

Barbecue 101

A Guide to Wicked Good Barbecue

Part II: The Fuel

By Dan Gill

By USDA definition, barbecue is cooked slowly with wood or coals from wood – everything else is “faux-cue”. It all started in the Americas with natives cooking and drying meat on a platform of sticks, called a barbacoa, over or beside a low, smoky fire. This (inefficient) method works fine, if you don’t have anything else to do for a day or two. The flavors from open-air smoking, though, are remarkable: The best bluefish I have ever tasted were smoked all day on a barbacoa (see photo). Shad-plankings were popular for the same reason – when we still had plenty of shad. Wild game and fish have little excess fat to drip on burning logs and cause flare-ups, but then Europeans introduced fat pigs and cattle (see “[The Cremation of Ethyl A. Pigg](#)” in the November - December issue of Pleasant Living).



The author smoking bluefish filets on a “barbacoa”
The bananas in the background actually fruited in Virginia



Homemade natural lump charcoal

Colonists soon learned to burn logs down to glowing coals, thereby reducing the danger of conflagrations. They also abandoned the barbacoa and dug pits or trenches to contain and focus the heat. These open pits were typically about

two to three feet deep. Sticks were placed across the top to support the meat and, later on in the development, cardboard was laid over the meat to reduce ash deposition and help retain heat and smoke. Traditional barbecue is therefore made by burning wood down to coals in a separate firebox and sprinkling “live” coals under the meat, which is elevated about twenty inches above the coals in an enclosed “pit”. This method results in the legendary “thin blue smoke” and subtle flavor associated with true (and elusive) Eastern North Carolina barbecue. It also requires a LOT of wood and a LOT of attention. There are still a few joints that cook over live coals, such as Honey Monk’s Lexington #1 in Lexington, North Carolina, and Cooper’s in Llano, Texas.

Modern wood-burning pits are designed so that fat does not drip directly on the fire. Raw wood must be used with care and burned fast enough, on a bed of hot coals, to keep the smoke sweet and pleasant. Most barbecuists use charcoal for heat and add a few chunks of raw, seasoned hardwood for the smoky barbecue flavor. Wood should be dry and well seasoned to burn properly: Green wood produces harsh, bitter smoke. Soaking wood in water is not necessary and affects the flavor and moisture balance in a pit. The fire should be active for wood to burn properly: Smoldering wood produces bitter smoke and creosote. Most hardwoods are good for smoking; soft woods such as pine have too much resin and produce tars and bitter smoke and should be avoided. Hardwoods have a range of flavors and each species imparts its own characteristic taste to meats. Listed in order from strong and harsh to light and sweet, popular hardwoods include mesquite, hickory, pecan, oaks, ash, cherry, and apple.

Charcoal is simply wood burned to coals and then deprived of oxygen, or raw wood heated in a retort until nothing is left but char (carbon). It burns hot and clean, with little smoke and little ash. Once lit, it functions just like live coals and is the best heat source for smokers and pits. Natural charcoal imparts little smoke or flavor as most of the volatiles have been burned away. Good charcoal is hard to find. Back in the ‘50s, when I was coming along and outdoor cooking was getting popular, there was an old man, just up the road, who made hickory charcoal the old-time way and sold it in burlap bags. Then, when I got serious about barbecue and needed good, clean charcoal, I perfected a method to make my own using fifty-five gallon drums as retorts. My arrangement was environmentally sound because all of the volatiles and pollutants were burned in the process.

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Charcoal is generally available in three distinct products:

In pure chunk form it is known as lump charcoal. There are some residual characteristics from the parent wood and lump charcoals vary considerably in heat, flavor, sparking and burn time. Sparking charcoal is great for people who make fireworks and seek special charcoals, such as grapevine, for colorful displays but sparking is not a good thing for barbecue.

Natural charcoal briquettes are made from a paste of crushed charcoal and a vegetable binder, such as wheat flour, and then pressed into a pillow shape. Briquettes are uniform, easy to handle, relatively clean and burn at a predictable rate. Unfortunately, natural briquettes are hard to find and are relatively expensive.

Consumers are more likely to encounter, and purchase, the cheaper, formulated briquettes found in grocery and discount stores. These briquettes are usually made from a slurry of carbonized sawdust, clay, limestone, sodium nitrate, anthracite coal and soft coal. Some contain raw sawdust for smoke flavor, and paraffin or other (petroleum) accelerants for quick lighting. Clay and limestone result in a lot of ash, which blocks airflow and interferes with heat transfer requiring frequent stirring to knock off surface ash. It can also become airborne and settle on the surface of the meat. Coal has a characteristic odor when burned, which can be detected in the barbecue – especially when unlit briquettes are added during cooking. In some contests, this is an advantage because the coal taste reminds inexperienced judges of home; experienced tasters object. Supermarket briquettes may be suitable for open grilling, but a barbecue pit is enclosed and meat is exposed to these adulterants for long periods of time: You eat what you cook with.

Charcoal, as used to make barbecue, is primarily a source of consistent heat. Therefore, you are really buying BTUs (British Thermal Units), a measure of heat content. Natural lump and briquettes contain significantly more BTUs per pound and they burn considerably longer than the commonly available and cheaper “formulated” briquettes. After much research, we have decided to use and sell the “Wicked Good” brand of natural charcoal. Popular on the competition circuit, Wicked Good is a high quality blend of five South

American hardwood charcoals selected for their long burn times, high BTUs per pound and low ash content. All of the wood is grown on plantations and does not contribute (further) to rain forest destruction. Their kilns are state-of-the-art: Pollutants normally associated with charcoal production are captured and further processed rather than being allowed to escape into the environment. The producers also take charcoal-making one step beyond and remove most of the remaining volatiles, thus eliminating sparking, a common and aggravating problem with some natural charcoals. Independent tests indicate that Wicked Good lump charcoal burns almost twice as long as the most popular manufactured briquettes, producing about 40% more heat and leaving only 10% as much ash. The Wicked Good all-natural briquettes stack up even better. Proving, once again, that it “always pays to go first class.” Stop by “Something Different” for some wicked good charcoal, wicked good barbecue and wicked good company.

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