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Barbecue Civil War

When Americans get together to feel American, like on the 4th of July or Veteran's Day, a backyard barbecue is the ultimate and correct choice of venue. Beyond the common elements of a grill and cheap beer, however, a barbecue means something different all around the country. Even within the state of North Carolina, a lasting feud over barbecue bitterly divides East from West, with Eastern purists denouncing the use of ketchup in barbecue sauce as though it were a war crime. While the Carolinas debate which sauce is boss, over in Memphis they're barbecuing with no sauce at all, relishing the spicy crackle of slow-cooked dry ribs. There are plenty of regional styles to choose from in the barbecue world, but you can be sure that choosing any traditional style barbecue will be a major improvement over the typical stacks of frozen cardboard that pretend to be hamburgers.

One thing the Carolinas and Memphis can agree on is to slow-roast pork with plenty of smoke and salt. Barbecues are all about sharing, and if you're looking for large amounts of cheap meat, pigs are the natural choice. Beyond that, the three styles differ in what parts of the animal to use and what type of sauce to make, if any. While there are as many individual recipes as there are pitmasters, a few key choices determine what stylistic family your barbecue belongs to, and where your loyalties lie.

For the Eastern Carolina purists, this means going "whole hog," and barbecuing the entire animal over a large pit, letting guests pick off their portion buffet-style. East Carolina pitmaster Ed Mitchell uses his family's century-old traditional techniques for his whole hog barbecues,

which "led to Mitchell being named the #1 Pitmaster in North Carolina" by a Southern Foodways Alliance study "to identify the most authentic barbecue in the region" (Raleigh Pitmaster). Mitchell argues that "you've deviated from the real deal" if you cook anything less than the entire hog at one time, though his Western rivals, such as Wayne Monk of Lexington Barbecue, counter that "there are some parts of the hog that [they] would just as soon not eat" (Shelton and Volberg-Reed). As for sauce, the Eastern Carolinians insist on a pure blend of vinegar and peppers, with the possibility of other spices, but absolutely no ketchup. As Raleigh journalist Dennis Rogers puts it, "somebody who would put ketchup on barbecue and give it to a child is capable of pretty much anything" (Shelton and Volberg-Reed).

Although Ed Mitchell and the East Carolinians have the traditional argument in their corner, the motivations for using a whole hog have changed since Carolinians first started barbecuing. Back when these techniques were developed, the pitmasters cooked and raised their own pigs, making whole hog barbecues the logical and cheapest choice. In modern America, however, the cheapest and most accessible form of pork comes in separate cuts at the grocery store. Additionally, rather than cooking on a massive pit for a large community, most Americans have grills that would buckle under the weight of a whole hog. Nowadays, going whole hog is the more expensive undertaking, and less accessible to the average backyard barbecue- if the original Carolina pitmasters were placed in today's surroundings, I have to think they'd make the same changes the West Carolina pitmasters made developing their style of Carolina barbecue, using more accessible cuts and sauces to please as many guests as possible.

Instead of using the entire hog, pitmasters in the West Carolina region, also known as the Piedmont, typically smoke whole pork shoulders for their barbecue. Piedmont jounalist Jerry Bledsoe comments that "[i]n the East, you get all these little things in your mouth and wonder

what the hell they are," preferring the West's uniformly smooth pork shoulders, though Easterners will point to the crackly skin of a whole hog as one of their advantages over Piedmont. Keeping with the Piedmont's theme of smoothing over the East's rougher edges, they mix a small amount of ketchup in with their vinegar-pepper blends, which provides some sweetness and tones down the heat. Even advocates of the Eastern style can admit that "a good western sauce can rescue a poorly-cooked pig" (Shelton and Volberg-Reed), and the times seem to have established ketchup as America's go-to condiment. While East Carolina traditionalists will rail against the Piedmont for their splashes of ketchup and abandonment of whole hog barbecues, the two Carolina regions have much more in common with each other when compared against the more modern Memphis style barbecue.

Although the Piedmont pitmasters may not cook whole hogs, the shoulder cuts they use are still the cheapest, most largest form of pork available to average Americans. Memphis barbecue, on the other hand, is synonymous with dry-rubbed pork ribs, typically baby-back, but occasionally St. Louis style spare-ribs as well. To hear it from Charles Vergos, owner of Memphis's legendary Rendezvous, it all started with a refrain we can all relate to:

> 'Hell, man, I want some ribs,' someone said once. So I basted them with the pickle vinegar I had left over and put some paprika and garlic and salt and pepper on them. Dry barbecued ribs, I called it. Now everybody's got it- dry-rubbed, they call it now." (White)

The appeal of Memphis-style barbecue is in the crunchy layer of "bark" formed by the salty-spicy dry rub slowly fusing with the ribs' natural oils. While pitmasters like Vergos may use an Eastern Carolina style vinegar-pepper mixture for basting, the final product comes out dry, with an extra sprinkling of the rub just before serving. While baby-back ribs may be America's iconic

barbecue choice, most Americans picture their ribs being slathered in a thick, ketchupy red sauce. "Sauce on the side" is the motto of true Memphis barbecue, and pitmasters take a special pride in concocting dry rubs so delicious that guests forget all about the sauce.

Ultimately, what style of barbecue you choose will come down to personal preferences of taste and convenience. However, if you're looking for the style that most fits a classic backyard barbecue, nothing beats the juicy, smoky goodness of the Piedmont's pork shoulders drizzled in its tart, ketchup-laced Lexington dip. A refreshing alternative to more hot dogs and hamburgers, West Carolina barbecue can feed plenty of guests on a small budget, and provides an easy, crowd-pleasing taste of the wide variety of traditional barbecue styles in America.

Works Cited (this will be a separate page for your paper)

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