

**Barbecue 101**  
***A Guide to Wicked Good Barbecue***  
***Part I: The Pit***  
**by Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist**

Making barbecue is the art of cooking tough cuts of seasoned meat slowly in the presence of wood smoke until they are tender and flavorful and can be easily pulled apart. Sounds simple until you try it yourself. Working muscles, such as pork shoulders and beef brisket, are held together by collagen, a tough connective tissue. When heated to 160° or more for a long period of time, collagen breaks down to gelatin and water, which accounts for the tenderness and moistness of properly cooked barbecue. The trick is to create an environment in which meat can be cooked for hours without getting overcooked, overly dry or too smoky. This requires the proper equipment, fuel, meat, seasoning and technique. This is the first of a series of articles designed to guide novices on the confusing and conflicting journey to barbecue Nirvana.

The first thing you need is a pit. It can be as simple as a modified fifty-five-gallon drum, a hole in the ground, or a cinderblock pit; or as sophisticated as an expensive competition pit with blowers and automatic dampers. Grills can be used but generally run too hot with too much direct, radiant heat, causing the meat to overcook and dry out before it gets tender.

Backyard and novice “barbecueists” have two basic choices: offset or bullet-style pits. Offsets, derived from Texas-style pits, have a firebox at the end of a cylindrical cooking chamber. Heat and smoke flow over and around the meat on their way to the exhaust stack. Offsets have the advantage of burning logs and chunks of wood, but they require a lot of attention and fire control. Since the firebox is located at one end, meat closest to the fire is exposed to more radiant heat, cooks faster and can easily burn. High-end and custom-made offset pits are “tuned” with baffles and shields for more even cooking. Bullet pits, also known as water smokers, are vertical cylinders with a grate for the fire at the bottom, a water pan to help regulate pit temperature and humidity, and one or more racks for the food. Cheaper models are hard to regulate and require a lot of attention and modifications to make good barbecue.

There is a saying around the barbecue circuit: “It’s not the cooker, it’s the cook.” This is true; an experienced pit-master can make good barbecue with just about any kind of pit. That said, it is much easier for beginners to start with a well-made and well-behaved pit. For one thing, they are more likely to keep using it after a few positive experiences. By far the best small pit for beginners, or experienced cooks for that matter, is the Weber Smokey Mountain or “WSM”—a bullet-style pit popular among knowledgeable barbecue enthusiasts. Once adjusted, it can hold 250° F for six hours or more on one charge of charcoal. It is coated with ceramics and will outlast ten of the cheaper, powder-coated bullets or small offsets and do a much better job of cooking. The WSM is used successfully in competition against pits that cost a small fortune. You may have to special order it from a dealer or buy it online. Weber sets a minimum retail, so prices are fairly consistent. In the Urbanna area, Harrow’s Home Center usually has one on hand or can have it delivered in just a few days. Once you get your WSM and put it together, fill the water pan with clean water and give it to the dog. OK, maybe you had better use it until you are thoroughly familiar with pit operation. Unlike cheaper water smokers, the WSM fits together snugly and does not usually need the added humidity of evaporating water. Some operators just use the water pan to catch juices and keep fat from dripping on the hot coals; or they fill it with clean sand so that it allows higher temperatures and functions as a thermal flywheel. I often prefer cooking direct (without the water pan) so that the meat is exposed to radiant heat and gets a better “bark” or caramelized surface. The problem with this method involves rendered fat

dripping in the fire. The WSM is so tight that it doesn't flame until you remove the top and introduce excess oxygen; then you have to do what you need to do fast and replace the top before things get out of control.

Get some good natural lump charcoal or natural briquettes. When I first got my WSM many years ago I even made my own charcoal. That was before I had a real job. Standard briquettes available in grocery and discount stores contain all sorts of adulterants. They may be fine for open grilling, but in a pit, meat is in intimate contact with combustion products for an extended period of time and you will taste what you burn. After considerable research, we are using and selling the "Wicked Good" brand of natural charcoal. "Wicked Good" lump and briquettes burn hot and clean for a long time with no sparking and little ash.

Have a chimney for lighting charcoal; never use petroleum starters or quick-lighting charcoal, especially in a pit. Chimneys—metal cylinders used for quickly lighting charcoal with newspaper—are readily available through retailers. Fill the charcoal ring in the bottom of the cooker about half full of charcoal and add a few chunks of dry, seasoned hardwood. Next, fill the top part of the chimney with charcoal. Find the instruction booklet that came with the cooker. Carefully separate the pages and wad them into a donut shape so that air can get to the center. Put the instruction booklet in the bottom part of the chimney and start your first fire. After coals in the chimney are burning well, dump them on the charcoal in the pit and put everything together. As with any pit, keep the top vent completely open at all times, except to smother the fire after cooking. Nothing will ruin meat faster than creosote from smoldering wood and stale smoke caused by insufficient airflow through the pit. Regulate the rate of burn with the bottom or inlet vents. Now, LEAVE IT ALONE! Resist the temptation to take the lid off and check the meat. Each time the pit is opened, heat is lost and cooking is prolonged. If you must baste or fiddle with the meat, do it quickly and not very often.

Get a digital thermometer with a probe on the end of a wire cable. Hang the probe through the top vent so that it doesn't restrict the vent or touch the meat. You can occasionally check to see if you are in the cooking range of 225° to 275° most of the time. You don't need to be anal about pit temperature; excursions above 300° or below 200° are not a serious problem, but indicate that adjustments are required. Don't worry about meat temperature unless you are cooking poultry or roasts. Barbecue meat will be well done hours before it becomes barbecue. Use your senses of smell, sight and touch to judge when it is ready: Pork shoulders kind of "slump" under their own weight; an inserted fork can be twisted easily and the bones can be pulled out cleanly. Ribs become flexible, acquire a glaze on the surface and are fork-tender but not soft and mushy; there should be some tug or "tooth" as the meat is pulled from the bone. Brisket is done when you can insert a two-tined fork vertically then, when the fork is withdrawn, the brisket does not follow.

Since you have burned the instructions, fire up your computer and visit Gary Wiviott's informative site, [www.wiviott.com](http://www.wiviott.com), for a five-dinner course designed to guide novice WSM owners through the learning phase. As Gary suggests, start out by cooking forgiving meats such as chicken, pork loin or rib eye roasts. Learn pit operation and fire control before attempting more demanding barbecue cuts such as ribs and brisket. Keep seasoning simple and minimal to begin with: a light rub of salt, pepper and maybe a little brown sugar is nice and will allow you to taste the subtleties of your efforts. Then, when you are ready, stop by Something Different for some of our Beef Rub, Butt Rub, Salmon Rub or our KA Caribbean seasoning and take your barbecue to the next level.