FORK IN THE ROAD

Baby Back Ribs by Carmen Juch

Is it Barbecue, Bar-B-Que, or BBQ? According to where you're from determines your preference (unless you are typing, and don't want to type a lot of letters over and over - you'll note I am going for "BBQ"). It seems that your preference for the type of BBQ you prefer comes from your youth, or at least it gives you a tug toward that being your overall preference of what you consider "good" BBQ.

Do you crave a sweet sauce, a tangy vinegar style or maybe no sauce at all, just a rub? BBQ techniques tend to have strong supporters and competitors on just about every point from the method of smoking/grilling to the way the meat is flavored with spices and/or sauces. There doesn't seem to be a general "*modus operandi*" or a standard method to that is considered 100% unanimously by everyone, everywhere. Each claims to be the "King of BBQ" (adjust spelling by location please).

My first BBQ cookout outside the immediate family was with some bikers who taught me the importance of preparation. After getting to the park where the shindig was to convene and setting about the task of cooking, it was discovered that no one had bothered to bring any utensils, plates or anything with which to cook or eat – not a simple cooking utensil could be found with which to turn the meat! I won't go into how we worked around the problem but I will say it did not include a trip to the store. While other cookouts have long since dimmed in my memory I still recall the taste and, of course, it still has me laughing still these many years later.

So, as this example points out and I cannot stress enough, there is great importance in the proper prep.

This article addresses BBQ ribs specifically. There are so many styles: Chicago, Kansas City, Carolinas, Memphis, Texas and on the list goes, each with its unique imprint on the end result. I can honestly say that there is something I love about each one of them and I choose not to pick a favorite. If pressed I would say a combination of Kansas City and Memphis with a heaping side of Texas is very pleasing to my taste buds. Each method has something unique about which I am passionate. Sweet and sticky, spicy and messy, fall off the bone and melt in your mouth with a hint of smoke are all at the top of my list.

Webster's states that barbecue is "*to roast or broil on a rack over hot coals or on a revolving spit before or over a source of heat*" and also "*to cook in a highly seasoned vinegar sauce*". I would add to that it is also "*slowly smoking meats at a temperature range between 190° and 250° using an indirect heating method*". But then no one at Webster called and asked me for my definition. (By the way, Webster's also defines it as "*a social gathering especially in the open air at which barbecue is eaten*".)

Gather 'round my friends and we will prepare the tastiest ribs in these here parts ... wherever your parts may be. Be prepared though – barbecuing is a time consuming process and requires attention and patience to get the end results you want. For ribs, the process takes between 3 ½ - 5 hours depending on how well you follow instructions and paying attention!

There are 4 elements you must decide before you even begin your BBQ: the wood, to rub or not to rub, the sauce and whether you want to share with your friends.

WOOD

An element that needs to be given your careful and considerable contemplation since it is one of the key flavors of your meat – in this case ribs. Mesquite is all the rage in Texas and that's probably because it is plentiful. Personally I would pick either pecan or maple before mesquite. Mesquite can overpower the flavor of the meat and is inclined to bestow heartburn to some of us. These are just a few of the woods you can choose from but if you like mesquite, then by all means, use it. The aim is to end up with the flavor that puts a smile on your kisser!

- **ACACIA** - same family as mesquite with a similar flavor but not quite as heavy.
- **HICKORY** - Sweet to strong, heavy bacon flavor.
- **MAPLE** - Smoky, mellow and slightly sweet.
- **MESQUITE** - Strong earthy flavor.
- **OAK** - Heavy smoke flavor- White Oak best for longer burning.
- **PECAN** - Sweet and mild with a flavor similar to hickory - all-around superior smoking wood.

You should soak the woods chips in water for at least two hours before you plan to begin cooking. You might be able to get away with one hour but really two is better to get the wood totally saturated. Dry chips will burn and can leave the meat with a nasty taste and you wouldn't want that. You will also need 10pounds of charcoal briquettes along with the chips. (If you must use the self-lighting type, PLEASE just use a few to get it started and allow the starter plenty of time to burn itself off– or it will impart an unpleasant flavor to the meat.)

RUB

I like to use both a dry rub and then baste with a sauce beginning midway through the smoking process. I think it's important to use a rub because it really adds a depth to the meat and enhances the texture but it's totally up to you. Below is a simple rub. You might want to work with it and add or subtract ingredients. I don't care for cumin and chili powder on smoked meat so I use only a small amount but some folks do like it and it seems to be generously included in a lot of the rub recipes. You may not like the cloves but I think the hint of sweetness and spice it gives the meat adds another flavor layer once the sauce has been added. If you do choose to use the rub, blend it well and rub into the ribs, front and back, and let them stand for a bit (at least an hour) before smoking so that the salt can bring the moisture to the surface of the meat. This will make enough for about 2 racks of ribs. You may find you want more the next time but start small and work up!

- **2 tablespoons salt**
- **3 tablespoons brown sugar**
- **2 tablespoons freshly ground black pepper**
- **1/2 tablespoon cayenne pepper**
- **3 tablespoons paprika**
- **1 tablespoon ground dry mustard**
- **1 teaspoon ground cloves**
- **1 tablespoons garlic powder**
- **1 tablespoon onion powder**
- **1 teaspoon cumin**
- **1 teaspoon chili powder**
- **1 teaspoon sage**
- **1 teaspoon thyme**

(The only prepping to do to the ribs other than the rub is to remove the thin layer of skin on the underside of the ribs. Use a knife sliding it between the bone and the layer of skin on the bottom side. Pull the skin up in the center and grab it and peel it off. You can also request that the butcher do this for you if you aren't sure what I mean.)

SAUCE

Every one of us has a sauce preference and sauces are many and varied. Whatever gets your mouth to watering is the right sauce. If you lean towards a mustard-based or tomato-based sauce, go for it. If like me you prefer a spicy and sweet sauce, that's acceptable too! All are good but you need to pick the one that gratifies your taste buds! Below is a very simple recipe that is both

sweet and spicy with a vinegar tang. There are some good bottled sauces if you just think this is too much trouble but if you are going to take the time to smoke the meat, well, then the sauce should be special too. Just toss it all in a pot and stir. Let it thicken and you're done. I never, **hear me, *NEVER*** use liquid smoke. If you need liquid smoke then you are doing something wrong in the smoking process.

- **36 ounces ketchup**
- **2 cups vinegar**
- **1 box brown sugar**
- **Red pepper flakes (to taste)**
- **2 tablespoon dry mustard**
- **1/2 cup Worcestershire sauce**
- **2 bay leaves**

Mix all ingredients and bring to a boil while stirring. Reduce heat and simmer lightly and allow thickening. Stir occasionally. You can play with the amounts of these ingredients to a certain extent, lessening the vinegar or replacing entirely with lemon juice (you won't need as much), lessening the brown sugar or replacing with honey. Your daring is the limit of your possibilities.

Now to finish prepping you need the following:

- **Smoker or Grill (*duh*)**
- **Aluminum drip pan approximately 9" x 12" x 1 ½" (This will be according to grill size)**
- **Meat tongs and meat thermometer (you have this from the fried chicken article, right?)**
- **BBQ racks (nice but not really necessary if you don't want to spring for them)**
- **4 baby back ribs weighing about 1 ½ to 1 ¾ pounds each**

Getting the Grill Ready

Pour oil onto paper toweling and wipe the grill down. Adjust the vents of your cooker so that they are about ½ open. Put about 35 to 50 charcoal briquettes in the center in the bottom and light. Allow to burn about 20 minutes or until most of them are gray ash. Divide in half and push to opposite sides of the smoker. The aluminum drip pan should be placed on the bottom rack situated between the charcoal piles. (This helps keep the meat away from the direct heat.)

Close the lid and wait a bit to allow the smoker temperature to rise to between 175° and 225° (this is where having a thermometer on the lid is nice). If you want, now's the time to sauce the ribs. However you may choose to cook for a bit and start basting a little later. Position the ribs in the rack which you have placed above the aluminum pan or just flop them on the grill. Add three fresh charcoal briquettes to each of your little piles and also a couple of the soaked wood blocks or a handful of chips on the top. Close the smoker lid immediately.

Get something cold to drink and a lawn chair because now you're cooking!

Check the temp outside of the smoker every 30 minutes and also "feed" the fire every 30 to 45 minutes. Whenever it drops below 190, add four to eight briquettes and a small handful of wood chips to each fire. If the temp ever rises to 300, remove the lid and allow the fires to burn until the heat dies down a little.

After 90 minutes use the tongs to remove rib slabs one at a time and baste with sauce. When you put them back rotate so that the opposite side of the rib is now touching the grill. After about 3 hours use a thermometer to get a reading on the meat making sure to stick between the bones (touching the bone will give a false temp reading). The ribs are done when the internal temperature of the meat reaches 150° to 160°.

It's best to finish the ribs directly over hot coals to achieve a final charring and seal in the juices. If you want to do this you will need pull them off the grill, build up the file then cook them for about two to three minutes per side while brushing with sauce.

Umm-mmm-good! I'll look for my invitation.