
VINEGAR AND BARBECUE

Tales of live cultures and red herrings

by Hugh Acheson

IN THE WORLD OF BARBECUE , vinegar is a seasoning, a spritz, a wash—an agile épée to porcine succulence. Vinegar is a necessity when it comes to giving barbecue its glory. Good barbecue has a char, a pit-borne crust, and a rich, tender interior that yearns for that jolt of peppery vinegar.

I will not speak to the Mendoza Line of barbecue sauce, where vinegar yields to sweetness. I will not debate the merits of mustard or tomato, for the sauce I will share with you has both, but neither is dominant. I will not regale you with arguments about how whole is better than finely chopped. Or how ribs pale in comparison to brisket. Or how I think baby back ribs are a red herring, a cut sucked into vacuum bags in the deep recesses of a factory in China to be sold many moons later at a chain restaurant in the suburbs of Hoboken. I will tell you of the sauce I love.

Let's make a simple mopping sauce. Not just a mop, not just a sauce, but something in between. Thin enough to sink into the meat, but with a little body to it. I am not much for ketchup, but I



understand your love. I am here for you. Believe me when I say that saccharine sauces do not complement meat cooked for hours, tended with care and precision over wood coals stoked with love and strength. That's like roasting a perfect chicken and serving it with a melted jelly bean sauce. And don't get me started about liquid smoke. If you go there, we can never be friends.

I just want to make the sauce using ingredients that appear in nature, without a label. Except for that little dash of Worcestershire—and the vinegar itself, but then again, you can make that, too. It's easy. I take hard cider and mix it with Bragg's raw apple cider vinegar, a live culture vinegar, which you can find at stores that sell a lot of quinoa. Place it all in the biggest mason jar you have and cover with a paper towel. Store it in a cool cupboard. In about three weeks, you have apple cider vinegar.

Back to the sauce. Don't be scared of the allspice. It's a spice component in America's favorite vegetable, ketchup.

Turn the page for the recipe.

PLEASANTLY LUMPY BARBECUE SAUCE

1 tablespoon bacon fat (You're reading Gravy, so naturally you have this at the ready)

¼ minced sweet onion

2 cloves garlic, peeled and thinly sliced

¾ cup cored, seeded and finely diced tomato

5 teaspoon kosher salt

¼ teaspoon freshly ground allspice (about 6 berries)

1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

1 teaspoon crushed red chile flake

5 teaspoon dried mustard

5 tablespoon sorghum molasses or honey

5 cup Bragg's raw apple cider vinegar

¼ cup water

In a heavy sauce-pot, like enameled cast iron, heat the bacon fat over medium heat. Add the onion and cook for 5 minutes, stirring every one in a while. Then add the garlic and cook for 2 minutes. Add the tomatoes, cooking for 5 minutes to a pap consistency. Season with the salt and then add the allspice, Worcestershire, chile flakes, and honey. Cook down for 5 minutes until the tomatoes look like tomato sauce. Add the vinegar and water and cook for 30 minutes. Cool and pulse in the blender.

This is a sauce to have in a mason jar, and not in a squeeze bottle. It's lumpy. That's good. Spoon it out onto your pulled 'cue. Taste the goodness and be happy with the rowdy friend we have in vinegar. 🍷

Hugh Acheson is the chef of 5&10 in Athens, Georgia, and the author of *A New Turn in the South*.

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