

The Ultimate Guide to America's BBQ Styles

From Kansas to the Carolinas

By [Danilo Alfaro](#)



Credit: The Spruce

Barbecue—the technique of using a wood fire and smoke [to cook meat slowly](#) until it turns fall-off-the-bone tender—is a cherished American tradition.

And while the practice of slow-cooking meats in a pit of hot coals dates to prehistoric times, the version of barbecue we currently enjoy originated in the Caribbean, specifically the island of Hispaniola, site of the modern-day Haiti and Dominican Republic, where its practitioners called it *barbacoa*.

What those early pitmasters knew was that the long, slow application of heat will—over a period of many hours and even days—transform tough, chewy [cuts of beef](#), [pork](#), even goat and sheep, into tender, smoky, succulent delicacies.

Having made its way to the South, the tradition of American barbecue now comprises four main types, each one associated with a particular region of the country and each one featuring its own unique combination of seasonings, sauces, types of meat, and signature dishes.

Here's a helpful look at each of the four main strands of barbecue and their respective characteristics, as well as a few of the offshoot varieties.



The Spruce Eats / Nita West

Carolina Barbecue

To begin with, cultural phenomena (including culinary ones) don't necessarily begin and end at the state line. With that in mind, it's not unreasonable to say that Carolina barbecue can be divided into two or even three distinct subtypes. (Texas barbecue is like that as well as we'll see below.) But what all types of Carolina barbecue have in common is pork.

Carolina barbecue is all about the hog. In the western part of the state, we see what's called the Lexington style of barbecue, which features pork shoulder as well as smoked [pork ribs](#). Barbecue enthusiasts in the eastern part of the state proudly cook the whole hog.

This, by the way, doesn't just mean that every part of the hog is utilized. These pitmasters actually barbecue an entire hog, which when done properly, produces perfectly cooked meat from the neck, shoulder, and belly of the animal.

Carolina pork shoulder prepared in both the Eastern and Lexington styles is typically seasoned with a dry rub, then cooked in a [wood-fired](#) barbecue pit for 8 to 12 hours until it is meltingly tender. It's then pulled apart and tossed with a thin sauce of vinegar and cayenne pepper before serving.

Where the Eastern and Lexington traditions diverge, however, is that with Lexington, the sauce is fortified with ketchup, the meat is exclusively the pork shoulder and it's generally served on a bun. With Eastern, the whole hog will end up in the mix, served with [hush puppies](#) (deep-fried balls of cornmeal batter) and [coleslaw](#).

South Carolina also uses the whole hog, which is smoked for up to 20 hours, then shredded and tossed in a sauce of mustard and vinegar and served on a bun.

Signature dish: South Carolina [mustard sauce](#) is unique in American barbecue



Credit: Claire Cohen

Memphis Barbecue

Memphis-style barbecue also focuses on pork, specifically pork shoulder, which is dry-rubbed and smoked, and pork ribs, which are prepared in two different ways.

For a lot of folks, barbecue is all about the sauce, but Memphis-style barbecue will often forego the sauce altogether in favor of its characteristic dry rub made up of paprika, garlic, salt, pepper, sugar and cayenne pepper, to name just a few.

And if you thought that sauceless barbecue would be dry, think again. First of all, applying sauce to barbecue does not actually add moisture to the meat. The liquid in the sauce quickly evaporates while cooking, leaving just the flavors of the ingredients in the sauce.

The same is true of the meat's natural juices. The moisture in the meat comes from the way the tough [connective tissues](#) liquefy over the course of cooking, and also from its fat content.

Which brings us to ribs, specifically pork ribs, which might be the epitome of what Memphis barbecue is known for. Memphis pork ribs can be prepared one of two ways, either wet or dry.

Wet ribs are prepared using a thin, vinegar and tomato-based sauce to mop the ribs before, during and after they're cooked. Dry ribs are prepared using only a dry rub, as described above, and are what many who regard themselves as purists consider to be the ultimate Memphis barbecue.

The pulled pork sandwiches made from Memphis style barbecued pork shoulder are often served dry, although many BBQ joints will serve it with a sweet sauce made from tomato, vinegar and spices on the side.

Another characteristic quirk of Memphis barbecue is the fact that, in addition to sandwiches, it's common to serve pulled pork on everything from pizza to nachos.

Signature dish: BBQ spaghetti, BBQ nachos and other creative hybrids

Texas Barbecue

Like Carolina barbecue, Texas barbecue consists of several different styles of cooking—as many as four, in fact, depending on how one counts. But unlike Carolina barbecue, in Texas, it's all about the beef.

Probably the most classic Texas barbecue is the so-called Central Texas style, which at one time dominated a broad region west and southwest of Dallas-Ft. Worth, but which now transcends any precise geographical boundaries.

And in Central Texas barbecue, brisket is king. The brisket in Central Texas is [seasoned with a dry rub](#), often consisting only of salt and black pepper, smoked over oak and otherwise prepared with little to no sauce whatsoever. The meat is served sliced with sides of pinto beans, pickles, potato salad and white bread.

Another Central Texas fixture is hot gut sausages, made from beef, seasoned salt, pepper and plenty of cayenne pepper and stuffed in a natural pork casing then [smoked, and finally grilled](#).

The next main variant is East Texas barbecue, which more closely resembles Carolina barbecue in its style in that it involves smoked meat, usually beef but sometimes pork as well, which is chopped, tossed in a sweet tomato-based sauce and served on a bun. And as in the Carolinas, pork ribs are widely available in East Texas as well.

West Texas barbecue features dry-rubbed beef brisket and [beef ribs](#) smoked with mesquite and is sometimes referred to as "cowboy barbecue."

There's also a South Texas variant which, because of its proximity to Mexico, goes by the Spanish name *barbacoa*, and traditionally called for wrapping a cow's head in agave leaves, cooking it slowly in a pit of coals and serving the meat in tacos. Today *barbacoa* is prepared in a smoker and oven with equally succulent results.

Signature dish: Dry-rubbed smoked brisket and hot gut sausages



Credit: Claire Cohen

Kansas City Barbecue

Owing to the city's one time position as the primary meatpacking hub in the U.S.—a status it maintained well into the 1960s—Kansas City barbecue distinguishes itself for featuring a broad array of meats, from beef and pork to lamb, chicken, turkey and sausages.

Typically the meats are dry-rubbed then slow-smoked and served with another quintessential element of Kansas City barbecue, which is its sauce. KC-style sauce is sweet and tangy with a thick consistency from its two main ingredients, ketchup and molasses, with brown sugar thrown in for good measure.

Common side dishes include French fries, mashed sweet potatoes, and coleslaw, but the side dish Kansas City is most famous for are the smoked [baked beans](#), which are typically prepared with fragments of beef brisket and the accompanying drippings blended in.

Perhaps the most noteworthy offering in Kansas City barbecue are [burnt ends](#), sometimes also called popcorn brisket. Burnt ends come from the fatty edge of the brisket, called the deckle or point end. Formerly trimmed away and discarded, burnt ends are now the part of the brisket that diners will fight over. Served with generous portions of KC-style sauce, burnt ends are crunchy, fatty, meaty and drenched with woodsmoke flavor.

Signature dish: Burnt ends and smoked baked beans

Other Styles

In addition to the four major types described above, there are a number of subtypes which are also defined by geography. Here are some of the most notable ones, and what they're known for.

Alabama: [Pulled pork](#) and smoked chicken sandwiches served with a one-of-a-kind mayonnaise-based white sauce.

Kentucky: Famous for its barbecued mutton, which is served sliced, chopped in sandwiches.

St. Louis: Another pork-centric town, featuring barbecued pork steak, which is thinly sliced pork shoulder, as also slow-cooked pork snouts affectionately known as crispy snoots.

Chicago: Known for its so-called aquarium smokers, tempered glass chambers resembling fish tanks, that churn out racks of smoked pork ribs and rib tips.