



Our View on Q

Like clam chowder, pizza, or hot dogs, BBQ is a perennial subject of debate and controversy. People argue ingredients and techniques, make claims about the superiority of regional styles, and even dispute the meaning of BBQ itself. Strong opinions about BBQ are firmly rooted in the passion of its devotees—and we wouldn't have it any other way. Just think how bland and diluted a world this would be if everything was designed for mass appeal or to achieve consensus. We're no different from our fellow BBQ fans. While we think that there is validity and merit to a lot of opinions, we have a pretty strong take on BBQ ourselves, which we're happy to share with you.

CHICAGO STYLE

If the world made any sense, Chicago would be known as a great BBQ town. Chicago has been a consolidation point for the cultures and people from the regions where BBQ traditions run strong. African-Americans moved north to Chicago in droves in the Great Migration of the late 19th and early in the 20th centuries, and brought with them their own style of cooking. Neighborhoods like Uptown were the historic jumping-off places for the rural whites of Tennessee and the Carolinas looking for opportunity and adventure in the great industrial metropolis of the North. Think of the Blues. What is it but an array of southern rural musical traditions and styles that migrated north to Chicago, where they were blended and electrified and became a compelling musical art form. The same might well have happened with BBQ. The varied traditions and techniques forged in the South might have been

combined and enhanced in Chicago to create an equally compelling culinary art form.

But for some reason it just didn't happen.

When people raised on real BBQ come to Chicago and order up a slab of ribs at places renowned for BBQ in Chicago, they take a bite and look up with an expression that is puzzled and forlorn. They've been had; they've been betrayed. "They call it BBQ," they think. It looks like BBQ. "But it ain't BBQ!"

In recent years, however, a number of local places have set out to reverse the trend and offer some legitimate BBQ. Smoke and meat have finally found each other in Chicago, and the city and the world are better for it. Smoke joins these establishments in the crusade to forge a strong Chicago BBQ tradition. We want to open the eyes of Chicagoans to what BBQ can be, celebrate BBQ as the American cuisine in all its variety and splendor, and help develop an indigenous BBQ tradition and style that can stand shoulder to shoulder with Kansas City, Memphis, North Carolina, Austin and others.

BBQ SAUCE

For years, chefs of all cuisines have been using sauce to cover up cooking mistakes. In fact, sauce was originally created before refrigeration for the sole purpose of masking the off flavor of meat that had gone bad. Well, we like to think that the culinary arts have evolved since then—not to mention the science of refrigeration. Yet far too many folks still use BBQ sauce to hide the poor quality and lack of artisanship that went into preparing the meat, which by all rights should be the star of the show. They try to breathe new life into dry, tasteless meat by dousing it with an overpowering BBQ sauce—a shameful practice that we like to call artificial resuscitation.

Well, we won't do it. No sir. Good BBQ—in fact, all good cooking—is about balance. With BBQ, where virtually all of the flavors are strong, balance is particularly important. The smokiness from the meat, the spiciness from the rub, the tangy sweetness from the sauce should all exist in perfect harmony. If any one element is dominant, the balance is lost and the BBQ doesn't show at it's best.

Many BBQ establishments develop a sauce and make it the centerpiece of a house style. They use it on anything and everything that comes out of the smoker. We take a different view. We think that a sauce that strikes that perfect balance with ribs doesn't necessarily harmonize well with brisket or chicken. So, we've gone to some trouble to develop sauces that complement specific meats, and we like to serve them appropriately paired. Sure, if you tell us that you want have the brisket with the rib sauce, we'll do it. But don't be offended if we try to talk you out of it.

One last thing. BBQ sauce should not be smoky. The meat should be smoky. Smoke-flavored sauces were developed for home BBQers who lacked the equipment, patience, or knowledge to impart smoke flavor into the meat, and for that purpose, they're fine. But if you're at a BBQ restaurant and are going to pay good money for BBQ, insist on having it done right. Smoke-flavored BBQ sauce is like sour cream and onion potato chips. It's fine. It's edible. It's also a poor substitute for the real deal.

RIBS

The debate will never end. Should the meat fall off the bone, or should it have a little tug? To many folks, the ease with which the meat falls off the bone is the measure of a slab's virtue. And while there's a case to be made for tenderness, we believe that there's an equally strong case to be made for texture. Because here's the thing: by the time rib meat falls off of the bone, the ribs have lost the texture that makes eating them so pleasurable. The answer is once again about balance. As we like to say, "You should have to bite 'em, but not fight 'em." It shouldn't be work to eat a slab of ribs. But you shouldn't be able to eat them with your gums, either.

As for flavor, we look for a subtle and sweet smokiness to the meat, with a nice layer of spice just beneath the sauce which should be evenly brushed on, and caramelized to add depth. The sauce itself should have some sweetness to offset the spice layer, and some tanginess to balance out the fattiness in the meat.

BABY BACKS VS SPARES

In much of Chicago, we realize, it's all about baby backs. But in almost every one of America's BBQ towns, spare ribs rule. Spare ribs have the reputation for being fatty and gristly, and if they're not trimmed properly, indeed they are. We serve St. Louis cut spare ribs because they solve the problem that so many people have with spare ribs. A St. Louis rib is a spare rib that has been trimmed of all the fatty, knuckle stuff that makes spares unappealing to a lot of people. Pound for pound, St. Louis ribs are far meatier and less expensive than baby backs. Both types of ribs have their virtues. Baby backs, because they're thinner, will have a higher ratio of seasoning and caramelized-sauce crust to meat and a slightly different texture. The flip side is that they won't absorb as much sweet smoky flavor as a good slab of St. Louis ribs will. We like both; and that's why we sell both. But if you think you don't like spare ribs, try a half-slab of our St. Louis. You may just change your mind and save a couple of bucks in the process!

PULLED PORK

It should be tender, juicy, served in medium-sized chunks. There should be a nice mix of the juicier pieces from the inside of the roast and the crustier pieces from the outside. It shouldn't be chopped into a pulp, or soupy, as if simmering in sauce for hours. It should be pulled off the roast just before it's served and topped with a bold sauce, as the pork itself has less flavor than a slab of ribs.

In some parts of North Carolina, where pulled pork is king, the sauce is little more than vinegar and spices. The vinegar is a nice contrast to the heaviness of the meat, but for our money, we prefer the depth of flavor that you get with a tomato based sauce with a pretty strong dose of vinegar. When done right, a plate of this stuff is a damn fine meal. But we like it best on a sandwich with a healthy mound of coleslaw. A nice, crunchy slaw with a little punch is our favorite. The roll should be soft enough that you don't squeeze the meat out of the sandwich with every bite, but substantial enough that it can stand up to the sauce without falling apart. Please, please, please—don't take this wonderful meat that has been slowly smoked for 12 or

15 hours and put it on a packaged hamburger bun.

BRISKET

OK, we admit it. It wasn't that long ago that we didn't really get brisket. Every brisket we tried was dry, tough, or tasteless—often all three. But in Texas, brisket is the stuff of legend. So for the sake of completeness, and so as not to anger a very large Texan friend of ours, we sent an expedition down to Austin's BBQ belt to see what the big deal was. You know what? They've got some extraordinary brisket. The best of it is tender, but not so tender that it can't be hand-sliced and laid out neatly on a soft white roll and topped with a thin, peppery sauce. Man, this is good stuff. The meat itself should have a rich beefy flavor, with a good bit of smoke. There should be a good mix of the leaner cut and the more marbled cut, both which should have a thin layer of fat along the top with a heavy spice crust. Many places chop up the meat for sandwiches, but to us, the result is a little too sloppy Joe.

When brisket is good, it's incredible. Be warned, however, that even the best-prepared brisket will dry out only moments after being sliced. So it's really best eaten right off the cutting board. If you need to take it home, you're going to need to mop it with a little sauce to get moisture back into it. Yes, we are against resaucitation as a matter of principle. But with brisket, unless you're going to eat it right away, there's no way around it.

SIDES

One thing that always puzzled us about BBQ restaurants: the sides. Side dishes should complement good BBQ and set it off by means of contrast. But more often than not, they seem like an afterthought. Not here. We think great BBQ deserves great sides—foods that harmonize artfully with the meat, with each bringing out the qualities of the other. To us, this means slow-cooked BBQ beans that echo and amplify the taste of the meat. Tangy and crisp coleslaw that cuts through the fat and savory character of the meat with a bracing freshness. Mellow and creamy mac and cheese that gives the mouth a textural and gustatory pause before that next onrush of great BBQ flavor. And fries? We love fries. But we also think they're ubiquitous and not necessarily a great pair with BBQ. They offer too little in the way of flavor to stand up to great BBQ, and they travel poorly. Even sublime fries (and fries can be sublime) are a disappointment when they've been both steaming and cooling in a styrofoam clamshell for 20 minutes. Beans and coleslaw are far less susceptible to a loss of quality or character.

ONE FINAL THOUGHT

Not everyone likes their BBQ the way we do, and that's fine. Because, remember, opinions are good. These are ours. This is the way we do BBQ because this is the way we think it should be done. Let us know if you agree.