

“THE BEAUTY OF BARBECUE IS THAT YOU JUST DON’T KNOW”

An interview with chef Michelle Wallace
of Gatlin’s BBQ in Houston, Texas

AS TOLD TO ADRIAN MILLER



THE WORLD OF BARBECUE IS OFTEN DEPICTED AS AN ALL-BOYS' CLUB. BUT Black women have long made their mark as entrepreneurs and the head cooks at family gatherings. Michelle Wallace occupies an even more unusual position. She's the executive chef of Gatlin's BBQ, a traditional, Black-run barbecue restaurant in Houston, Texas. Wallace shared some of her journey with *Gravy*.

Where did you grow up?

Specifically, I lived in Baden, on the north side of St. Louis. This was an area that was previously German.

Is there such a thing as St. Louis barbecue?

It is a good mixture of things. The sauce is kind of sweet. Some places sauce the meat and then finish it on the grill. Our [St. Louis style] barbecue is very pork heavy. My dad barbecued all the time. He was big on barbecuing pork steaks, rib tips, and chicken. We're also big on snoots [pig snouts].

What's the traditional way to prepare snoots?

My dad would parboil them by doing a quick blanch. He finished on the grill so that they would have a chewy and crispy texture—think chicharrones on the outside and gelatinous goodness on the inside.

Tell us more about your dad.

My dad was a police officer. He knew all of the great barbecue spots in St. Louis. I remember that he would bring home this hot link sandwich smashed together with potato salad, pickle, onion, and a sweet barbecue sauce. C&K was the place that made those sandwiches. My earliest barbecue memories are cooking with my dad. My dad cooked with high heat, not the “low and slow” method. When making pork steaks, my Dad would tug a piece off for me to sample. People called him “Wild Man Wallace.” He's the kind of guy who would offer people beer and food, even if he didn't know them well.

What got you interested in barbecue?

Watching my father grill first piqued my interest. But also, I would mimic in my kitchen what I saw on television and ate at restaurants. Seeing people enjoying a bite of my food is my high. I started regularly cooking for others in 2008 because of Jamar Israel (Fletcher), a cousin of mine who played in the NFL. He loved seafood, so I would grill trout or salmon with a bunch of vegetables. The word spread to other NFL players, and soon, they would pay me to make meals for them.

What's your first memory of barbecuing for yourself?

I remember in my second year at Texas Southern University, I had a tiny Weber grill, and I wanted to cook for my friends. We were broke students, and we just wanted something other than the cafeteria food. I called my dad. I remember asking him about how to properly stack the charcoal and get the fire ready. If I remember correctly, the meal was successful.

Tell us about your culinary education.

After graduating from Texas Southern with a degree in health administration, I eventually enrolled in the culinary program at the Culinary Arts Institute of Houston. As part of my culinary school study abroad program, I studied in China for three weeks, primarily Beijing, Xi'an, and Shanghai. I have a closet full of Asian condiments. Fish sauce is one of my favorite ingredients to work with. My first line cook position was with Chef Mark Holley at Pesce in Houston. I finally got my chance to work the grill station when the grill cook called in sick.



Adrian Miller (left)
and Michelle Wallace

How did you come to work at Gatlin's?

I randomly met Greg Gatlin at a party. I was there because my twin sister worked with the wife of Greg's lawyer. When I saw Greg, I said, "Hey, there's that barbecue dude." We got to talking, and I told him about my dreams of doing a food truck concept focused on sandwiches. He loved the idea and said that we should work together. This was June or July of 2016, and the rest is history.

How can we show women more love in the field of barbecue?

We have to get away from the idea of having a man's approval for what a woman can do. Greg trusts that I'll make something that people will love to eat, as well as managing the pits. Most women are the wives of the barbecue guy, and they don't cook. I'm one of the few women who does create barbecue on my own terms.

What's a typical day like for you?

I usually get to the restaurant by 4 A.M.

to 4:30 A.M. I check the wood in the first pit, which is loaded with briskets and pork butts. Next, I put wood in the second pit, which is eventually loaded with baby backs, spare ribs, turkey, and chicken. From there, managing the fire and being mindful of time is the main objective for the day. There are many variables in barbecue, and the beauty of barbecue is you just don't know...and I love it. It's in the adjusting that I find the excitement.

What is your favorite barbecue side dish?

Potato chips (either plain or salt and vinegar), or mac 'n' cheese.

What is your favorite barbecue dessert?

Rice pudding.

Favorite barbecue beverage?

Cold beer, especially a lager. Now, a margarita goes with everything!

What's the difference between a barbecue and a cookout?

Barbecue is the product itself. A cookout is the experience, the people there, the music playing, and the food being served.

Any parting thoughts?

I respect the art and the technique of barbecue so much. I respect the old tradition of cooking barbecue. Those things are embedded in us. We have a different understanding of the history of cuisine. Some people outside of our [Black] culture lack the understanding of where certain things come from and the techniques used. Things that can only be taught by, and learned from, someone who knows the tradition...our elders. If it was given to us correctly, it's in us. We are those things. They [white chefs] do those things. White chefs can learn the culture. But they are not of it. But all can enjoy it! 🍷

Selfie by Michelle Wallace