



KOSHER BARBECUE GETS A GOOD RIBBIN’

Jewish meat smoking traditions

BY MICHAEL TWITTY

AS AN AFRICAN AMERICAN JEWISH culinary historian of Southern heritage, one of the most frequent and sardonic questions I get is, “What about barbecue?” Assumed translation: “*Have you just given up on traditional Southern barbecue because it means pork, or have you come up with some clever substitute I’ve never thought of?*”

I know what they mean, and the assumptions pack in centuries of cultural distance and difference between Jews and their neighbors and notions of Black and white in America and the American South. However, I have an answer for everything, and out pops something they’ve probably never considered: One of the oldest barbecue-adjacent traditions was the preparation of the lamb at Passover. Jewish barbecue is older than brisket.

A closer look at Jewish dietary laws shows why barbecue is not oxymoronic. Jewish law, or *Halakhah*, is based on

ancient rules handed down in the Torah and the Talmud. Those texts, along with the customs (*minhagim*) and folk traditions of the Jewish diaspora worldwide, inform how Jews navigate food and culinary traditions. Food is one of the powerful ways we both remind ourselves of our unique and distinct heritage and mold and mend our tradition to incorporate outside influences and affirm our participation as citizens of the places where we live. The Passover Seder—built on layers of history, migration, and cultural experience, with dishes absorbed, transformed, and shared across communities—exemplifies this.

Kosher meat is more than just properly slaughtered common domestic poultry and cloven-footed, quadruped ruminants. Kosher cuts are predominantly drawn from the forequarters of the animal. This tradition comes from the narrative of Jacob, also known as Israel,



in which he sustains a hip injury after wrestling with an angel. As a result, Jews who practice kashrut do not eat the meat that touches a quadruped's sciatic nerve. This nerve is notoriously difficult to remove, so unless you have an excellent butcher or live in Israel, most American Jews who practice kashrut tend to eat cuts from the head, the breast, brisket, deckel, rib, plate, and shoulder. Most importantly, each cut is soaked, salted, and soaked again to remove as much blood as possible before being sold.

In the South, kosher barbecue finds its highest expression in Memphis and Texas barbecue competitions, where brisket is king, especially when marinated or sauced with a tenderizing cola-based preparation. Kosher barbecued chicken, beef ribs, sausage, and lamb are also favorites. Ultimately, much of Southern kosher barbecue draws from a long association between immigrant Jewish populations and African Americans. Its expressions could be found most commonly in home entertaining, celebrating holidays like Sukkot (traditionally

held outdoors), and synagogue dinners and fundraisers. That means you're more likely to find kosher barbecue at a competition, home, or community gathering than in a restaurant. Twelve Oaks Barbecue, a former kosher barbecue restaurant in Decatur, Georgia, has closed. As of this writing, it's unclear whether JoeBob's Kosher BBQ in Austin will reopen after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kosher barbecue is thriving in New York City, however. Izzy's Brooklyn Smokehouse, with locations in Brooklyn and Manhattan, serves beef, chicken, and lamb dishes that incorporate Southern, Korean, and Tex-Mex flavors.

I like mixing and matching, too. In my kitchen, I make a brand of fusion I've called "Koshersoul," an "Afro-Ashekefardi" (West and Central African, Ashkenazi and Sephardic-Mizrahi) blend of Diasporas. Here, I offer Yiddishe Ribbenes, my version of Jewish barbecue. The basics include kosher powdered bullion, salt, and coarsely ground black pepper, followed by that southeastern European staple, paprika. A spike of cinnamon nods to central European and Lithuanian Jewish cuisine. I added a little ginger, which sometimes makes an appearance in German Jewish cuisine. Next, I added garlic, onion, oil, a splash of vinegar, a little bit of brown deli mustard and horseradish, and a bit of brown sugar. So basically, the kind of stuff that makes soups, roasts, briskets, pastrami, corned beef, and roast chicken taste so good, all rolled into one recipe.

You'll need short ribs, time, and patience. 🍷

Michael Twitty, a writer, culinary historian, and historical interpreter, is the author of The Cooking Gene: A Journey through African American Culinary History in the Old South.

Yiddishe Ribbenes

Serves 6 to 8

- 3 pounds beef short ribs, flanken style
- 1 tablespoon brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon powdered kosher beef or chicken bouillon
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt (I use Diamond Crystal)
- 1 teaspoon coarsely ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon ground ginger
- 2 teaspoons paprika
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 small onion, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped garlic
- 2 tablespoons olive, canola, or vegetable oil
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- 1 to 2 tablespoons prepared horseradish with beets (chrain), such as Gold's brand
- 1 to 2 tablespoons brown deli mustard

Rinse the meat and pat it dry. Place in a large, shallow bowl or dish, such as a baking dish. Combine the sugar, bouillon, salt, pepper, ginger, paprika, cinnamon, and cinnamon in a small bowl. Using your hands, coat the meat with the dry spices, rubbing it in. In a medium bowl, whisk together the onion, garlic, oil, vinegar, beet horseradish, and mustard. Pour the mixture over the meat, turning to coat. Cover the bowl or dish and refrigerate for 4 to 6 hours.

About 30 minutes before you plan to start grilling the ribs, remove the meat from the refrigerator and allow it to rest at room temperature. Prepare your grill, heating it to medium.

Grill short ribs over medium heat for 4 to 5 minutes per side. Remove meat from grill, wrap loosely in foil, and allow it to rest for 10 minutes before serving.

Be'teyavon—Bon appétit!



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