming thinner at the end opposite the point. This layer of fat is sometimes referred to as the "fat cap". Thick fat may also wrap around one edge of the brisket flat, especially near the point.



From an anatomical perspective, the brisket flat is the "deepest" portion of meat and is attached to the rib cage, while the brisket point sits on top of the flat and is nearest the surface.

Pork



The portion of the pork shoulder, known as the picnic, is the lower portion of the hog's foreleg. The picnic contains the arm and shank bones and has a relatively high ratio of bone to lean meat. It contains some of the toughest cuts of pork.

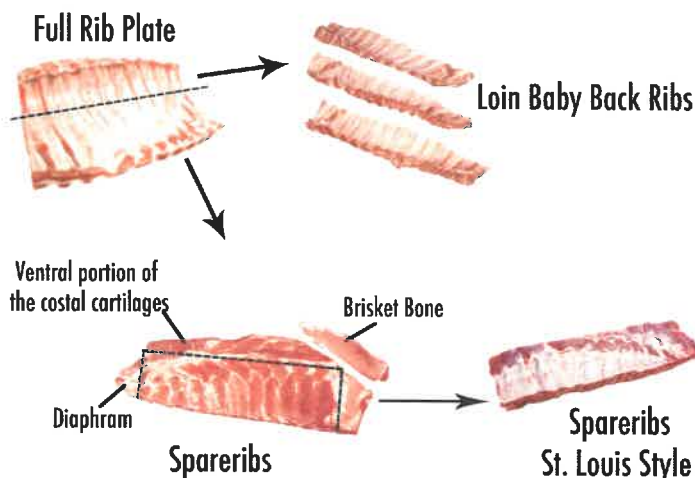
The shoulder "Boston" butt is a square cut located just above the picnic. It is interesting how this cut came to be known by its name. In pre-revolutionary New England and into the Revolutionary War, some pork cuts (not those highly valued, or "high on the hog," like loin and ham) were packed into casks or barrels also known as "butts" for storage and shipment. The way the hog shoulder was cut in the Boston area became known in other regions as "Boston Butt." This name stuck and today, Boston Butt is called that almost everywhere in the U.S., except in Boston.

The loin is cut from directly behind the Boston Butt and includes the entire rib section as well as the loin and a portion of the sirloin area. It contains a portion of the blade bone on the shoulder end, a portion of the hipbone on the ham end, all the ribs and most of the backbone. Loin back ribs are trimmed from the loin. Loin back ribs are often sold as *baby back ribs*, a term used to describe the size of a Loin Back Rib. Unfortunately, many times the term is applied to any size Loin Back Rib. A true Baby Back Rib is 1-3/4 lbs. or lighter.

Spare Ribs are the intact rib section removed from the belly and may include costal cartilages with or without the brisket removed and diaphragm trimmed.

Both the Loin Back Ribs and the Spare Ribs have a skin on their interior. This skin is heaviest at the backbone and becomes very fine at the belly end. The membrane's density has much to do with the age and size of the animal.

St. Louis Style Ribs originate from pork spareribs and are prepared by removing the brisket bone approximately parallel to the rib side, exposing cartilage on the brisket bone side. Skirt meat is also removed.



Where Different Ribs Come From

Pork Loin, Country-Style Ribs

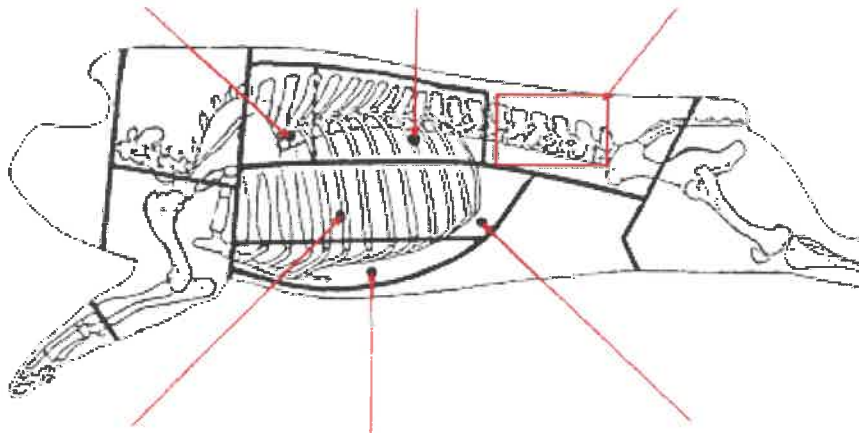
Country Style Ribs are prepared from the blade end of the loin or Boston Butt and include no less than three and no more than six ribs.

Pork Loin, Back Ribs

Back Ribs, also referred to as Canadian Back Ribs and Baby Back Ribs, originate from the blade and center section of the loin. Back ribs contain meat between the ribs called finger meat, and shall contain at least eight ribs.

Pork Loin, Sirloin End

This can be bone-in or boneless



Pork Spare Ribs

Spare Ribs are the intact rib section removed from the belly and may include costal cartilages with or without the brisket removed and diaphragm trimmed. Spare Ribs shall contain at least eleven ribs.

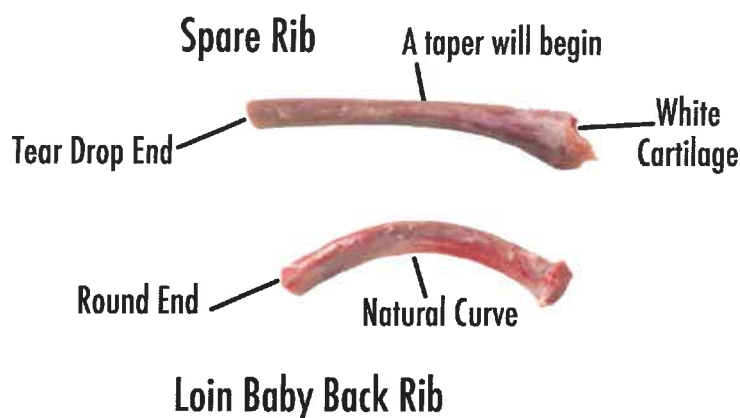
Brisket Bone (Rib Tip)

Rib Tips are small, meaty pieces that have been cut from pork spare ribs during the trimming process when making a St. Louis Rib.

Pork Spareribs, St. Louis Style

St. Louis Style Ribs originate from pork spareribs and are prepared by removing the brisket bone approximately parallel to the rib side, exposing cartilage on the brisket bone side. Skirt meat is removed

The shape and size of a rib bone can tell about its origin on the carcass. It is all in the shape:



To remove the membrane from the bone side of ribs, insert a dull bladed knife between the membrane and the bone. A screwdriver or clam or oyster knife also works well.



Grasp the membrane and peel it from the bone. A paper towel can be used to help get a better grip on the slippery membrane.



The Science of Barbecue

Meats are made of muscle, connective tissue, fat and bone. Muscle contains proteins and glycogen. As the temperature of the meat increases, glycogen, a long chain sugar, is reduced to simple sugars. This caramelizes and is responsible for one of the flavor components.

Proteins (flavorless) are denatured to amino acids, which not only have flavors themselves, but also undergo Maillard browning reactions that add another flavor component.

While bone adds no flavor itself, the marrow is rich in methyglobulin and other proteins. This reacts with smoke nitrites to give us the smoke ring. A common belief is that the sweetest meat is next to the bone.

Fat cells are very simple and breakdown to sugars, fatty acids, and triglycerides at low temperatures.

Collagen is protein with multiple side chain bonds. This makes them elastic. It takes more energy to denature them than the simpler proteins of muscle tissue. Energy in the form of heat will denature these proteins into the flavorful amino acids.

If the temperature is too high, the water in the muscle cells and the fat is rendered out before the collagen melts. This results in dry, tough meat. If the temperature is too low, there is a risk of bacterial growth.

Tougher cuts of meat like brisket and pork butts benefit from low temperature cooking as the collagen adds flavor to the meat. More tender cuts do not need this phase and can be cooked at high temperatures for shorter periods. That is why ribs take 4 to 6 hours of low and slow cooking and briskets take 12 or more (about one hour per pound).

Smoke Ring

One of the results of smoke cooking is the formation of the pink smoke ring. Its intensity, depth and its effect on flavor are within control.

What causes a smoke ring?

Development of the smoke ring involves the chemistry of nitrogen from wood combining with oxygen during the burning process. The resulting nitrogen dioxide (NO_2), one of the gases in the smoke, is absorbed into the moist meat surface. There it reacts with a pigment called myoglobin. Myoglobin is the pigment that gives meat its characteristic color. The amount as well as the state or condition of myoglobin will determine whether the meat is light or dark colored, and whether it is red, purple or brown, respectively. To achieve the desired pink ring in barbecue, nitrogen dioxide is absorbed into the moist surface of the meat to create nitrous acid, which diffuses from the surface of the meat inward to create a pink ring as it reacts with myoglobin in the same way that cured meats obtain a pink color.



Nitrates have been used to cure meat for thousands of years but not on purpose. Sea salt contains nitrates as a naturally occurring impurity. The nitrates incidentally cured meat that was salted for storage. Through a series of reactions, nitrate is converted to nitric oxide myoglobin and when heated it forms nitrosylhemochrome, which results in the pink color of ham, hot dogs, and other cured meats.

Since nitrogen comes from the gases exiting the wood during burning (there is a flame), this phenomenon does not occur in meats cooked in the oven or electric smokers. There is the potential to achieve a smoke ring in a gas-fired cooker because NO_2 will be produced when the gas is burned. If the gas is burning efficiently

(small flame), it will produce less NO₂ than a flame that is from a less efficient (more flame) cooker, so little smoke ring results. To insure creation of an artificial smoke ring in a gas environment, apply sodium nitrate or potassium nitrate (ordinary saltpeter) to meat prior to cooking.

How can I maximize the depth of the smoke ring?

First, realize that the smoke ring has less to do with the amount of smoke applied than with the condition of the meat. Since nitrogen dioxide is very water-soluble, meat will absorb it easier and more readily if the surface of the meat is moist. Therefore, using marinated meat, applying moisture to the surface (spraying), or increasing the relative humidity by putting a pan of water in the smoker will increase the chance of developing a smoke ring. Also keep in mind that once the meat reaches approximately 140°F (60°C) the ring formation stops. Above 140°F (60°C) proteins start to denature and the myoglobin is no longer available. To maximize the extent of the smoke ring from a time/exposure perspective, put the meat on right out of the refrigerator and start out cooking at a lower temperature. With small cuts, like baby back ribs, the smoke ring may go all the way through. Heavier smoke early on may affect the depth and intensity of the smoke flavor on meat.

Why is the smoke ring sometimes purple or red?

That has to do with the amount of myoglobin in the meat; technically, the oxidative state of the iron in meat from older animals has more myoglobin accumulating in cells, thus the ring will appear purple instead of reddish pink as it typically does in beef. The less myoglobin present in the meat (i.e., pork and chicken) the pinker the smoke ring will appear.

Are nitrates safe to eat?

Nitrates and nitrites occur naturally in many foods including onion, pepper, celery, spinach, beets, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, eggplant and tomatoes. There is no evidence of increased cancer rates with dietary nitrates.

Barbecue Cookers/Pits

While just about any metal container of any shape or size can be turned into a barbecue cooker, there are a few standard barbecue designs used for commercial cookers. Many options are now available for backyard cooks or individual homeowner's use.

Horizontal Offset

The horizontal offset cooker originated in the Texas oilfields when welders constructed barbecue smokers from the large diameter pipe they had available. They consist of a long horizontal food chamber with a firebox on one end and an exhaust stack on the other. Some designs have a vertical cooking compartment on the exhaust end for cooking at lower temperatures or holding meats and keeping them hot. One drawback to this design is that the end near the firebox tends to be hotter. This can be offset through the appropriate use of baffles and tuning plates that circulate the heat to avoid hot spots.



Vertical Cooker

There are a number of vertical barbecue cooker designs. Vertical cookers have the heat source at the bottom and food racks above. Some vertical designs have a water pan in the bottom to provide humidity and moderate the temperature. Other designs have a double internal wall so that the heat and smoke travels up through the walls and enters the cooker at the top, exiting through an exhaust at the bottom, circulating over the meat as it goes.



Water Smoker

The barbecue cooker that provides the most bang for the buck, is a vertical water smoker. These cookers have a charcoal pan in the bottom with a water pan above the charcoal and two cooking racks above that. They are sometimes referred to as R2D2 due to their shape. There are several brands of inexpensive water smokers at around the \$30 or \$40 price range. Experts strongly advise against these since they have no adequate way to control ventilation, airflow and temperature. While it is more expensive, around \$300 retail, the best water smoker available is the Weber Smokey Mountain. It has three adjustable vents in the bottom and one on the lid to control the airflow and thus the temperature. Once the temperature has stabilized, these cookers will stay rock solid for at least four hours or more without touching them.



Weber Kettle Grill

While it is generally considered to be for grilling, not barbecue, a Weber kettle can be used to cook offset by placing the coals on one side of the grill and the meat on the other. Weber has an optional charcoal basket that can be used to contain the charcoal on one side. A competition team in California has won Grand Championships cooking on nothing but Weber kettles.



The Primo Grill / Smoker and Green Egg

These grills are made of modern heat holding ceramics. The original design traces its roots back over 3,000 years to ancient China. The Japanese adopted it, and called it "kamado," which means oven, stove, heater, or fireplace. The ceramic walls are heavy and thick. This insulating quality cooks foods with an amazingly small consumption of charcoal. They are a smoker, a grill, and an oven. They can sear steaks at 2,000°F (1,093°C) or slow cook under 200°F (60°C).



Grilling and Indirect Cooking on a Weber Kettle

Some foods taste better when grilled over direct heat, while others benefit from hours of slow roasting.

Direct Grilling is ideal for tender, lean, thin cuts of meat or fish, such as steaks, pork chops, swordfish, and salmon steaks, or fast-cooking vegetables, such as zucchini, broccoli, and corn. The searing heat quickly causes the surface to become crispy and caramelized, producing a flavor and a texture that are impossible to duplicate in an oven.



Direct Grilling

Two-zone Direct Grilling – When building the fire spread one layer of coals evenly across the bottom of the grill and a second layer of coals across half the first layer. Also, leave a small area coal free. This allows movement of items from high to medium or low heat as they become done.



Two-Zone Direct Grilling

Indirect Grilling (or barbecuing) is for thick, fatty, or tougher pieces of meat, such as pork shoulder, leg of lamb, whole chicken, and brisket. Classic barbecue is quite slow (225°F to 275°F - 107°C to 135°C - for 10 to 12 hours in the case of a 14-pound brisket) and requires either a barbecue pit or a special smoker to maintain the steady low temperature. Most people do not have either of these. Nor, frankly, the patience to cook all day. Fortunately, there is a less time-consuming method of barbecuing that can be accomplished on a basic kettle-style charcoal grill. First, carefully push the hot coals away from the center so they are piled on either side of the firebox. Add wet or dry wood chips for added smoke. Both are accepted methods of smoking and are a matter of personal choice. Next, place a pan in the center to catch dripping fat. Finally, set the food on the grate and cover the grill. It will now function as a roasting oven, with all the heat and smoke swirling up and around the food. The ideal cooking temperature for this kind of barbecue is 325°F to 350°F (163°C to 177°C). The rule of thumb is one hour per pound (with an average packer trim brisket at 10 to 12 pounds) although there are reports of successfully cooking a brisket within 5 to 6 hours, a leg of lamb in 1½ to 2 hours, and a chicken in about 1½ hours.



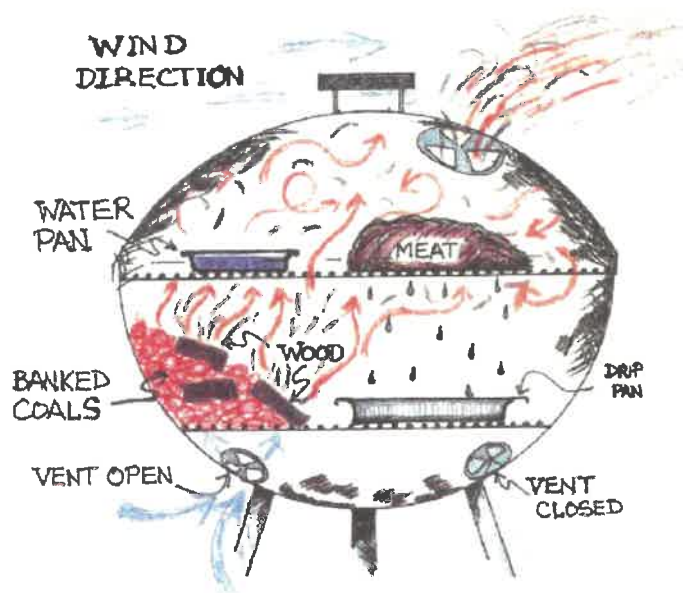
Indirect Grilling

Gas vs. Charcoal – Serious grillers use a charcoal grill. That is not to say one cannot make a good steak on a gas grill. And gas grills are convenient on a drizzly day, not to mention in winter. But gas grills are incapable of re-creating quite the same burned-edge, charcoaled, wood-smoky flavor. Many people have both kinds of grills. The best charcoal is the hardwood-lump kind. Use a chimney style, or non-petroleum based fire starter or prickly pear (cactus)/weed burner to start the charcoal; never use lighter fluid or Sterno (note that Sterno is toxic!).



Chimney style fire starter

Cooking Ribs in a Weber Kettle



Buy one or more racks of spareribs (or "St. Louis Style" for more uniformity), or beef back ribs. Remove membrane over the ribs and coat lightly with olive or vegetable oil by hand or a brush. Sprinkle an abundance of "rub" on both sides and ends, patting and slapping it firmly into place. The surface of meat should be completely covered with a layer of rub. Wrap each rack of ribs in plastic wrap and place in refrigerator for 4 to 24 hours.

Bank a small amount of coals on one side of the grill and let smoker warm up for 20 to 30 minutes. Stick a meat thermometer in the top or side of the grill (may need to drill a hole), and work the fire to stabilize the temperature around 200°F to 300°F (93°C to 149°C). Hotter fires will significantly shorten cooking times and not allow slow cooking of the meat.

Soak hickory, mesquite, cherry, apple or other wood chips in a bowl of water for 20 minutes or more, and sprinkle small amounts on the coals every 20 to 30 minutes or as often as desired. If using large chunks of wood it is not necessary to soak them, it is just a preference.

Optional: Partially fill a small disposable aluminum pan with water and place at the bottom of the Weber or partially over the coals. Fill as necessary during the cooking process.

Place ribs away from the heat source, on the side opposite the banked coals. With two or more racks of ribs, use a 'rib rack' purchased at the local hardware store for around \$10 to help stand the rib racks on their side next to each other. Place rib racks thick side up/bone-end down, so the small ends stay moist.

That is it! Sit back for 4 to 6 hours and watch the smoke rise. Do not forget to add wood chips every so often, and keep the water pan half full. Turn the meat in-place to give each rib end or side equal time nearest the heat source. To test whether the ribs are done, try cutting one off and eating it. The meat should be pink around the edges, called a 'smoke ring', pull cleanly from the bone and taste nice and smoky.

If desired, before serving or for the last 10 minutes of cooking, lightly brush each rack with homemade barbecue sauce. Cut between each rib, brush again with sauce if desired, and serve. Make sure to save a few ribs for the cook—they will go quickly!

Barbecue Fuels

Barbecue is cooked with some form of wood product, never with gas or electricity alone. If the heat source is gas or electricity, it is an oven, not a barbecue pit. Some barbecue pits are suitable for burning wood, while others will produce better results using charcoal. Charcoal can successfully be used in pretty much any cooker. Fist sized wood chunks may be mixed with, or placed on top of, the charcoal to produce flavoring smoke. Do not use an excessive amount of flavoring wood chunks. Excessive smoke can cause foul tasting deposits on the meat creating a bitter flavor. Smoke is one of those things where "if a little is good, more is better" does not apply. There should only be a slightly visible, thin blue smoke coming from the exhaust on the cooker.



Wood, wood chunks and wood chips

Not all charcoal is created equal. Avoid charcoal briquettes. They are produced from scrap wood that is ground to a powder and held together with a clay compound. They also contain other impurities such as coal dust. For barbecue, always use natural hardwood, lump charcoal. It is made from natural wood and contains no additives.

Using wood chunks for additional smoke flavor can modify the flavor of the barbecue. One or two chunks added to the charcoal every couple of hours is plenty. Do not overdo it!

Smoking Woods

Generally speaking, use only hardwoods from fruit-bearing or nut-bearing trees. Fruit woods tend to impart a lighter smoke flavor, while the nut woods produce a stronger smoke flavor. Some BBQ experts believe apple seems to complement all meats. Pecan wood is also a favorite but is sometimes difficult to find.

Acacia	Cherry	Kiawe	Olive
Alder	Chestnut	Lemon	Orange
Almond	Cottonwood	Lilac	Peach
Apple	Crabapple	Madrone	Pear
Apricot	Fig	Manzanita	Pecan
Ash	Grapefruit	Maple	Persimmon
Bay	Grapevine	Mesquite	Pimento
Beech	Guava	Mulberry	Plum
Birch	Hackberry	Nectarine	Walnut
Butternut	Hickory	Oak	Willow

The rule of thumb is the bigger the wood source, the less need for soaking. In fact better results are achieved if the chunks are not soaked. Water soaked chunks tend to smolder, rather than burn, and produce an unpleasant smoke.

Woods To Avoid

The conventional wisdom is that cedar, cypress, elm, eucalyptus, liquid amber, pine, redwood, fir, spruce and sycamore are not suitable for smoking. Some people say that sassafras is also inappropriate for smoking, yet it is available from some mail-order wood suppliers.

When in doubt about a particular smoke wood, play it safe—do not use it until confirmed with a reliable source that it is OK for barbecuing.

Common Smoke Woods

Alder - Alder is commonly used with fish, but also works well with pork and poultry. It has a light, slightly sweet flavor and is not overpowering. It is much less dense than other smoke woods, and is similar to cedar in its look and smell.

Apple - Apple has a light, fruity, slightly sweet aroma and is commonly used with pork and poultry. It is a favorite to use with pork ribs and bacon. It can be mixed with other smoke woods like oak and cherry with good results.

Cherry - Cherry is good to use with chicken. It has a slight red color and a subtle, sweet, fruity flavor. It goes well with beef, pork and poultry and can be mixed with oak and apple.

Guava - Guava, a member of the Myrtle family, is a fruit wood from Hawaii and other tropical regions. Its semi-sweet aroma goes well with beef, pork, lamb, poultry and fish.

Hickory - Hickory is probably the most popular smoke wood used in barbecue. It has a strong flavor that complements all meats. Some people find that hickory alone can be overwhelming, especially if too much is used. It is recommended to never use hickory alone, but mix it with oak. Try two parts oak to one part hickory.

Kiawe - Kiawe (pronounced key-ah-vey) is indigenous to Hawaii and is related to mesquite. It is sweet and strong and works well with beef, fish, or poultry. The wood is very dense and heavy with a dark, smooth, thin bark. Kiawe is not found in stores, but give it a try if acquired.

Mesquite - Mesquite is the official smoke wood of Texas barbecue. Its strong, hearty flavor complements beef, but it also works with fish, pork and poultry. The wood is dense and dark red/brown in color with a very rough bark. Some experts do not like to use mesquite for slow-smoked barbecue because it tends to give the barbecue a strong smoke flavor. However, it is great for grilling.

Oak - Oak is a favorite smoke wood. It goes with just about any barbecue meat. It has a medium smoky flavor that is stronger than apple and cherry, but lighter than hickory. As a result, it mixes well with these three woods, but also works great by itself. It has a dense, tight grain and a color ranging from almost white to yellow to red.

Pecan - Pecan is great with beef, pork, and poultry. Its flavor is described as sweet and nutty. It can be used by itself or mixed with oak. It is especially great for chicken and ribs.

Wine Barrel Chunks - When wine barrels reach the end of their useful life, they are often cut into chunks and sold as smoke wood. These oak chunks show the dark stain of red wine on one side and the natural oak grain on the other. They have the same aroma as the cellars at a winery. Do they provide a unique flavor to barbecue? Hard to say, but they are fun to try.

Whiskey Barrel Chunks - When distillers retire whiskey barrels, they are often cut into chunks and sold as smoke wood.