

I Smell Smoke!

Summer is the time for grilling and barbecuing outdoors. These two cooking methods are vastly different: Grilling is the high temperature cooking of tender cuts of meat with the direct, radiant heat of burning wood, coals or charcoal. We don't discuss other sources of heat, which properly belong indoors. Barbecue, on the other hand, utilizes tougher cuts requiring hours of slow cooking to become tender. Smoke cooking is an intermediate method whereby meats such as pork loin or beef roasts are cooked on a pit or smoker to the desired degree of doneness. Working muscles such as pork shoulders and beef brisket contain a lot of tough connective tissue composed largely of collagen. At meat temperatures over 160° F, collagen slowly "melts" into gelatin and water and the meat becomes tender, moist and "pullable". Skill, patience and proper equipment are required to maintain relatively low temperatures for long periods of time, especially when burning wood. Meat can easily get too smoky or dried out or even incinerated due to flair-ups and pit fires.

According to the official USDA definition, barbecue is "cooked by the direct action of heat resulting from the burning of hardwood or the hot coals therefrom for a sufficient period to assume the usual characteristics".

It is very difficult to find "real" barbecue now. Even in North Carolina where pig meat has ruled supreme for over 300 years (see sidebar), there are few wood burners left; most "joints" converted to gas or electricity in the '60s for convenience.

[Sidebar or note: William Byrd, builder of Westover on the James River, kept a daily journal during his survey of the boundary of North Carolina and Virginia in the spring and fall of 1728. In his subsequent "History of the Dividing Line", he observed that, "The only business here is raising of hogs, which is managed with the least of trouble and affords the diet they are most fond of. The truth of it is, the inhabitants of North Carolina devour so much of the swine's flesh that it fills them full of gross humors."]

Traditionally, barbecue was cooked over "live coals": hardwood burned down to coals and sparingly shoveled under the meat. Done properly, this method results in the "thin blue smoke" that pit masters strive to attain and thus the finest flavor. The meat is placed on a grate about 20 inches above the coals, covered or uncovered, and is cooked mostly by radiant energy. As with charcoal, most of the volatile components have been burned off and the smoke flavor is subtle and pleasant. Operating a burn barrel for 12 hours or so requires a lot of attention and consumes a tremendous amount of wood. Cooking directly over live coals is tricky because of frequent flare-ups and requires constant attention. Commercial charcoal is not much better than gas as far as flavor is concerned and it is made with a lot of additives. Good, natural lump charcoal is hard to find, unless you make your own. The trend, therefore, is to use an offset firebox and raw wood or a combination of wood and charcoal. Smoke from burning wood is acrid and contains over 200 chemical compounds, many of which can ruin meat. Therefore, the fire needs to be managed to retain the good components of smoke and eliminate the bad ones. As with other seasonings, smoke should be of good quality and used judiciously; it should complement flavors rather than dominate them. In choosing wood, avoid softwoods, such as pine, and green or rotten wood. Mesquite produces a very strong smoke. It needs to be used sparingly and with robust meats such as beef or game. Among popular Eastern hardwoods, hickory and pecan are the strongest, followed by the oaks. These woods are suitable for pork and beef. Fruit tree woods, such as apple and wild cherry, produce a light, sweet smoke that is excellent for fish and poultry.

To avoid bitter volatiles, wood should burn, not smolder. The firebox damper regulates the rate of burn and pit temperature. Adequate airflow through the cooking chamber is essential to avoid stale smoke and the accumulation of bitter creosote on the meat. It is advisable to keep the top or exhaust damper completely open at all times.

If all of this sounds like too much trouble, just come by "Something Different" for some real barbecue and smoked meats. In addition to our Eastern North Carolina style pork barbecue, we have dry-rubbed, Texas style beef brisket and on Friday and Saturday the dry-rubbed spareribs

are usually hot from the pit by about 4:00. We dry-rub and smoke-cook roast beef (eye of round), prime rib, and salmon and we always have our brined and smoked turkey breast.

© Dan Gill 8-10-05

Something Different Country Store and Deli

Published in Pleasant Living magazine

e-mail – sdcsdeli@yahoo.com