

# Barbecue in the United States

In the [United States](#), [barbecue](#) refers to a technique of cooking meat outdoors over a fire; often this is called *pit barbecue*, and the facility for cooking it is the *barbecue pit*. This form of cooking adds a distinctive smoky taste to the meat; [barbecue sauce](#), while a common accompaniment, is not required for many styles.<sup>[1]</sup>

Often the proprietors of Southern-style barbecue establishments in other areas originate from the South. In the South, barbecue is more than just a style of cooking, but a subculture with wide variation between regions, and fierce rivalry for titles at barbecue competitions.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

## Description

There are 3 ingredients to barbecue. Meat and wood smoke are essential. The use of a sauce or seasoning varies widely between

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regional traditions.

The first ingredient in the barbecue tradition is the meat. The most widely used [meat](#) in most barbecue is pork, particularly the [pork ribs](#), and also the pork shoulder for [pulled pork](#).<sup>[1]</sup>

The techniques used to cook the meat are [hot smoking](#) and smoke cooking. These cooking processes are distinct from the [cold smoking](#) preservation process. Hot smoking is where the meat is cooked with a wood fire, over indirect heat, at temperatures between 120 and 180 °F (50 and 80 °C), and smoke cooking (the method used in barbecue) is cooking over indirect fire at higher temperatures, often in the range of 250°F (121°C) ±50°F (±28°C). The long, slow cooking process take hours, as many as 18, and leaves the meat tender and juicy.<sup>[2][3]</sup>

Characteristically, this process leaves a distinctive line of red just under the surface, where the

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[myoglobin](#) in the meat reacts with [carbon monoxide](#) from the smoke, and imparts the smoky taste essential to barbecue.<sup>[2][4][5]</sup>

The second ingredient in barbecue is the wood used to smoke the meat. Since the wood smoke flavors the food, the particular type of wood used influences the process. Different woods impart different flavors, so the regional availability of the various woods for smoking influences the taste of the region's barbecue. Smoking the meat is the key, as otherwise cooking meat over an open flame is simply "grilling" the meat, whereas barbecue is the actual process of "smoking" it.

- Hard woods such as [hickory](#), [mesquite](#), [pecan](#) and the different varieties of [oak](#) impart a strong smoke flavor.
- [Maple](#), [alder](#), and fruit woods such as [apple](#), [pear](#), and [cherry](#) impart a milder, sweeter taste.

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Stronger flavored woods are used for pork and beef, while the lighter flavored woods are used for fish and poultry.

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More exotic smoke

generating ingredients can be found in some recipes; [grapevine](#) adds a sweet flavor, and [sassafras](#), a major flavor in [root beer](#), adds its distinctive taste to the smoke.

The last, and in many cases optional, ingredient is the [barbecue sauce](#). There are no constants, with sauces running the gamut from clear, peppered vinegars to thick, sweet, tomato and molasses sauces to mustard-based barbecue sauces, which themselves range from mild to painfully spicy. The sauce may be used as a [marinade](#) before cooking, applied during cooking, after cooking, or used as a table sauce. An alternate form of barbecue sauce is the dry rub, a mixture of salt and spices applied to the meat before cooking.<sup>[6]</sup>

## The barbecue region

The origins of American barbecue date back to colonial times, with the first recorded mention in 1672<sup>[7]</sup> and [George Washington](#) mentions attending a "barbicue" in [Alexandria, Virginia](#), in 1769. As the country expanded westwards along the [Gulf of Mexico](#) and north along the [Mississippi River](#), barbecue went with it.<sup>[1]</sup>

The core region for barbecue is the southeastern region of the United States, an area bordered on the west by [Texas](#) and [Oklahoma](#), on the north by [Missouri](#), [Kentucky](#), and [Virginia](#), on the south by the Gulf of Mexico, and on the east by the [Atlantic Ocean](#). While barbecue is found outside of this region, the fourteen core barbecue states contain 70 of the top 100 barbecue restaurants, and most top barbecue restaurants outside the region have their roots there.<sup>[1]</sup>

Barbecue in its current form grew up in the South, where cooks learned to slow-roast tough cuts of meat over fire pits to make them [tender](#).

These humble beginnings are still reflected in the many barbecue restaurants that are operated out of "hole-in-the-wall" (or "[dive](#)") locations; the *rib joint* is the purest expression of this. Many of these will have irregular hours, and remain open only until all of a day's ribs are sold; they may shut down for a month at a time as the proprietor goes on vacation. Despite these unusual traits, rib joints will have a fiercely loyal clientele.<sup>[1]</sup>

Barbecue is strongly associated with Southern cooking and culture due to its long history and evolution in the region. Indian corn cribs, predecessors to Southern barbecue, were described during the Hernando de Soto expedition in southwest Georgia, and were still around when English settlers arrived two centuries later. Early usage of the verb *barbecue*, derived from Spanish *barbacoa*, meant "to preserve (meat) by drying or slowly roasting"; the meaning became closer to that of its modern usage as a specific cooking technique by the time Georgia was colonized.<sup>[8]</sup> Today, barbecue has come to embody cultural ideals of communal recreation and faithfulness in certain areas. These ideals were historically important in farming and frontier regions throughout the South and parts of the Midwest with influences from the South.<sup>[9]</sup> As such, due to the strong cultural associations that it holds in these areas, barbecue has attained an important position in America's culinary tradition.

Parts of the Midwest also incorporate their own styles of barbecue into their culinary traditions. For example, in Kansas City, barbecue entails a wide variety of meats, sweet and thick sauces, dry rubs, and sliced beef brisket. Kansas City barbecue is a result of the region's history; a combination of the cooking techniques brought to the city by freed slaves and the Texas cattle drives during the late nineteenth century has led to the development of the region's distinctive barbecue style.<sup>[10]</sup>

Barbecue as a cultural tradition spread from the South and was successfully incorporated into several Midwestern regions such as western Missouri, again owing to the cultural ideals that the barbecue tradition represents and the need for locals to express those ideals.

Variations of these ideals by region are reflected in the great diversity of barbecue styles and traditions within the United States.

## **Barbecue tradition**

Barbecue has been a staple of American culture, especially Southern American culture, since colonial times. As it has emerged through the years many distinct traditions have become prevalent in the United States. The pig, the essential ingredient to any barbecue, became a fundamental part of food in the South in the 18th century because the pig requires little maintenance and is able to efficiently convert feed to meat (six times quicker than beef cattle).<sup>[11]</sup> As a result of the prevalence of hogs in the South, the pig became synonymous with Southern culture and barbecue. The origins of the pig symbol with Southern Culture began as a result of its value as an economic commodity. By 1860, hogs and southern livestock were valued at double the cotton crop, at a price of half a billion dollars.<sup>[11]</sup> The majority of pigs were raised by residents of the South and as a result the pigs contributed considerably to the economic well-being of many Southerners.

Pigs and barbecue were not only valuable for economic reasons but barbecue "scores of hog" were set aside for large gatherings and often used as an enticement for political rallies, church events, as well as harvest festival celebrations.<sup>[11]</sup> Barbecues have been a part of American history and tradition from as early as the first Independence Day celebration.<sup>[12]</sup> In the early years, Independence Day was celebrated as a formal civil gathering, in which egalitarian principles were reinforced. The traditions of Independence Day moved across the country as settlers traveled to western territories. By the 19th century, the role of barbecue in public celebration and political institutions increased significantly and it became the leading practice of communal celebrations in the South as well as the Midwest.<sup>[12]</sup> The important social, political, and cultural gatherings of barbecues have spanned three centuries and its cultural significance remains important today.



# Main regional styles

See also: [Regional variations of barbecue](#)

While the wide variety of barbecue styles makes it difficult to break barbecue styles down into regions, there are four major styles commonly referenced, [Carolina](#) and [Memphis](#), which rely on pork and represent the oldest styles, and [Kansas City](#) and [Texas](#), which use beef as well as pork, and represent the later evolution of the original Deep South barbecue. Pork is the most common meat used, followed by beef and veal, often with chicken or turkey in addition. Lamb and mutton are found in some areas, such as [Owensboro, Kentucky](#) ([International Bar-B-Q Festival](#)), and some regions will add other meats.<sup>[2][4]</sup>

## Carolinas

Further information: [Barbecue in North Carolina](#)

Carolina barbecue is usually pork, served pulled, shredded, or chopped, but sometimes sliced. It may also be rubbed with a spice mixture before smoking and mopped with a spice and vinegar liquid during smoking. It is probably the oldest form of American barbecue. The wood used is usually a hardwood such as oak or hickory.

Two styles predominate in different parts of [North Carolina](#). Eastern North Carolina barbecue is normally made by the use of the "whole hog", where the entire pig is barbecued and the meat from all parts of the pig are chopped and mixed together. Eastern North Carolina barbecue uses a thin sauce made of vinegar and spices (often simply [cayenne pepper](#)). Western North Carolina barbecue is made from only the pork shoulder, which is mainly dark meat, and uses a vinegar-based sauce that includes the addition of varying amounts of tomato. Western North Carolina barbecue is also known as Lexington barbecue, after the town of [Lexington, North Carolina](#), from which the style comes, home to many barbecue restaurants and a large barbecue festival, the [Lexington Barbecue Festival](#).<sup>[13][14]</sup>

[South Carolina](#) has its own distinct sauce. Throughout the Columbia to Charleston corridor, barbecue is characterized by the use of a yellow "Carolina Gold" sauce, made from a mixture of yellow mustard, vinegar, brown sugar and other spices.

## **Kansas City**

*Main article: [Kansas City-style barbecue](#)*

Barbecue was brought to [Kansas City, Missouri](#) by Memphian [Henry Perry](#). Despite these origins, the Kansas City style is characterized by a wide variety in meat, particularly including beef, pork, and lamb; and a strong emphasis on the signature ingredient, the sauce and the french fries. The meat is smoked with a dry rub, and the sauce served as a table sauce. Kansas City barbecue is rubbed with spices, slow-smoked over a variety of woods and served with a thick tomato-based barbecue sauce,<sup>[15]</sup> which is an integral part of KC-style barbecue. Major Kansas City-area barbecue restaurants include [Arthur Bryant's](#), which is descended directly from Perry's establishment and [Gates and Sons Bar-B-Q](#), notably spicier than other KC-style sauces with primary seasonings being cumin and celery salt.

## **Memphis**

*Main article: [Memphis-style barbecue](#)*

Memphis barbecue is primarily two different dishes: ribs, which come "wet" and "dry", and barbecue sandwiches. Wet ribs are brushed with sauce before and after cooking, and dry ribs are seasoned with a dry rub. Barbecue sandwiches in Memphis are typically pulled pork (that is shredded by hand and not chopped with a blade) served on a simple bun and topped with barbecue sauce, and cole slaw. Of note is the willingness of Memphians to put this pulled pork on many non-traditional dishes, such as salads, baked potatoes, spaghetti, pizza or nachos.<sup>[2][4]</sup>

## **Texas**



*Main article: [Barbecue in Texas](#)*

There are four generally recognized regional styles of barbecue in Texas:

- **East Texas style**, which is essentially Southern barbecue and is also found in many urban areas;
- **Central Texas "meat market style"**, which originated in the butcher shops of German and Czech immigrants to the region;
- **West Texas "cowboy style"**, which involves direct cooking over mesquite and uses goat and mutton as well as beef; and
- **South Texas barbacoa**, in which the head of a cow is cooked (originally underground).<sup>[16][17]</sup>

## Other regions

### [Grilling](#)

## Virginia

Virginia Style barbecue is based around apple cider vinegar sauce. It is reported that some of the first barbecues in the United States occurred in Virginia, including by US President [George Washington](#)<sup>[18]</sup>.

## Alabama

Alabama is well-known for its variety and flavor of barbecue. Smoked and roasted chicken is traditionally served with a white sauce, made thick or thin (depending on the restaurant) with lots of mayonnaise, vinegar, salt and pepper, cayenne and paprika at times, and sugar sometimes. Locals of [Decatur](#) and the surrounding areas make their own 'white sauce' and everybody's is different. Pork is usually pulled and chopped at the same time, served dry and with sauce on the side. Alongside white sauce, Decatur is known for their red sauce, which is extremely sweet and smoky, with a flavor regarded as great for pork. Brisket is served Central-Texas-style.

There are Barbecue restaurants around every corner, such as Whitt's

Barbecue, Lawler's Barbecue, and Big Bob Gibson's. All of these restaurants are highly regarded and well-known around Alabama.

Sides traditionally include baked beans, potato salad, macaroni and cheese, cole slaw (traditionally a vinegar-based slaw with thinly chopped cubes and slices of cabbage and onions), and served with burger buns with nothing on them. Golden Flake (An Alabama-only chip brand) and Pepsi are also common. Dessert usually consists of banana pudding or pies of all types.

## California

The original use of buried cooking in barbecue pits in [North America](#) was done by the [Native Americans](#) for thousands of years, including by the [tribes of California](#). In the late 18th and early 19th centuries eras, when the territory became Spanish [Las Californias](#) and then Mexican [Alta California](#), the [Missions](#) and [ranchos of California](#) had large [cattle](#) herds for [hides](#) and [tallow](#) use and [export](#). At the end of the culling and [leather tanning](#) season large pit barbecues cooked the remaining meat. In the early days of California statehood after 1850 the [Californios](#) continued the outdoor cooking tradition for [fiestas](#).

In California a well-known barbecue dish is grilled [tri-tip](#) beef rump, sometimes cut into steaks. The [Santa Maria Style BBQ](#), originally from the [Central Coast of California](#), uses a portable 'towed' trailer version frequently seen at [farmers markets](#).<sup>[19]</sup>

The old Mexican Ranchos of California would cook tri-tip over a pit of red oak, and simply season it with salt and garlic to enhance the flavor. It was served with pinto beans, pico de gallo and tortillas.

## Hawaii

The cooking customs of the [indigenous peoples of Polynesia](#) became the [traditional Hawaiian luau](#) of the [Native Hawaiians](#). It was brought to international attention by 20th century tourism to the islands.

# Kentucky

See also: [Cuisine of Kentucky](#)

Barbecue in Kentucky shows two distinct traditions involving both choice of meats and preparation. In most of the western portion of the state, especially in the [Owensboro](#) area, mutton is the meat of choice as pitmasters smoke whole mutton shoulders over cinderblock pits of coals, using hickory, oak, and sometimes sassafras. This region favors a Worcestershire-based sauce, often referred to as "dip". In the South Central part of the state, "shoulder" is the choice meat. This refers to thin-sliced pork shoulder smoked over live coals for 45 minutes to an hour. It is sauced in a vinegar and pepper mix, and often served on bread. Barbecue in the far-western [Purchase area](#) is a mixture of the two traditions, with pork shoulder as the preferred meat and pit smoking as the standard cooking method.

## St. Louis

*Main article:* [St. Louis-style barbecue](#)

St. Louis-style barbecue refers to various pork dishes prepared in and around the city of St. Louis, Missouri. A staple of barbecuing in St. Louis is the [pork steak](#),<sup>[20]</sup> which is sliced from the [shoulder](#) of the pig. Although now considered a part of the Midwest, Missouri was originally settled primarily by Southerners from Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee. These original settlers brought a strong barbecue tradition and even though successive waves of later, primarily German and Northern, immigration obscured much of the state's Southern roots, the Southern foodways persisted, especially throughout the [Little Dixie \(Missouri\)](#) enclave of central Missouri (connecting the Kansas City and St. Louis barbecue traditions).<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>

## Chicago

See also: [Culture of Chicago](#)

The [Great Migration](#) and an abundance of cheap meat from the [Union Stock Yards](#) led to Chicago developing its own style of barbecue. <sup>[21]</sup> The styles perpetration is unique due to the use of aquarium smokers: indoor pit smokers with glass panels that allow the pitmaster to watch the meat cook. <sup>[22]</sup>. [Rib tips](#) are this style of barbecue's iconic meat. Pork ribs are the most commonly cooked meat. The barbecue is often not served with sides. The sauce is tomato based and tends to be sweet and not particularly thin or thick. <sup>[23][24]</sup> Variations of the style are nationally known due to [Famous Dave's](#) chain restaurant and [Sweet Baby Ray's](#) barbecue sauce brand.

## Other states

Other regions of the core barbecue states tend to be influenced by the neighboring styles, and often will draw from more than one region. Southern barbecue is available outside of the core states; while far less common, the variety can be even greater. With no local tradition to draw on, these restaurants often bring together eclectic mixes of things such as Carolina pulled pork and Texas brisket on the same menu, or add in some original creations or elements of other types of cuisines.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Competitions

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Nationally and regionally sanctioned barbecue competitions occur. State organizations like the Florida Bar B Que Association often list competitions taking place throughout any given year. Visitors are welcome to visit these contests, and many of them hold judging classes where it is possible to become a certified barbecue judge on site.<sup>[citation needed](#)</sup>

There are hundreds of barbecue competitions across the region every

year, from small local affairs to large festivals that draw from all over the region. The American Royal World Championship contest, with over 500 teams competing, is the largest in the United States. Another major contest is the Houston BBQ world championship contest in Texas. Memphis in May World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest is another one of the largest, and there is even a contest dedicated to sauces, the Diddy Wa Diddy National Barbecue Sauce Contest.<sup>[2][6]</sup> The nonprofit [Kansas City Barbeque Society](#), or KCBS, sanctions over 300 barbecue contests per year, in 44 different states. Despite the "Kansas City" name, the KCBS judges all styles of barbecue, which is broken down into classes for ribs, brisket, pork, and chicken.

## See also

- [Burnt ends](#)
- [List of smoked foods](#)
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## External links

- Eatocracy Editors. [\*"5@5 - Regional barbecues decoded"\*](#). CNN. December 6, 2011.

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### **Barbecue in North America**

#### **Sovereign states**

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- [Canada](#)
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- [Haiti](#)
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- [Mexico](#)
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- [Saint Kitts and Nevis](#)
- [Saint Lucia](#)
- [Saint Vincent and the Grenadines](#)
- [Trinidad and Tobago](#)
- **United States**

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- [Cayman Islands](#)

**Dependencies and other territories**

- [Curaçao](#)
- [Greenland](#)
- [Guadeloupe](#)
- [Martinique](#)
- [Montserrat](#)
- [Puerto Rico](#)
- [Saint Barthélemy](#)
- [Saint Martin](#)
- [Saint Pierre and Miquelon](#)
- [Saba](#)
- [Sint Eustatius](#)
- [Sint Maarten](#)
- [Turks and Caicos Islands](#)
- [United States Virgin Islands](#)

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**Barbecue in the Americas**

- [North America](#)
- [Central America](#)
- [South America](#)
- [Caribbean](#)

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## Sovereign states

- [Guyana](#)
- [Haiti](#)
- [Honduras](#)
- [Jamaica](#)
- [Mexico](#)
- [Nicaragua](#)
- [Panama](#)
- [Paraguay](#)
- [Peru](#)
- [Saint Kitts and Nevis](#)
- [Saint Lucia](#)
- [Saint Vincent and the Grenadines](#)
- [Suriname](#)
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- **United States**
- [Uruguay](#)
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## Dependencies and other territories

- [Anguilla](#)
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- [British Virgin Islands](#)
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- [Curaçao](#)
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