

History Of East Texas Barbecue

Before the Civil War, Blacks on the plantations of East Texas, Hispanics in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, German immigrants in the Hill Country, and White subsistence farmers in the northeast corner of the state all had their own style of cooking meat. The meats were equally varied, including pork, mutton, goat, venison, squirrel, and any number of others. When the Texas cattle industry emerged after the war, beef became cheap and commonly available. Eventually it became a central part of everybody's cooking, but that's hardly the whole story.

We (Texans) barbecue beef, but we're also fond of other meats. East Texas barbecue is a proud variant of the Black Southern barbecue tradition, and while both consider pork their crowning glory, in East Texas they have their own way of doing things. Southern pork would never be served without barbecue sauce, but some East Texans like slow-smoked pork ribs with a little salt and pepper - no sauce!

So what is Texas barbecue exactly?

If we can't quite agree on what it is, at least we can agree on where it came from. A look at the history of barbecue and the evolution of the modern barbecue pit explains a lot about our various styles.

When Texas entered the Union as a slave state in the 1850s cotton planters from the Carolinas, Alabama, and Mississippi came to take advantage of the cheap land prices. Each plantation founder brought as many as a hundred slave families with him. When the slaves were freed in 1865, the African American barbecue of East Texas became a style of its own.

According to *Eats: A Folk History of Texas Foods*, the first big civic barbecues began to be held around the state in early 1800s. Pits were typically 25 ft long and 3 ft across. Whole sheep, goats, pigs, and steers were cut into pieces and cooked over oak and hickory coals while being continuously basted. The standard cooking time was 24 hours.

After the Civil war, beef became the meat most characteristic of Texas barbecue. In the days before refrigeration, barbecuing beef meant getting enough people together to make killing a whole steer worthwhile. When that happened it was quite a party. While the ultimate n Southern barbecue was cooking a whole hog, cooking a whole steer was the ultimate Texas barbecue. Because you could feed so many people with a whole steer, Texas barbecues started out big and then got bigger.

(Taken from *Legends of Texas Barbecue Cookbook* by Rob Walsh.)