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## BBQ IQ

### True Barbecue Takes Time and Patience

*By Alison Pride*

A recipe for a day spent barbecuing might read something like this: Take one whole day with not much else to do. Stock favorite beverages. Check out what's on television. Get the coals going. Kick back. Toss the Frisbee for the dog. Put the meat on. Call Mom to catch up. Check on the meat. Watch TV. Water the garden and pull some weeds. Wonder what else to do...

Because depending on what cut of meat is smoking, you could be at this a few hours or all day. True barbecue can't be rushed.

"Low and slow" best summarizes the cooking process, according to Ben Howlett, co-owner with his wife, Phyllis, of Fat Rascal's Bar-B-Que in Port Orchard. "By cooking it slow, meat's much more tender because it breaks down the membranes in the fat."

This cooking process is what allows the transformation of less savory cuts of meat from tough to fork-tender. Barbecue has traditionally made great use of inferior cuts of meat.

"Beef brisket is one of the worst cuts. It's fatty and gristly, but if you barbecue it just right, it will melt in your mouth," Howlett promised. "Pork shoulder is tough, but when you put it on the smoker and cook it until it's fall-apart tender, it's a whole different game."

Howlett got his early education in barbecue growing up in Virginia, but it took him 26 years in corporate America and a lot of traveling around the South to perfect his skills and open his own restaurant. In July 2005, he fired up the 17-foot-long "iron maiden" in back of the restaurant, where it's burned ever since. "I've only not smoked meat for four days that whole time," he said.

And he's uncompromising when describing exactly what constitutes authentic barbecue. "You're either making barbecue or you're not," he said. "The sauce is not the secret. Barbecue is about smoke. It's about the flavor of the meat. The sauce is a condiment."

Real barbecue requires wood, smoke and time—lots of time. The first thing to understand is the difference between smoking, best done between 100 to 200 degrees, and barbecuing, best done between 200 and 300 degrees. Anything cooked 300 degrees and above is really grilling.

This is where the patience comes in. At such low temperatures, for example, pork can take up to 12 hours to cook, depending on the size of the cut, beef up to eight hours, and ribs and chicken up to six. A common mistake people make, Howlett said, is to use too much smoke in the cooking process.

"If you put in too much smoke, it will come out with a bitter taste," he said. Instead, smoke should only be used at the beginning and at the end. Perfecting the process takes time.

Howlett uses a temperature gauge to monitor the process but said, "A lot if it's still by sight and intuition, and that comes with experience."

To tell if you're eating the real thing, he added, look for the telltale reddish smoke ring approximately an inch into the meat. "If you don't have the smoke ring on meat, you're not barbecuing," he said.

**BBQ IQ, continued:**

Another consideration when barbecuing is what wood to use. Howlett has hickory trucked in from Missouri because he loves the flavor. At Wild Horse BBQ in Poulsbo, owner Stephanie Ryan uses apple wood for the sweet flavor it imparts to meat and because it's native to the Pacific Northwest.

"Hickory can get too strong. Ours hits middle of the road," she said.

Ryan grew up smoking meat with her father in their backyard. She still has "Old Bessie," the original cast iron barbecue they used. Today, the tradition continues: Bill Wallace, Ryan's father, works with her in the kitchen three days a week. The Wild Bill Special on the menu is named after him.

"We try to serve real home-cooked, homestyle food. I want to serve it the way I grew up with it," Ryan said. She uses a smoker with automatic temperature controls and a digital display to maintain consistency. And like everyone interviewed for this article, she creates her own rub recipes (a rub is a combination of spices applied to the outside of the meat to flavor it while cooking), including a special kid-friendly rub for milder palates.

"The rub and the meat should hold their own," Ryan said. But of course there's sauce available, and the recipe for that is a secret, too. Ryan describes her sauce as bold, in the tradition of Texas-style barbecue sauces. "I make a really really great sauce," Ryan said. "My husband always said, 'You should do something with this.'"

At Q's Bar-B-Que in Bremerton, the original sauce is available in five levels of heat, if needed. Owner Laura Medina grew up in California, but her husband, Garland Bostic, grew up in Texas and Louisiana, where he received his "barbecue education."

Medina's own barbecue education has opened her eyes to a new world of food. "I've gotten a whole new concept of food. Food's got to have flavor," she said.

Medina uses custom-made smokers with automatic temperature controls and digital displays. In consideration of her customers with diverse religious beliefs, she smokes her pork and beef separately.

And instead of using wood, she uses wood pellets in her smokers. They burn cleaner, she said, which is good for customers with respiratory problems. But they also prevent wood oils from seeping into the meat, which she said could give it an aftertaste.

The wood pellets can be purchased locally at the Heritage Fireplace Shop in Bremerton or Poulsbo. Co-owner Steve Edwards said the pellets have become very popular, along with home pellet grills (ranging in cost from \$750 to \$1,180). The pellets come in a variety of flavors including hickory, mesquite, apple, cherry, alder, onion, garlic, pecan and maple, so there are a lot of flavors to experiment with. "People that have experience with pellet grills are sold," Edwards said.

Medina has tried out a few different flavors, but prefers the taste of hickory. Whatever wood is used, though, nothing is more important for true barbecue than patience.

"I had a guy tell me he cooked a brisket in six hours and I thought, 'No way,'" she said. "There's no short cut. Things just take time."

BBQ IQ, *continued*:

## Want to try this at home?

First of all, no one's sharing sauce recipes. In fact, most original recipes are zealously guarded secrets, some passed down from generation to generation. But our three restaurateurs were willing to share a few tricks of the trade:

A good spice rub is essential for flavoring meat. It's easy to start experimenting with one, according to Laura Medina of Q's Bar-B-Que. Start with salt and pepper as a base. Add different peppers to spice it up, or herbs like rosemary and oregano. If you like a sweeter taste, add brown sugar and perhaps a bit of nutmeg. If tangy is preferred, add some mustard. Play around with different combinations. "You can always try out different spice rubs on one piece of meat," Medina says.

Stephanie Ryan, owner of Wild Horse BBQ, grew up smoking meat with her father in the backyard. Here are her tips for home barbecuing: First, make sure you have a grill big enough to move the coals off to one side when they're hot. Once that's done, put a pan of water underneath the side that will be holding the meat. For wood, Ryan recommends using wood chips, available at most outdoor stores in a variety of flavors. Soak the chips for up to an hour, then spread them across the coals. Place meat on the grill fat side up. For the best results, use a temperature gauge, keep the grill closed as much as possible, and keep the temperature around 230 degrees, adding coals if necessary to maintain a consistent temperature. Don't be afraid to experiment with different flavors and types of wood: You may, for instance, want to start with apple or cherry wood and finish with hickory.

And if you want to add a touch of southern authenticity to your next home barbecue, Ben Howlett of Fat Rascal's offers this simple but delicious recipe for French fried corn on the cob: Heat vegetable oil (canola, safflower, or peanut oil will work) to 350 degrees in a deep fryer. Use thoroughly dry fresh ears of corn. Drop corn into oil. Remove when the ears of corn float to the top and turn golden brown. Remove, immediately slather with butter and season to taste.

Interested in checking out online resources? The Pacific Northwest BBQ Association, headquartered in Edmonds, has news about regional barbecue events as well as recipes. Visit them at [www.pnba.com](http://www.pnba.com).

## Sidetracked by sides

While barbecue might be all about the meat for some people, for others it's at least as much about the side dishes. Who can resist smoky baked beans, homemade potato salad or a slice of pecan pie? Who would want to?

Without doing justice to the mouth-watering array of side dishes at the three featured restaurants, here are some not-to-be-missed temptations:

At Fat Rascal's in Port Orchard, owner Ben Howlett frequently adds more southern favorites to the menu. At a party eight years ago, he tried out French fried corn on the cob, a traditional Southern preparation. The corn was such a hit, it was all his guests ate. Now it's a regular on the menu. And don't forget to order the sweet potato puffs, served piping hot with honey butter. Howlett says that when he first served them to a group of regular female customers, one of them said, "We have discovered we don't need a man anymore."

At Wild Horse BBQ in Poulsbo, it's advisable to check low-carbohydrate diets at the door. That's because the cheesy spuds will make you forget, at least temporarily, all about such silliness. Owner Stephanie Ryan uses family recipes for these and most everything else she makes: Even the blue cheese salad dressing, made with two different kinds of cheese, is not to be missed, and for dessert, try one of grandma's black bottom cupcakes.

**BBQ IQ, continued:**

Finally, what is barbecue without beans? At Q's Bar-B-Que in Bremerton, owner Laura Medina says the beans take three hours of preparation time and use every kind of meat on site, lending them a hearty, rich complexity. "We operate from the premise that food's got to have flavor," she says. Some people come in just for the beans, Medina says and adds with a laugh, "There's beans, and then there's beans." If you have any appetite left, top off your meal with a slice of sweet potato pie.

And because most portions are generous, patrons would be wise to heed the advice of Fat Rascal's Phyllis Howlett, "We do recommend pants that stretch."

Originally appeared in *WestSound Home & Garden*, Summer 2007