

Our Barbecue Heritage

By Dan Gill

Barbecue is uniquely American. Not only did Columbus discover America, he also discovered the culture and traditions of barbecue, which continue today. On the island of Hispaniola, now Haiti and Santo Domingo, Taino Indians spent days hunting and fishing, then spent a similar amount of time cooking. The meat was seasoned and elevated on a platform of sticks about two feet above a small fire of allspice wood.

Man has cooked and preserved meat with fire and smoke ever since he climbed down from the trees. Why is barbecue different? First, barbecue is seasoned and usually served with a spicy sauce. In the Caribbean, the sauce was composed of peppers called *aji* (ancestor of today's habanero), fruit juice, land crabs, and whatever else was handy. Columbus wrote: "*In those islands, where there are lofty mountains, the cold was very keen there, this winter, but they endured it by being accustomed thereto, and by the help of meats which they eat with many and inordinately hot spices...*"

Barbecue is cooked slowly over the flame, embers and smoke of specific woods. This method flavors the meat throughout as it cooks. Smoke and seasonings also retard spoilage, an important property in tropical climates. Being elevated and open to the air, the meat is cooked primarily by radiant heat and does not get over-smoked. Slow cooking requires monitoring, so the Taino Indians of Hispaniola reclined on their hammocks, smoked "sikars," drank beer made from palm sap, and discussed the upcoming inter-village ball game. Therefore, barbecue was always as much of a social event as a cooking method. This all made quite an impression on the Spanish, but the natives were cooking turtles, lizards, fish and monkeys: Spaniards figured pigs would make much better barbecue. Therefore, on his second voyage, Columbus brought eight hand-picked hogs to Hispaniola. Descendants of these same pigs were later brought into North America by De Soto and founded the herds of razorbacks still found from Georgia to Texas.

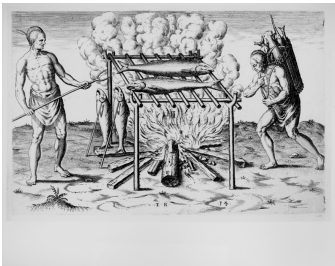
The meat was laid on a platform of sticks about two feet above the fire and supported by four forked sticks. The Tainos called the platform a "babracot", or something similar. In Spanish, the word became *barbacoa* and referred to the platform, the cooked meat and the party. Spanish explorers spread the word around the world and English speakers changed it to barbecue.

It took the Spanish less than 100 years to find all of the gold on Hispaniola, exterminate the Taino Indians and move on to conquer the mainland. In the meantime, the Caribbean Islands attracted a lot of ruffians and malcontents from France and Holland. Mostly political, social and/or religious refugees, these hardy adventurers survived by hunting and planting. They also learned the art of barbecue from natives on Cuba and other islands. On Hispaniola, they found wild horses, cattle and hogs left by the Spanish. They set up camps and started hunting, tanning hides and cooking meat in the native style. Since they had to keep the meat until it could be sold, they cut it into strips and dried it over smoky fires to make *charqui* (dried meat, later called jerked meat or jerky). The French name for the platform of sticks, the cooked or dried meat and the inevitable party was *boucan* and the

men who made boucan became known as “Boucaniers.” Typically, two men would partner and spend as much as two years hunting and making boucan on Hispaniola. Then they would paddle their canoes over to Tortuga, a neighboring island, and sell to passing ships. Sailors liked boucan better than their salt pork and readily bought it from the boucaniers. The boucaniers then spent some of their money on powder and shot and the rest on rum and brandy. When they finally sobered up, they paddled back over to Hispaniola for another year or so of hunting and cooking. As Tortuga was developing into a French trading center, the Spanish became alarmed and attacked and burned settlements and hunting camps. In retaliation, boucaniers started taking Spanish treasure ships. They then decided that there was more profit in robbing ships than in smoking meat. Soon they formed a federation known as the “Brethren of the Coast” and became “Buccaneers.”

As the Buccaneers were getting their act together, England decided that maybe she should lay claim to some of the new land before Spain and France took it all. Queen Elizabeth I sent Sir Walter Raleigh to found Virginia (he actually found North Carolina). On one trip inland, they encountered natives cooking seasoned meat on a platform of sticks over a small fire.

Robert Beverley, the Historian, was raised in (now) Middlesex County. As a young man, he spent as much time as he could with the few remaining Indians. In 1705, he published *The History and Present State of Virginia* and described the culture and customs of Indians in Virginia. He wrote:



"They have two ways of Broyling, vis. one by laying the Meat itself upon the Coals, the other by laying it upon Sticks rais'd upon Forks at some distance above the live Coals, which heats more gently, and dries up the Gravy; this they, and we also from them, call Barbacueing."

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Engraving by De Bry (printed 1590) based on watercolor by White.
Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

English settlers often used Indian words in naming places. Early land patents reference Barbicue Swamp in Nansemond County and Barbicue Creek (most likely Sturgeon Creek) in Middlesex County. It is not really surprising that natives throughout the Americas employed similar cooking methods, but if the word “barbecue” was in general use among native Virginians prior to English settlement, then it was either brought by earlier Spanish explorers or spread up the East Coast through inter-tribal trading.

At “Something Different” we no longer use a platform of sticks (although I have smoked bluefish on one), but we *do* make traditional barbecue using methods that were adopted straight from Native Americans. And that’s the truth, as far as I know.

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