

Pig on a Hot Tin Roof

By Claud Mann

I grew up in Berkeley in the 60's and 70's, the son of gratefully displaced Texans. Both of my parents effortlessly cast off their Texas accents early on and willingly embraced all things Californian. Luckily for me, this included my family's active participation in the San Francisco Bay area's burgeoning restaurant renaissance. Fond memories include warm loaves of Acme sourdough, weeknight restaurant forays to restaurants like Narsai's, The Bay wolf, The California Culinary Academy (where I was later to attend school), and of course, what my grandmother called "that new place on Shattuck", better known as Chez Panisse

To the casual observer, we looked the part of the typical, well-adjusted, Berkeley liberal family. My mom taught yoga to seniors and administered music therapy to depressives in her spare time. My dad drove a lime green Citroen, had a nodding acquaintance with Angela Davis and Eldridge Cleaver and smoked a pipe he had hand carved out of apricot wood from our own trees. My sisters wore Birkenstocks and studied African dance (gratefully not at the same time). For my part, I remember pursuing many of the interests typical of the average Berkeley boy my age: gathering wild chanterelle mushrooms in the cow pastures above Orinda, burying various time capsules deep in the earth with artifacts that I considered emblematic of the period (mostly Bill Graham Presents posters, TV Guide and the Berkeley Barb) and learning the secret for flawlessly prepared calves liver from Mr. Thiery, our local and very grumpy French auto mechanic. (It was marinated with lemon slices and Greek olive oil and then flame seared over a small, hot charcoal brazier welded together from spare car parts.) We raised Araucana chickens, formed a community garden, marched for peace and composted. Everything looked so normal, but as is the case with many families, we had a dirty little secret.

Barbecue. At least once a week, my dad would furtively head to the outskirts of town to one of a handful of family-run barbecue houses he had sought out and selflessly tested repeatedly. The kind of place where you could literally follow your nose from blocks away to a hole in the wall where the split hickory was piled up on the sidewalk and the line was out the door with "Q" addicts. One establishment that I recall the most vividly was a house in Oakland where the living room window had simply been replaced with a to-go window. An immensely powerful woman wielding two 14" cleavers steadily chopped the Carolina-style pulled pork shoulder on a worn butcher block, mixing in the "bark" (the burnt, crisp outer edges) with the impossibly succulent and moist inner meat, before piling it all on a soft slice of unsuspecting white bread. There was always potato salad and sometimes a pickle. A single unsupported paper plate held the entire meal; so two hands were needed to wrestle the glistening bounty to a table. Thick slices of sweet potato pie awaited all good children.

Fast-forward three decades. Suffering from burn out after too many years in high-end restaurants catering to the "food is entertainment" crowd, I got a gig with Southern Living Magazine as their television food correspondent. My first assignment: Memphis in May, otherwise known as the world championship barbecue-cooking contest. For three days each year along the Mississippi River in Tom Lee Park, 90,000 visitors come to watch over 200 teams from dozens of countries compete for over \$60,000.00 in cash, a man-sized trophy, and more importantly, bragging rights to be recognized as the world's finest barbecue team. By the time the sweet blue smoke has lifts from downtown Memphis, close to 90 tons of pork products will have been consumed at this legendary event. After 28 years it's now come to be billed as The Preakness of pork, The Superbowl of Swine. I suspected I might be going home again.

Flying over the Mississippi Delta, I began to think it made perfect sense that the home of the blues and the birthplace of rock might also be the spot where pork would come to achieve its ultimate gastronomic expression. I mean, why should the same unseen hands that guided W.C. Handy to write "The St. Louis Blues" or led guitarist Robert Johnson to the Crossroads hesitate to whip together some killer ribs at the same time? My stomach growled as I strained to ponder this heady concept. Then we made our decent into Memphis and I commented aloud to the flight attendant about the thin layer of bluish haze hanging over the city, which I thought was smog. I was wrong. It was barbecue smoke - - the contest was already underway.

To get an insider's sense of the competition, I finagled a temporary crew position on a professional team by the name of *Pig Pounda Kappa*. Other swine-inspired team names include *The Pork Authority*, *Notrious P.I.G.*, *Modern Porkfolio Theory*, *Reservoir Hogs*, *Any Pork in a Storm*, *Pork me Tender*, *Sweet Swine of Mine*, *Pit and the Pigulum*, *South Pork*, *The Hogfather* and my personal favorite, *No Pig Left Behind*. (The list goes on and on, but mercifully I won't.) Team captain Gary Kerce, a no-nonsense professional metal fabricator from Loganville, Georgia leads the crew with laser-like focus. As a seasoned professional competitor, he is considered one of the elites. His self-built stainless-steel rig is mounted on a full-size tractor-trailer and probably cost as much as his house back in Georgia. He explained that with a rig this size, he's able to compete in all three major categories at once: whole hog, rib, and the mythic pulled pork shoulder of my childhood.

When discussing barbecue, pros like Gary and his brother Roger are as serious as a heart attack. (Although that may not be the most sensitive metaphor to use at three-day cholesterol fest) When Gary welled up with tears recounting his very first win on the circuit, I was surprised to find myself getting a little misty with him. It was turning into a fantastic day: here I was on the banks of the Mighty Mississippi, drinking icy cold beer with tough-as-nails Deep-Southern metal workers, dry rubbing whole 90 lb. hogs and openly crying as only real men can. It was one of those moments when life seemed...well...complete.

After we pulled ourselves together, Gary taught me a lot more about the contest. As you may have gathered by now, MIM is a dedicated pork event. In most of the south, barbecue is by definition, pork and nothing but pork so help me god. Mention Texas-style barbecued beef brisket anywhere in Memphis and it's like you just told a knee-slapping funny one...folks just shake their heads and giggle right at you...then give you smoked pork. Apparently, they also find it oh-so-amusing that outsiders tend to use the term "barbecue" and "grill" interchangeably. My team members even forced me to repeat the following mantra: "Grilling is the act of using any type of fuel to cook any type of food over direct heat on metal grates, whereas barbecuing is the agonizingly slow, hardwood smoking of seasoned pork until it metamorphosizes into nothing short of ambrosia". It didn't even rhyme or anything, so it was hard to remember at first.

When no one had laughed at me for a good 10 minutes, I asked what seemed like a relatively innocent question: "When do we get to put on the sauce?" There might as well have been a big needle scratching across a record. All conversation stopped, It was as though I had added ice and 7-Up to my Syrah in front of the winemaker. When the silence finally gave way to another round of giggling and knee slapping, my Southern buddies sat me down and explained sternly that Memphis barbecue gets its flavor from the quality of the pork, the character of the wood smoke and the complimentary combination of dry rub spices and marinade. Apparently, judges won't even bother tasting a pre-sauced entry. They hoped I hadn't jinxed them with the mere mention of it. Perhaps it's analogous to quoting "Porkbeth" backstage on the first night of a play.

I thanked my friends and mentors and moved along the river, promising to return later that evening for catfish and hush puppies. The sun was setting as I walked to the far end of the park where the “Patio Porker” teams were sequestered. Whereas the pro teams generally consisted of numerous members spending astronomical amounts of cash on their booths and equipment, the Patio Porkers competition category seemed more my speed. Teams were often no more than two or three guys, a Lil’ Chief smoker, and 22 cases of beer. These teams also seemed more reflective and less competitive. Or they could have just been drunk. Right then and there, my producer, Ed and I agreed to return next year to compete in this category with our own team of reflective drunks.

As the light faded and I watched the silhouettes of teams tending their fires, it occurred to me that humans are hard-wired to be drawn to anything smoked. This is likely in part due to involuntary physiological responses to certain mouthwatering aromas, but perhaps also due to the security these same smells represent. Our cellular memories must still recognize what our earliest ancestors knew with dead certainty - a hunk of meat and a well tended fire meant that one wasn’t going to starve, freeze or be ravaged by animals, even if just for that one night. Kind of a big deal 40,000 years ago.

That first Memphis trip was five years ago, and since then, our “Barefoot in the Pork” team hasn’t even come close to a taking home a trophy (although two years ago we had an ironclad excuse when a small tornado touched down near our tent). But trophies aren’t the point. Each year, friends new and old come by to watch the process, share the results and occasionally get “reflective”. As is common in the South, storytelling and music are in endless supply, and team captain Ed Richardson’s pre-contest jambalaya is steadily becoming a festival legend. Next year, as repayment long overdue, I may even get around to FedExing a full pouch of hand pulled pork straight from the contest to Dad and Mom on their little island off of Seattle. Don’t worry. I won’t add sauce.

Update: In what the barbecue news blogs have called the Cinderella story of the year, of the 18 countries and hundreds of teams competing, “Barefoot in the Pork” placed third for its rib entry.

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Here is an adapted recipe for BITP's ribs and rub, letting your home grill serve as a slow smoker.

The Rub

1/3-cup sweet paprika
3 tbsp. each: granulated sugar, brown sugar, onion salt and garlic salt
2 tbsp. each: ground chile powder and fresh ground black pepper
1 tbsp. each: finely grated lemon peel, fresh ground white pepper and ground toasted coriander
1/2 tsp. each: ground allspice, ground thyme, ground ginger, cayenne pepper and ground toasted cumin

The Ribs and Marinade

4 slabs Niman Ranch baby back ribs, (they usually weigh about 1-½ lbs per slab)
1/2 cup of American yellow mustard combined with 1/4 cup each of apple cider and toasted peanut oil.

The Smoke

3 cups of hickory chips, soaked in water and wrapped loosely in aluminum foil. (We use Georgia peach wood)

1. Combine all rub ingredients in a large mixing bowl and stir together. Sift in batches to blend thoroughly and store in an airtight container until use.
2. Rinse the ribs and remove the thin membrane running along the bone. This is best achieved by sliding the tip of your knife under the membrane and gently pulling up.
3. Spread the ribs with mustard-cider mixture to coat lightly and sprinkle generously with dry rub this actually works a little better than rubbing. (Maybe it should be called a *dry-sprinkle*) Wrap ribs with plastic or transfer to a food grade plastic bag and refrigerate anywhere from 1 to 24 hours. A short marinade is still better than nothing. Remove from the refrigerator 20 minutes prior to cooking.
4. If you are using a gas grill, ignite one side only. Otherwise, light about 20 briquettes and have plenty of extras to use as needed. Once the coals are fully ignited and cloaked in ash, push them to one side of the barbecue and place the foil wrapped hickory chips either directly on top of the coals or over the gas grill's burners. If your barbecue is equipped with a thermometer, try to maintain a 200-225F heat. If not, just cross your fingers and try not to let it get too hot.
5. Place the ribs on the grill over a small pan of water, as far from the coals as possible. Cook for 3-4 hours, turning every 30 minutes or so and adding a little water to the pan to maintain a moist cooking environment. As the coals begin to burn out, add more pre-lit briquettes as needed. (Have some going in bucket or a charcoal starter) Alternatively, ribs may be wrapped in 2 layers of foil and transferred to a 225F oven. The meat is ready when a fork inserted between the ribs slides in easily and the bones begin to loosen up nicely. Wrap with foil and keep warm until serving. Be prepared for compliments.

Southern Style Barbecue Rub

Amount	Measure	Ingredient
2	tablespoons	sugar
2	tablespoons	salt
2	tablespoons	brown sugar
2	tablespoons	cumin, ground
2	tablespoons	chili powder
2	tablespoons	freshly cracked black pepper
1	tablespoon	cayenne pepper
4	tablespoons	paprika

General-Purpose Dry Rub

Amount	Measure	Ingredient
2-1/2	tablespoons	dark brown sugar
1-1/2	teaspoons	dried sweet basil
1/8	teaspoon	ground cumin
3/4	teaspoon	ground coriander
3/4	teaspoon	ground savory
3/4	teaspoon	dried thyme
3/4	teaspoon	black pepper
3/4	teaspoon	white pepper
2	tablespoons	paprika
2	teaspoons	dry mustard
2	teaspoons	onion powder
2	teaspoons	garlic powder
2	tablespoons	salt

Poultry Rub

Amount	Measure	Ingredient
3/4	cup	sweet paprika
1/4	cup	black pepper
1/4	cup	celery salt
1/4	tablespoons	sugar
2	tablespoons	onion powder
2	teaspoons	dry mustard
2	tablespoons	cayenne
		Grated zest from 3

Willingham's rub

Amount	Measure	Ingredient
4	tablespoons	salt
1	tablespoon	freshly ground black pepper
1	tablespoon	lemon pepper
1	teaspoon	onion salt
1	teaspoon	mild chili powder
1	tablespoon	cayenne pepper
3	tablespoons	brown sugar
1	teaspoon	white pepper
1	tablespoon	Dried thyme
1	tablespoon	Dried rosemary
1	tablespoon	Dried cornstarch

Latin style rub w/whole

Amount	Measure	Ingredient	Preparation Method
2	ounces	ancho chiles	dried and roasted
4	ounces	red New Mexican chile	dried and roasted
1	ounce	chile de arbol	dried and roasted
6	tablespoons	cumin seeds	toasted and ground
6	tablespoons	garlic, granulated	freshly purchased
4	tablespoons	oregano, ground	preferably Mexican type
4	tablespoons	hot Hungarian paprika	