

HISTORY OF CENTRAL TEXAS BARBECUE

HOW BRISKET BECAME KING

What we know today as central Texas barbecue began in the late 19th century with the emergence of meat markets operated largely (but not exclusively) by German and Czech immigrants. Up until that point, barbecue had been primarily restricted to large social gatherings, where pitmasters would cook whole steers in open, underground pits. The meat markets turned barbecue into a business.

At first it was a practical decision. The markets sold fresh meat from animals the proprietors had slaughtered themselves, but with limited means of refrigeration, any unsold meat was turned into sausage or smoked for preservation. Barbecue was another way of selling meat and reducing waste.

The butchers began selling simple meals of smoked meat with sides like white bread, pickles, and sliced onion. But over time barbecue went from a sideshow to the main attraction. Smoking operations branched into full-fledged standalone restaurants and multiplied over the ensuing decades, particularly in the immediate post–World War II era as young GIs returned home looking to start their own businesses. As older pitmasters passed their techniques onto younger generations, a distinct regional style coalesced around the use of beef and local Texas oak, both of which were available in abundance. Sauces were sparse. For most cooks, salt and pepper sufficed.

Although it's now considered the defining cut of central Texas barbecue, brisket didn't become a fixture of restaurant menus until the 1960s. [According to barbecue critic and historian Daniel Vaughn](#), the change happened in part because the USDA formalized a series of Institutional Meat Purchase Specifications (IMPS) that enabled consumers to order precise cuts of meat from wholesalers and processing plants. Coupled with the increasing ubiquity of refrigerated delivery trucks, a barbecue restaurant could now order IMPS #120—a full boneless brisket, big, fatty, and tough to cook, but relatively inexpensive and uniquely suited to long stints in a smoker.

Brisket became the standard by which central Texas barbecue is judged, but over time central Texas barbecue expanded far beyond the region. Barbecue joints from New York to California now specialize in Texas-style brisket. Likewise, there are pitmasters all across Texas serving pulled pork and whole hog sandwiches in the style of the Carolinas. Despite their origins, regional barbecue styles are intermingling more and more.

Further Reading:

The Prophets of Smoked Meat : A Journey Through Texas Barbecue by Daniel Vaughn (Anthony Bourdain/Ecco, 2013)

Legends of Texas Barbecue Cookbook: Recipes and Recollections From the Pitmasters by Robb Walsh (Chronicle Books, updated edition 2016)

Barbecue: The History of an American Institution by Robert F. Moss (University of Alabama Press, 2010)

Texas BBQ, Small Town to Downtown by Wyatt McSpadden (University of Texas Press, 2018)

Franklin Barbecue: A Meat-Smoking Manifesto by Aaron Franklin and Jordan MacKay (Ten Speed Press, 2015)