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Mmmm! Good Ribs by Lee shown with Debbie's Beans & Potato Salad

photo by Garry Beckham

## Barbeque: The Secret of Success

By Lee Ratliff

Everything you've heard about barbeque is wrong. The funny thing is, most of it is right too. Barbeque has a legendary ability to spark passionate debate with nearly everybody weighing in with contradictory rules about what constitutes "Real Barbeque." Like politics and religion, barbeque has its own zealots with no shortage of absolute rules for the rest of us to follow. For such a down-home cuisine, barbeque has more than its share of snobs. However, most people just love to eat good barbeque, but get confused by all the dogma when it comes time to prepare it.

The fact is, barbeque is one of the most forgiving methods of cooking that has ever existed. In fact, if you just stick to the definition of barbeque – low and slow roasting, usually flavored with

wood smoke – it's hard to go wrong. Many a delicious brisket has been prepared using nothing but a low fire and a little salt and pepper. Still, it's good to have a bag of tricks and a few fundamental techniques to add interest to your weekend cookouts.

The biggest mistake people make when barbequing is simply getting it confused with grilling. Grilling is a high-heat method of cooking relatively thin and tender cuts of meat, fish, poultry and vegetables. Barbeque cooking, on the other hand, evolved as the optimal method of cooking large, tough cuts of meat, often with lots of connective tissues. Grilling a rib eye steak generally results in a beautiful, tasty and tender steak, while grilling a brisket would result in something resembling a tire in both texture and taste. The key

to barbeque is cooking low and slow. Cooking at low temperatures for prolonged periods of time makes large, tough cuts of meat tender and juicy by minimizing moisture loss and muscle shrinkage and by dissolving the collagen in the connective tissues.

### CUTS OF MEAT

So what cuts of meat are best for barbeque? Pork shoulder, ribs, and beef brisket are often considered the holy trinity of barbeque and benefit the most from this tenderizing style of cooking, but chicken, turkey, sausage, and many other cuts are often used as well.

Pork shoulder is a perfect candidate for barbeque. It is a tough, well-used group of muscles connected by normally inedible tissues, but after a day in the smoker, it is melt-in-your-

mouth, fall-off-the-bone delicious – tender enough to pull apart with a fork, hence the name, pulled pork. A full pork shoulder is a monster cut of meat, so unless you're feeding an army, you might want to get one of the component muscles, preferably the Boston butt, in a five- to eight-pound cut.

Beef brisket is considered the most traditional *barbeque* for Texas. Consisting of two muscles, the flat and the point, the brisket is a 12- to 18-pound cut of meat from the chest of the steer. Trimmed and untrimmed briskets are available. Barbeque snobs would never buy a trimmed brisket because the fat should render during

cooking to keep the meat moist. But the truth is, trimmed briskets are easier, more economical (since you're not paying for the fat), and there's still plenty of fat to keep the meat moist. Some butchers will let you buy just the flat if you want a smaller cut.

Finally, pork ribs are, by far, the most commonly barbequed cut of meat due to their manageable size, relatively short cooking time, and wonderful flavor. The whole pork rib is divided into two cuts by the butcher – spare ribs close to the belly and back ribs from 'high on the hog' as they say. The back ribs, also known as baby back ribs, are smaller, more tender, less meaty, and can be prepared in only a couple of hours. Spare ribs are meaty and have a more intense flavor, but are tougher, requiring three to five hours on low heat. Baby backs have become very popular in recent years due to clever marketing and easier preparation, but many people think spare ribs are tastier when properly cooked. One advantage to back ribs is that they come in a semi-rectangular slab that requires little or

no further trimming. Spare ribs usually come with several flaps of muscle that must be trimmed to achieve a nicely formed slab of ribs. Recently, however, meat packers have begun selling pre-trimmed spare ribs that they've labeled "St. Louis cut." These will save you a lot of trimming and waste.



Ribs on the Grill

sprinkled all over the meat and rubbed in. Rubs also have problems penetrating the meat deeply, but their real advantage comes from the thick, flavorful crust – known as "bark" – they form. A good coating of rub will stick to the meat and survive basting, mopping and saucing. Rubs can be purchased, but it's easy, fun

and economical to make them yourself. A typical rub recipe uses 3 parts coarse salt, 4 parts sugar (any combination of white, brown and turbinado sugar), 3 parts blended paprika and chili powder, and one part spices and herbs (anything you want, but typically includes black pepper, cayenne pepper, onion powder, garlic powder and cumin). Experiment! And don't be shy.

Sauces and glazes are very similar.

photo by Garry Beckham

Whether you choose back ribs or spare ribs, you'll need to "peel" the ribs before cooking. Flip the ribs so the bone side is up. The bones are covered with a very tough, elastic membrane that must be removed. Using a bluntly pointed utensil, separate the membrane from the bone at the end of the slab. Once you have a loose flap of membrane, use a dishcloth to grab hold and pull off the membrane. It normally comes off in one piece that is discarded.

#### RUBS, MARINADES, GLAZES, AND SAUCES

While the natural flavor of the meat supplemented by the flavor of wood smoke makes for great food, most people like to add certain flavorings to taste like traditional barbeque. More often than not, that begins long before the meat hits the heat.

Rubs and marinades are used minutes, hours, or even days ahead of time to permeate the meat with flavor.

Rubs are dry mixtures of salt, sugar, spices, and herbs that are liberally

applied. In fact, the only difference is when you apply them. Sauces are applied at the table and it's a glaze if you apply it in the final minutes of cooking. A glaze is very effective at adding a powerful shot of flavor to the meat. It also adds that glistening stickiness that many people associate with ribs. The key is to apply the glaze during the last 10 or 15 minutes of cooking and watch it carefully. Glazes are full of dissolved sugar and corn syrup that burns very easily.

#### MEET THE HEAT

As with most things, preparation is critical. Most of the work is done before you ever light the fire, so the actual cooking process is pretty easy. Once you've selected your meat, trimmed it and seasoned it, let it chill in the fridge for a while. This can all be done in advance, up to 24 or even 48 hours. When you're ready to start the fire, take the meat out of the fridge and let it start warming to room temperature.

If you've got a smoker, great, but it's not necessary. You can use your

charcoal grill. Just start the coals well in advance so they can ash over and start to cool off. Push them to the side to achieve a low, indirect heat. Throw in a few chunks of your favorite smoking wood and let the fire rest for another ten minutes before putting on the meat. Close the lid and using the built-in thermometer, adjust the vents until you achieve a temperature of 200F to 250F. Temperature is not critical as long as you stay close to this range. At a low temperature, longer cooking times just mean more tenderness.

That's it! Kick back and grab a tasty beverage because all you need to do now is check the temperature every once in while. About once per hour or whenever the temperature dips too low, add 10 or 15 pieces of charcoal and a few chunks of wood for smoke. While you're at it, baste the meat or simply use a spray bottle filled with apple juice to keep it moist. Ribs are done when the meat has pulled back about a quarter of an inch from the bone ends. For really tender ribs wait until the bone twists loose under a little pressure. For large cuts like brisket and pork shoulder, use an instant-read thermometer and look for an internal temperature of about 190F. Cooking time depends on the temperature, weight, and thickness of the meat. Start checking after about an hour for each pound. Brisket and pork shoulder can easily take seven or eight hours, but can take much longer if they are big. Some pros go 24 hours at very low temperature.

Once you've become a barbeque guru, it's only natural that you'll become obsessively secretive, jealously protective of your recipes, and annoyingly opinionated when discussing the merits of pecan versus hickory smoke and other arcane barbeque topics. That's OK. It's part of the barbeque mystique and you've earned it. Just don't tell anybody how easy it is!

*Lee Ratliff is a freelance writer and cook living in Plano.*

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