

Smoking Meats

The modern method of smoking foods has evolved from a process of preserving. Long before refrigerators and chemical preservatives, smoke was used to extend the shelf life of food, particularly meat. Now days smoking, as it relates to barbecue is so much more. Smoking adds flavor, it tenderizes, and it turns some of the worst cuts of meat into a wonderful meal. \

Most people know about smoked ham, bacon or fish. In the world of traditional barbecue, whether it is Texas or North Carolina, smoking means something else. In barbecue, smoking takes anywhere from 1-2 hours up to 20 or even more. To do the really long smoke will require the right kind of equipment.

To smoke something you need a container to hold in the smoke, a source of the smoke, and some food to smoke. A smoker can be anything from a hole in the ground to a \$20,000 smoker. The source of the Smoke is typically hard wood. There have been people who assert that what you burn to make the smoke really doesn't matter. Long time ago there was a guy in Kansas City who claimed that he had fed people in his restaurant ribs smoked with Hickory and some smoked with corncobs. Supposedly no one could tell the difference. He passed on a while back and the restaurant that bares his name denies that it ever happened. Believe what you will. I myself stick with the traditionally hardwoods like Hickory, Oak and Apple, but most any hardwood will do.

What to smoke is purely a matter of taste. The most popular items smoked by enthusiasts are ribs, brisket and pork shoulder. But don't limit yourself to these. You can smoke just about anything, from nuts to cheese to steaks. However, the process of smoking has grown around cuts of meat that traditionally don't come out well with any other cooking method. A good example of this is brisket, which is very tough and not very easy to eat unless you cook it very slow at a low temperature.

The basics of smoking meats are as follows. You need to practice good temperature control. Meat smoking is best done in the range of 200-220 degrees F. To be safe most meats need to be cooked to an internal temperature of 145 degrees F and poultry to 165 degrees F. However, to get real tender barbecue you want a higher final temperature, say around 180 degrees F. Basically smoking is a long process of over cooking tough meats to get a tender and flavorful meal. I recommend two accurate thermometers for smoking. One inside the smoker in the area where the meat sits to tell you the smoker temperature and one meat thermometer in the meat to tell you the internal temperature of what you are smoking.

There are two reasons to keep the temperature low. One is to give the smoke enough time to sink in and the other is to naturally tenderize the meat. Slow cooking gives the natural connective fibers in meat time to break down, become tender, and change into basic sugars. This last part is an integral part of barbecue. Collagen, the tough connective tissues in meat (think gristle) breakdown when cooked slowly into several types of sugar. This makes the meat sweet in flavor.

Another basic rule of smoking is to place the meat inside the smoker so that it is surrounded by smoke. You want a good thick stream of smoke around the meat at all times to give it the kind of exposure you need to enhance the flavor. The smoke needs to be moving, always moving to maximize exposure and prevent the smoke from making the meat bitter because of a build up of creosote.

The last thing to remember is that smoking is far more an art than it is a science. Practice and patience are the secret.