

COME HELL OR HIGH WATER

The vigorous ritual of the Northwest barbecue by Rick Levin

There is nothing quite like the aroma of barbecue smoke wafting across the neighborhood of a late summer afternoon. It's a distinctly heady smell — woody, primal and tangy, with a faint hint of mesquite and lighter fluid elevated by an underlying bouquet of sizzling flesh reverting to its carbon form. Even more, the smell is evocative and nostalgic, like Proust's madeleine: Barbecue is the smell of freedom and celebration, like a smoke signal spelling out escape from the tedium of time and work. Barbecue is life.

Cultural anthropologists have long sought a "human universal," or a single custom or rite practiced by all cultures that ties people together the world over. Such things as marriage, religion and body scarification have all been suggested. It wasn't until Emanuel Lipscomb Studge at the University of Chicago published his groundbreaking *Barbecue or Mildew*, a 2003 cross-cultural study of the practice through the ages, that social scientists realized the answer was staring them right in the face. Everyone barbecues.

More recently, archaeological digs in New Mexico, New Jersey and Lima, Peru have unearthed findings that appear to overturn the long-held belief that the first barbecue pits can be traced to the late-early to middle Cretaceous, with the rise of *Homo erectus*. It was a good guess — man indeed must be erect to barbecue — but Norman Bush's 2005 tripartite dig (especially the location in Jersey) has revealed a previously unknown hominid similar to *Homo neanderthalensis* but arriving much earlier: *Homo homersimpanicus*.

Carbon dating has placed *homersimpanicus* in the early Cretaceous. The species is characterized by a severely restricted sagittal crest; such a squeezing of the frontal lobe, with its negative impact on attention spans and the ability to concentrate, likely made all but the simplest tasks painfully difficult to accomplish. Bush has argued that it was the phenomenological limitations of *homer* that gave rise to barbecuing, which is almost impossible to fuck up. "It's possible that *homersimpanicus*, being an easily amused early hominid, was drawn to the bright, pretty colors of the cooking fire," Bush adds.

If barbecuing is a human universal, it is also true that the tradition of barbecuing varies in its specific details from region to region. Folks in the Northwest, for instance, tend to do their barbecuing in backyards, behind fences (hence the saying, "Fences make good neighbors"). This, however, is hardly the norm. In the Midwest, from North Dakota to Wisconsin and as far south as Kansas, barbecuing is largely considered a communal affair: One person in the neighborhood will light up the grill in the front yard, after which neighbors from up and down the block, or from around the cul-de-sac, would simply converge on the site, formally uninvited but more than welcome, carrying their own beer and meat — like moths to a flame.

The East Coast, on the other hand, is home of the "brownstone barbecue," distinct to the borough of Brooklyn and characterized by a surplus of style over substance — often, after having been fired up, the barbecue grill receives no actual food and is simply used to light cigarettes; instead, these gatherings are marked by copious drinking and long,

tedious discussions about the relative hipness of Fort Greene over Park Slope.

The Northwest barbecue, or cookout, is indeed an interesting ritual. Like Catholicism in Latin America or blues music in the South, barbecuing in our region is an amalgamation of several customs borrowed from other cultures, patched together with that particular grungy, sodden flair that is the *raison d'être* of Northwest living. The term barbecue itself is believed to derive from the Caribbean term *barabicu*, which entered Spanish and other Euro languages as *barbacoa* and translates as "sacred fire pit." In Washington and Oregon, territories marked by relatively short summers and protracted rainy seasons, the sacredness of the *barbacoa* is elevated to the status of a civic duty and individual right — something both sacred and secular, and always full of regional pride. The Northwest rock band Pearl Jam, for instance, derives its name from a type of barbecue sauce, "Pearl's jam," developed in the late 1800s by the down-and-out restaurateurs of Seattle's infamous Skid Row (the sauce was notable for its tart taste and excessive use of cheese).



PHOTO AND MEAT BY TRASK BEDORTHA

Here, then, is the archetypal scene of the classic Northwest barbecue: A dozen or so people who more or less "get along" gather in a backyard on a Saturday afternoon. After drinking two or three beers, one of the men will say: "Well, whaddya think? Should we fire that fucker up?" Consensus then is reached among a quorum of the men present, with affirmative votes registered by a simple "Yup" or "Hell, why not?" Ripping open a bag of charcoal briquettes, one of the men — under supervision of the rest of the men — arranges the briquettes in a neo-classical pyramid style, after which another of the men pries open a bottle of lighter fluid and liberally douses the pyramid with up to 8 fluid ounces of butane, during which he receives several encouragements of "more" and "a little more, dude."

More often than not, someone will suggest simply upending the bottle until it is completely emptied of fluid.

Typically it takes all the men present to get the barbecue lit (hence the punch line to the familiar joke about how many men does it take to light a barbecue: "All of them"). Someone will produce a book of matches, and the barbecue is set aflame by tossing a fiery match near the bottom of the charcoal-briquette pyramid. It is not unusual, upon ignition, for the flames to soar as high as seven feet into the air (nine feet, seven inches is the record); nor is it uncommon for one or several of the men huddled around the barbecue to have their eyebrows, eyelashes and untrimmed facial hair singed off, which is considered a mark of honor. As A.B. Klinkhaber writes in his 1999 study, *Fire of the Gods*: "For some men, a barbecue is not a barbecue until one of them gets his pubic hair burnt off. This is known, among aficionados of grilling, as the 'butane bikini' or, sometimes, the 'Brazilian grill.'"

At this point, the cooking of the meat becomes almost incidental, with hamburger, steak, salmon and/or hot dogs thrown willy-nilly and wonky-doodle atop the white-hot coals, like a pileup of cars on a derailed train. One of the great ironies of the Northwest barbecue is that, although every man present supervises the cooking of the meat, the meat nearly always end up scorched and overcooked, if not completely fossilized. In no way, however, does this deter from the almost ecstatic enjoyment the men take

in devouring what they alone have cooked, which may account for the almost holy status of such condiments as catsup, relish and mayonnaise.

In the final analysis, the Northwest barbecue is a stout and hardy affair, requiring a level of manliness and endurance that is seldom found in other regions of the Americas. Like the postal creed about delivering mail, the Northwest barbecue cannot be shut down by rain, sleet or even snow — such is the determination and pride we feel in firing up our outdoor grills. Barbecuing is not for the faint of heart. It is a joyous, drunken celebration of testosterone, appetite and brotherly love, and as pure an example as you will find of the civilizing impulse of humankind.

So, whaddya say? Should we fire that fucker up? **ew**

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