

A very short history of Alabama barbecue

Wendell Wiggins, July 2013

The origin of barbecuing will always be a controversial and mysterious subject because it simply evolved as several ancient cooking practices intermarried and procreated. Smoking meat to preserve it goes back to when people lived in caves. Our ancestors have cooked over an open fire since they figured out how to make the fire. Spices have been considered very valuable since biblical times, and the competition for them has generated human conflict all the way.

The substance known as Southern Barbecue has its roots in the smokehouses built by European immigrants and the spices and sauces contributed by Caribbean and Central American cuisines and brought in by African slaves. Given the ethnic variety of practitioners, the geographical variation in influences, and the lack of any centralized authority, it's no wonder that barbecue has as many variations as there are barbecue pits. And most happily, neither the Bible, the Koran, nor any other religious book imposes a recipe from on high. Go ye, be fruitful and culinarily-promiscuous and free, and cook some barbecue!

Little metal domes and kettles for backyard cooking popped up in nearly every American backyard in the 1950s, fueled by charcoal briquettes that were popularized by Henry Ford as he looked for a way to use all the wood scraps left over from the early automobiles he produced and founded the Kingsford charcoal company. But before the explosion of backyard barbecuing, lots of small, often out-of-the-way cafes and walk-up stands offered the unpretentious but wonderful sandwiches and plates.

This month marks the 50th anniversary of “the schoolhouse door” confrontation of George Wallace and the Kennedy administration that began to bring racial integration to the South (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stand_in_the_Schoolhouse_Door). But, about a mile away from that door in Tuscaloosa, Alabama in the 1960s, many people would drive across several railroad tracks to the backside of the L&N railroad yard to get a barbecue sandwich. A couple of picnic tables sat on the ground outside the barbecue stand. Orders were given at a window while standing in the dirt, and sandwiches were delivered there wrapped in waxed paper. The barbecue was so good that black and white stood in line together and nobody gave any political thought to the circumstances.

My father's first job after leaving the family farm was at a Hill's Grocery Company store in Birmingham. Soon after arriving there, he acquainted himself with Ridlehoover's Barbecue cafe across the street. Years later, after he had moved 80 miles away to Fayette and I had been born, every family trip to Birmingham still ended the same way—at Ridlehoover's Barbecue. Mr. Ridlehoover's sauce had little in it except Louisiana red hot sauce, but the barbecue was so good that even my child's tongue would suffer the fire to get the wonderful, rich barbecued pork. I would order an orange soda to drink, but I didn't touch it while I ate the sandwich. The customary free glass of water would wash down the sandwich. I saved the orange soda to sip all the way home because it offered temporary relief from the fiery afterglow of the sauce.

So strong is the appeal of barbecued meat that it promotes racial harmony and motivates people to

endure pain and much more. The contributions of spicy, smoked meat transcend the mere culinary—barbecue sauce lubricates society, the peppery sauce ignites human endeavor, the smoky flavors seep into our lives and fill our memories. Our future seems to be filled with more and more technology, and our surroundings and even our food becomes more synthetic day by day. Until the day when we have been melded with the machines, and our only appetite left is for delicious electricity, let us savor barbecue and appreciate its subtle wonders.