
Ave Santa María

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

The myth of Santa Maria

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

THE COMFORTING, MELLOW SCENT OF BURNING RED OAK COALS HIT my friend and me as soon as we parked in Santa Barbara, a wealthy town on California's Central Coast, and the gateway to the region's celebrated wine country. Here was a barbecue tradition more mythologized than Zeus: Santa Maria style.

We settled into our table at a popular downtown restaurant and asked about their specialty. A waitress promptly regaled us with a version of the description posted on the website of the Santa Maria Valley Chamber of Commerce:

> "It started in the mid-19th century when the rancheros gathered to help each other brand their calves each spring. As a thank-you to his fellow vaqueros (America's first cowboys), the host would prepare a Spanish-style barbecue, consisting of beef barbecued over a red-oak fire, served with pinquito beans, bread, salsa, and homemade desserts."

The meal was fabulous: wagyu tri-tip, minimally dressed, sprinkled with salt and pepper. Red oak imbued the beef with a sweet smokiness that never overwhelmed. There was no garlic bread, which usually accompanies Santa Maria–style barbecue, nor the customary mild red salsa used to lend a dash of tang. But the tri-tip, coupled with the pinquito beans (a sweet, pink legume with the creaminess of pinto) made it easy to forgive those oversights.

The tables around us began to fill. It was springtime, and COVID restrictions were slowly lifting across California after a winter of death. People were so raring to go out again that I couldn't even make it up to Santa Maria, the namesake city for the barbecue. Most of the

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barbecue-specific restaurants there and in surrounding communities were booked or wouldn't open until the weekend.

So we settled for Santa Barbara, a shorter drive from Los Angeles anyway. As my friend and I walked around downtown after lunch, our conversation turned to the obvious: We had just eaten a lie.

We had participated in a fantasy promoted as a gastronomic trip to the past. It was a past that never really existed, a lie first told long before the exploitation and bloodshed began that led to our meal.

THE CULT OF BARBECUE has always bothered me. It's a celebration of erasures upon erasures spun as an all-American celebration of heritage. Come to think of it, that's par for the USA course.

It starts with the name: barbecue. Although humans have grilled and smoked meats as long as we've known how to cook with fire, the word itself is of relatively recent coinage. The Oxford English Dictionary dates it back to the 1660s, an Anglicization of the Spanish barbacoa, itself a loan from the Taino people of the Caribbean. From the earliest days of the conquest, chroniclers described how intrigued they were by the Taino practice of cooking meats over wooden slats as opposed to directly on flames.

Spaniards adopted the style even as they slaughtered the Taino and other indigenous people of the Americas. Barbecue was born from genocide.

The Spaniards brought over the animals that serve as the foundation for most American barbecue today—beef, pork, lamb, and goat. Indigenous people across the Americas incorporated the animals into their barbacoa traditions. The English picked up these traditions in turn, then African-Americans made it into their own, from the slavery days to freedom. That's a story of oppression and resilience being rightfully told more and more across the South, a model of truth telling worthy of patronage.

That's not the story of Santa Maria–style barbecue.

Its origins lay with the Spaniards who conquered California during the late 1700s. Franciscan fathers established missions that spanned nearly the entire state. They invited Indigenous converts to move onto their new land holdings, then placed them into what amounted to indentured servitude. In Santa Barbara

and the Santa Maria Valley, those Indigenous people were the Chumash. Game meat cooked over fire was a part of their diet, but they relied more on seafood and foraged plants.

Barbecue as gluttony was anathema to them. That form of barbecue became the food of Spanish California.

The conquistadors and their descendants built cattle empires that transitioned into Mexican hands after Mexico declared independence from Spain in 1810. Those ranches survived well into the 1850s, until drought and conquest by the United States ended most of them. American settlers turned grazing lands into farms. Those new inhabitants created what historian Carey McWilliams deemed the "Spanish Fantasy Heritage."

This fantasy imagined Spanish and Mexican California as an idyllic wonderland of señoritas and rancheros, engaged in an endless fiesta even as they discriminated against the Mexicans who remained. They took on those trappings and styles of the Mission days. Downtown Santa Barbara, for instance, has adopted building codes that encourage structures with clay-tiled roofs, whitewashed walls, and arched windows and walkways. The idea is that visitors and residents alike can imagine themselves as part of a romanticized history.

As California tribes and scholars push back on the narrative, this historical amnesia is starting to fall out of favor. Today, the only things the public continues to embrace of the Spanish Fantasy Heritage are the architecture and Santa Maria barbecue.

Santa Maria barbecue gained national fame in the 1970s, as the region's wines earned acclaim and the press swept in and happened to notice the region's food. Major publications have covered restaurants across the Central Coast that offer this style of barbecue ever since. The Hitching Post II in Buellton made a cameo in the cult-classic 2004 movie *Sideways*.

Correspondents bought the story that local boosters sold them. That story was built on the erasure of the most important Santa Maria—not the river or the valley, but the city of about 100,000 that serves as the center of the region's barbecue scene. Here, the smoke of red oak helps boosters shield tourists from seeing what the city really is: working class and 76 percent Latino. Many Indigenous workers from Mexico and Central America toil in the fields. Every time people eat the succulent tri-tip and the savory pinquito beans, their plight goes missing. So does their food.

Santa Maria's real barbacoa scene is growing—try the savory beef barbacoa tacos at 805 Tacos, the Mexico City–style lamb barbacoa prepared by Taqueria Lindo Mexico #2, or the goat barbacoa from the Casa Oaxaca food truck. The latter is just a mile away from an Elks Lodge world-famous for its tri-tip.

May the Santa Maria Valley Chamber of Commerce celebrate the modern-day barbacoa of its region as much as it celebrates the barbecue of its imagined past.

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