



Get Your Grill On!

A Southern Grill Out Story

By Jill Becker

Like a man to a flame ... that's what the saying should be if you ask me. Sure, those pesky moths may be drawn to the light, but here in the South, give a guy a grill and a slab of meat and I'll show you a real attraction. And an equally instinctual one. Because firing up the coals for a backyard barbecue is as much a part of Southern culture as yard sales and sweet tea.

Of course, girls can grill, too. I myself have a Char-Broil Quickset 40,000 BTU gas grill. I got it right after I bought my first house. I still remember the day I went to Home Depot and picked it out. I saw its push-button starter and rotisserie attachment and immediately fell in love. And the darn thing wasn't even on sale (a real rarity for me). Although to save a few bucks I did buy it unassembled. Which was a big mistake. I was still slapping together pieces two weeks later!

I've cooked some of my favorite meals on that grill. They weren't necessarily my favorite because they were the best tasting (I have a tendency to, um, overcook things). Rather, they were memorable because they usually involved get-togethers with family and friends.

Some of the best food I've ever tasted has come off a grill, though. For one, there are the T-bones my dad always makes whenever I visit. (He knows they're my favorite.) And there was that oh-so-fresh snapper at this little waterfront walkup in Belize. An everyday hot-dog from a New York street vendor even makes the list.

Just what is it exactly that makes grilled food taste so good? Is it that rich, smoky flavor that wafts up from the coals? Is it all the marinades, spices, and sauces? Or is it the sheer romanticism of cooking over an open fire? Officially, it's all of the above, of course, but for many of us, it's the tradition, the long and storied history of it, that sucks us in. I mean, who among us didn't sit down around a campfire as a child with, of all things, a sugary marshmallow on the end of a stick? (In my book, getting to cook outside is the only reason to go camping.) And

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who hasn't attended a family reunion or birthday party in the park where they served grilled burgers and potato salad? And just try and convince me you don't know someone who has packed up the grill for a tailgate party before the big game. The act is as American as apple pie. Or is it?

The etymology of the word "barbecue" is fuzzy at best. The American Heritage dictionary says that it's of Taino origin, from the Spanish word *barbacoa*. *Bon Appetit* magazine claims it derives from an extinct tribe in Guyana who favored "cheerfully spitroasting captured enemies." Whatever the term's origin, barbecue's ties to the U.S., particularly the South, are undeniable. But just how did it become so ingrained in our culture?

The South, back in the day, was extremely poor. So pigs, which could feed off the land when other animals would starve, became a popular source of food. Every part of the swine, from the ears to the organs to the



feet, was consumed. But because the pigs, for the most part, were wild, not farmed and fed like they are today, their meat was tough and stringy. The solution? Slow cooking over an open fire. The result? Tender, juicy meat that practically fell off the bone. (Just like when you simmer a pot roast in the crock-pot all day.) In those early days, the slaughtering of a pig was cause for

celebration, with entire communities coming together to share in the feast. Soon after, the barbecue became a staple at everything from church picnics to political rallies. Barbecue shacks began cropping up sometime after the Civil War. Typically nothing more than an open pit surrounded by tin walls and a roof, and only open on weekends (the pit men worked on the farm during the week), these roadside shanties were primarily for take out. But come the invention of the car, pit owners starting extended their hours and adding tables and chairs. And the rest, as they say, is history, and today you can't swing a cat without hitting a barbecue joint or one sort or another.

Whether you choose to eat in or cook out, rest assured that you're helping keep one of the South's most sacred traditions alive and well. Eat up! ❖

Jill Becker is an Atlanta-based freelance writer. She is anxiously awaiting her next grilled T-bone.

Tips For Great Grilling

- Coals vs. gas? This is a tough one, as each side has its pros and cons. If you do choose briquettes, and use lighter fluid to start them, be sure to let the fire go a good 30 to 45 minutes before you put your food on so that all of the fluid burns off. Sure, it may delay your dinnertime, but remember, good barbecue isn't meant to be rushed.

- Lid open or closed? Here's another technique that devotees argue over. Some say that lid on, the grill acts as an oven rather than just a broiler, and you're less likely to get oily flare-ups, which carbonize your food. Those who prefer the lid off claim it's easier to keep an eye on your food that way and so there's less chance of burnt chicken breasts or scorched shrimp.

- Fight the urge to flip. Frequent turning and moving food around on the grill lowers the temperature and prevents it from creating the perfectly seared exterior that gives grilled food its flavor. Flip only once about halfway through.

- Save the sauce till the end. Most cooks can't wait to slather on the barbecue sauce. But experts say that because most sauces are high in sugar, they can burn easily, so you should wait until the last 20 minutes or so. If you're worried your food won't soak up the sauce if you put it on that late, marinate it in the sauce ahead of time. Just be sure to wipe off all the excess before you throw it on the grill.

- Have a hard time knowing whether your steak is rare, medium, or well done? Never use a fork to puncture the meat to test for doneness; it lets all the yummy juices escape. The best thing to do is to invest in a good meat thermometer. Be sure to insert it into the thickest part of the meat, away from the bones.

- Never put the finished product on the same plate you carried it out to the grill on.

Bacteria from the raw meat can contaminate your cooked food. — J.B.

