

# Barbecue: Still Smoking after Three Hundred Years

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The word *barbecue* has many meanings. Some people use it as a verb to describe cooking food outdoors on a grill. In North Carolina, barbecue is a noun that describes pork meat that is smoked, chopped or sliced, and sauced. When North Carolina was a poor, farming state, especially around the time of the Civil War, hogs were popular. People could raise hogs faster and more easily than cattle. Hogs could forage (graze or search for food) and eat just about anything. They didn't require large pastures, like cattle, and grew quickly.

Some pork would be put away for the winter as smoked hams. But for celebrations and other big events, people cooked barbecue. Farmers might cook a hog to celebrate a successful tobacco harvest or to feed folks gathered for a church revival.

Historians believe that American Indians taught early settlers the art of smoking meat over wood or charcoal. Preparing barbecue was so common in North Carolina by the early 1700s that William Byrd, of Virginia, wrote about the practice as he surveyed the border between the two states.

In the 1800s barbecue was prepared at home or by traveling men cooking at fairs or festivals. Some of those cooks eventually opened restaurants. The first sit-down barbecue restaurant in North Carolina was Melton's in Rocky Mount, which opened in 1924. Melton's recently closed, but many barbecue restaurants in the state have been in business for a long time.

In the 1930s and 1940s, barbecue entered politics. Candidates would go to a town and make campaign speeches. A barbecue dinner would be offered to lure voters to these "political caravans." A lot of political talk still happens over plates of smoked pig.

Barbecue is prepared differently in different parts of the state. In eastern North Carolina, people use the meat from the whole hog. The pork is chopped after it's cooked and is served with a spicy vinegar sauce. In the Piedmont, people use only certain parts of the pig, mainly the shoulder. They serve their barbecue chopped or sliced, with a thicker, sweeter sauce that contains tomatoes. Barbecue fans can get in big arguments over which kind of pork and sauce is better.

People cook both kinds of barbecue the same way. Traditionally, they place the pork over a pit of slowly burning hickory or oak wood. The wood smoke gives the meat a distinctive flavor. Some cooks prefer to put sauce on the meat while it cooks. Others serve the sauce on the side at the table. But the sauce is so important that most people keep their recipes a secret. And barbecue takes a long time to prepare—eight to twelve hours. Good pit masters—what the people who cook barbecue are called—have learned from experience how to prepare the wood and handle

the smoking process. Someone must tend the pit all night and add wood during the cooking. Making barbecue by the old-fashioned smoking method takes a lot of work.

A “pig pickin’” is different. Instead of serving meat already chopped, the cook leaves the pig whole, and guests pick meat directly from it. Sauce is offered on the side. Pig pickin’ often takes place at home or at a tailgate before a football game or other sports event, where fans pull large cooker grills into parking lots.

Before the Civil War, enslaved people did the cooking on plantations, so they usually made the barbecue. After the war, former slaves used their cooking skills to make money, passing down knowledge to their children. That may be why many pit masters and barbecue restaurant owners today are African American. One example is the African American minister who started Scott’s Famous Barbecue restaurant in Goldsboro. The Reverend Adam Scott began cooking pigs at his home in the 1930s. He was invited to serve barbecue to President and Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt at the White House. The restaurant is open limited hours now, but supermarkets sell Scott’s patented barbecue sauce.

Because traditional smoking takes so much work, many restaurants now use gas or electric smokers that do not need wood or constant tending. A lot of the elder pit masters are dying, taking their experience with them. Many of them say that younger people don’t want to spend the time needed to make traditional barbecue. The wood is also becoming more expensive. Some people believe that pork not smoked over wood isn’t really barbecue. The newly formed North Carolina Barbecue Society in Winston-Salem ([www.ncbbqsociety.com](http://www.ncbbqsociety.com)) is dedicated to promoting and preserving the traditional way. It features a Historic Barbecue Trail of restaurants that still use the old-time method for cooking real ‘cue.

Despite the changes, barbecue is still a food for fun and celebration. There are barbecue contests, where teams of cooks have a great time trying for prizes. Trained judges taste the barbecue and evaluate teams on costumes and decorations, too. Barbecue festivals take place all over the state. The largest is the Lexington Barbecue Festival, held in October each year. Lexington has become famous nationwide as a center for barbecue. The festival, which started in 1984, draws more than one hundred thousand people to a variety of events, all of which center around barbecue.

So the next time you sit down to a big plate of barbecue—eastern or Piedmont style—enjoy a tasty bit of our state’s history.

*\*At the time of this article’s publication, Debbie Moose was an award-winning freelance food writer living in Raleigh. Her books include Deviled Eggs: Fifty Recipes from Simple to Sassy and Fan Fare: A Playbook of Great Recipes for Tailgating or Enjoying the Game at Home. She formerly was a food editor for the News and Observer.*