

Barbecue:

A Love Story

Making classic American barbecue is hard, sweaty, smoky **work**. But as Dwight Garner and Cree LeFavour found when they went south to study with two **experts**, the result can be a revelation. Photographed by **Raymond Meier**

But these just scratch the surface. Barbecue places elsewhere—there are roughly 6000 in the U.S.—have been known to cook elk, mutton, whole turkeys, “hot guts” (sausages), and anything else that will survive a few hours in an open pit. And don’t get experts started on the merits of, say, cooking with oak versus hickory, or using spareribs versus baby-back. Fists have been known to fly, and blood oaths have been uttered.

Our purposes were relatively humble: We wanted some honest, hands-on experience tending serious meats over serious flames and, okay, maybe a few juicy secrets to smuggle back home for our summertime dabbings on backyard grills. After consulting a pile of guidebooks, several amateur barbecue scholars, and some grease-stained notes we’d taken on previous trips to the South, we chose our spots: Louie Mueller Barbecue, a revered institution located on a rundown main street in Taylor, TX, and Carl’s Perfect Pig in White Bluff, TN, a relative newcomer run by Carl Teitloff, a rising young star in the > 140

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thick, fatty pieces of pork shoulder with a mixture of butter and salt. We laid the pork in the pit and spent the rest of the day removing glowing hickory coals from the nearby furnace, then shoveling an even layer of them under the meat. The temperature inside the shack was sweltering; Teitloff kept watching for fires. “This place tries to burn down every few weeks,” he said.

Late in the afternoon, we helped Teitloff douse the pork with a vinegary sauce, then wrap it in foil to steep overnight. He suddenly got a mischievous grin on his face. “Wanna see how to make some of the tastiest ribs you’ve ever come across?” he asked. We nodded. We were starving.

Teitloff uses pork ribs called three-downs, which are smaller than the five-down ribs many places use. He seasons them with the requisite spices—top secret, of course—seals them in foil, and cooks them for an hour or so over good but ordinary charcoal. “Most people just throw ribs right on the grill,” he said. “They’re good that way, but in foil they stay more tender.” Later he removes the ribs from the foil, brushes them lightly

ribs from the foil, brushes them lightly with a spicy tomato sauce—“don’t use too much, or people will think you’re hiding something”—and puts them back on the grill for 10 or 15 minutes. That final bit of cooking, sans foil, gives the ribs a gorgeous glaze.

We sat around in Carl’s parking lot, eating ribs and drinking beer in the dwindling sunlight. “I take back everything negative I’ve ever said about barbecue,” Cree said, sampling her fifth or sixth rib. For the first time on the trip, she was making a perfect pig of herself.

The following morning we gathered in a big communal circle with Carl’s employees and pulled apart the pork we’d cooked the previous day. Heaps piled up on the table: smoky, crusty bits mixed with softer, lusher pieces to create a gorgeous mélange. I’d been complaining about my weight the day before, but when Carl caught me sneaking pieces and popping them into my mouth, he grinned.

“Go ahead and eat—I always do,” he said, sampling a piece himself. “If you’re going to be a serious barbecue person, you’ve got to remember my motto: A waist is a terrible thing to mind.” ■

