

EVERYTHING BUT THE PIG

American Muslim barbecue is local, global,
and the most fun I've had on WhatsApp.

by S. FARHAN MUSTAFA
Illustrations by Molly Brooks

southernfoodways.org



I SET OUT LAST SUMMER TO ANSWER THIS QUESTION: WHAT IS AMERICAN MUSLIM BARBECUE?

As an Indian Muslim who grew up in Greenville, North Carolina, I had my own ideas about that experience. When I told my family what I was writing about, they were only concerned about my potentially “representing Islam,” given that I occasionally enjoy pork barbecue. Not that it would disqualify me, for every single bite is always accompanied by the tang of guilt along with peppery vinegar.

I learned that American Muslim barbecue is closely linked to the history of Southern barbecue, while at the same time evolving rapidly and spinning off new subgenres. Unsurprisingly, the one commonality across American Muslim barbecue is that there’s no pork involved. But beef, chicken, lamb, goat, and fish are all on the menu. The meat they use is *halal*, meaning “permissible,” or *zahiba*—that is, slaughtered according to Islamic rules. I think of how Southern barbecue cooks long passed down their techniques through the oral tradition. Now, first- and second-generation Muslim immigrants to the United States are building upon those foodways in real time, at digital speed. They’re passing along half-secrets and plenty of judgments in the liveliest WhatsApp group chat I’ve ever been a part of, called Halal BBQ Pitmasters. And to understand how we got here, it’s helpful to know a little more about Muslim American history.

There are approximately four million Muslims living in the United States. Islam is also the fastest-growing religion in the country, with Hispanic

Americans comprising the fastest-growing group of converts. Demographically, roughly a quarter of Muslims in the United States are Black or African American; a quarter are of Arab descent; a quarter are of South Asian descent; and the remaining quarter a mix of Southeast and East Asian, Hispanic, and white. Remarkably, there’s no majority race or ethnicity among Muslims here. I’ve long taken pride in being a part of this community, where diversity and unity intersect.

The first Muslims came to the United States against their will on slave ships. It’s estimated that between ten and thirty percent of enslaved Africans brought to the Americas were Muslim, primarily from West Africa. Scholars’ estimates range from 40,000 enslaved Muslims in the continental United States all the way to three million individuals across North America, South America, and the Caribbean. We know from the few surviving Muslim slave narratives that it was hard to practice Islam. Some adherents hid in plain sight as converted Christians. Their diets were largely vegetarian by force and circumstance. In the narratives I read, I did not find any accounts of barbecue.

The next wave of Muslims came around the turn of the twentieth century to help build America through factory work. Roughly ninety thousand Arabs from Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Jordan settled in the Midwest. While the vast majority were Christians, about ten thousand were Muslims. Thousands settled in Michigan in

congregation in Raleigh. He had eaten pork growing up but eschewed it after his conversion. Luckily for Brother Abdul-Rahim, he already knew how to barbecue chicken. That dish, which became his specialty, is also (coincidentally or not) a local favorite. Greenville's long-beloved B's Barbecue serves a barbecue chicken that's just as popular as its pulled-pork sandwiches.

In the 1980s, more Muslim families began moving to Greenville, many of them drawn by jobs at East Carolina University and its growing medical center. Brother Abdul-Rahim welcomed them with barbecued chicken—and in doing so, he picked up some new techniques. He still speaks wistfully about the first time an Afghan Muslim transplant, Professor Abdul-Shakoor Farhadi, showed him how to marinate chicken in yogurt before barbecuing it.

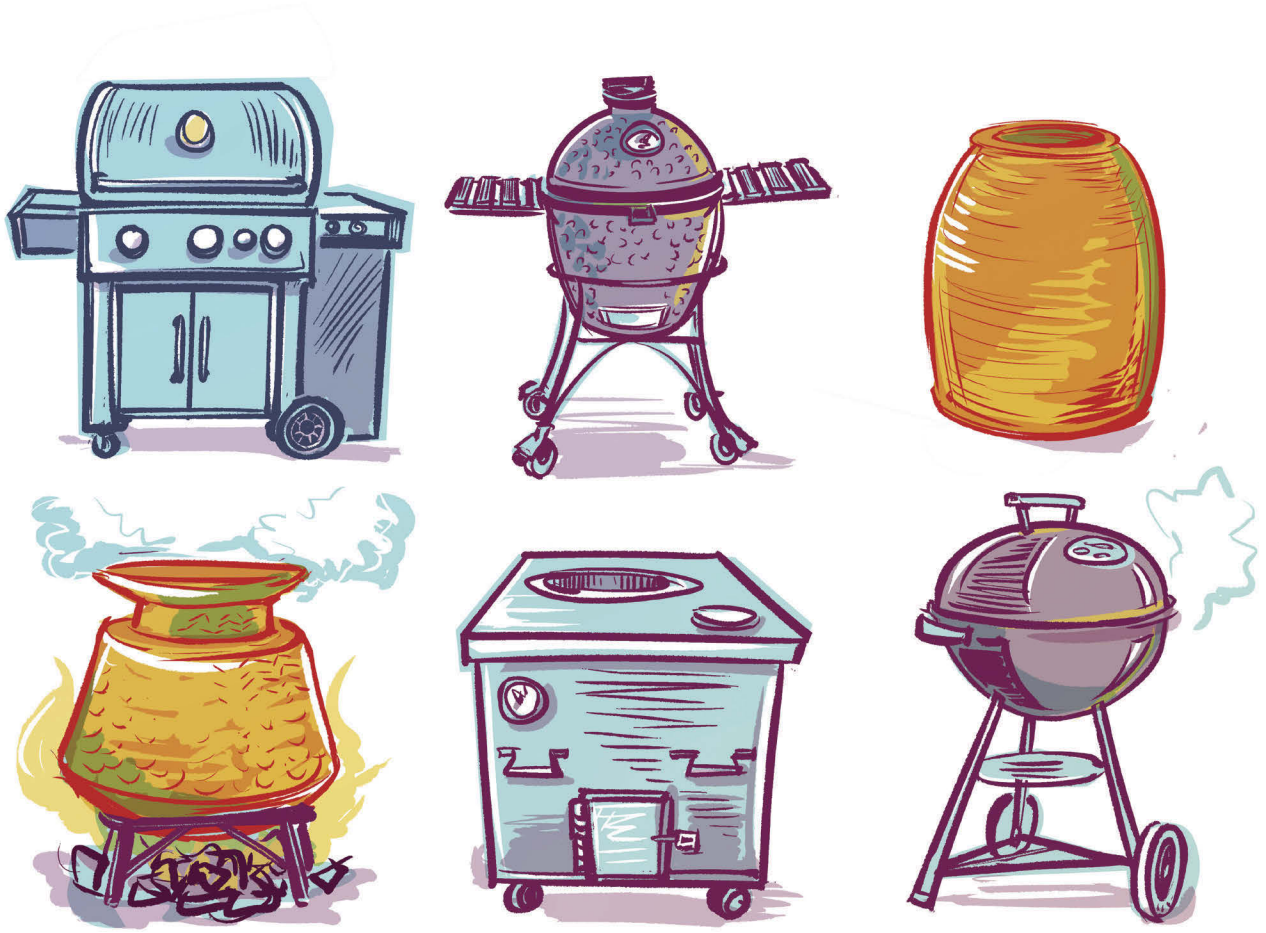
Southern barbecue has a long history of flourishing at religious events. American Muslim barbecue is no different. At the potlucks and cookouts I grew up attending, I remember arguments about whose meat would go on first. The adults working the grill or smoker had to play the role of diplomats, ensuring that our multiethnic, international community was fairly represented over the coals. Eids in Greenville weren't complete without Brother Abdul-Rahim and Brother Amin tag teaming on barbecue chicken, graciously letting others carve out room for foil packets of roasted lamb, delicate shaami kebabs, and hamburgers. Brother Yusuf fried trout, catfish, and whiting in his giant cast-iron pot. The cooking wasn't necessarily low and slow by traditional Carolina barbecue standards, but our cookouts shared almost everything else with those of our neighbors. Except, of course, the pig. We talked, throwing back cans of Coke and cups of chai, about food, politics, and community gossip. I

remember going to pig pickings with non-Muslim friends and listening to the adults talk about the exact same things.

And I suspect, to my parents, our celebrations felt something like home. My family is from the city of Lucknow, in northern India, where coal cooking and smoke flavor define the cuisine. (In fact, a lot of folks across the Muslim world still cook everything on wood stoves.) We build our tandoors from clay and hammer out giant pots from copper. I can still see my *dadi*—my grandmother on my father's side—whom we'd visit in India every three years or so, squatting next to a *degh*, a heavy metal pot with a rounded bottom. She'd drop a hot coal onto a bit of ghee in a little aluminum bowl, place it into a pot of chicken curry, and then close the lid, letting the entire curry smoke. I remember her rubbing goat pieces with masala paste and tucking them into a pot, sealing the lid with dough. It would cook for hours over a low fire in the *aangan*, or courtyard.

In the Muslim cuisine of Northern India, it's not just the meats that take on smoke, but vegetable stews, dals, and even kachumber, the ubiquitous salad of tomato, cucumber, onion, chile, and cilantro. As Southerners know, the juice that collects at the bottom of any bowl of tomato salad—salty, acidic, and sweet—is heavenly. As a kid, I'd secretly drain the collected juice from a potluck bowl of smoked kachumber into a Styrofoam cup. The cornsticks from Parker's Barbecue were my preferred dunking vehicle. I smelled the same smoky aromas—coals, fat, and spices—through the open windows of my parents' car as we drove home across Greenville. On summer nights, it might have been a neighbor's barbecue; on Saturdays in the fall, an ECU tailgate. I still remember how we had those smells in common.

Southern barbecue has a long history of flourishing at religious events. American Muslim barbecue is no different. At the potlucks and cookouts I grew up attending, I remember barbecued chicken, foil packets of lamb, and delicate shaami kebabs.



Last summer, I fell down the rabbit hole of American Muslim barbecue through a WhatsApp group called the Halal BBQ Pitmasters. For the uninitiated, WhatsApp is an app that's just like iMessage, but for people with green cards. It's the way everyone here stays connected with family and friends back home, around the globe. I was briefly an investigative journalist with *Al Jazeera*, and this is most fun I've had undercover as a practicing Muslim. In this group, there are more than 300 Muslims, mostly American Muslims with roots all over the world, talking night and day about barbecue. It's so popular there are subgroups, organized by geography and gender. In the main chat, they mostly post about brisket. Chicken is a close second, then goat. Recently someone asked a question about eating alligator, which prompted a quick scan and analysis of Islamic scholarly texts on eating reptiles.

Zahid Ahmed, Dallas-based physician in his mid-forties, founded the group. The child of Pakistani immigrants, Ahmed grew up in New Orleans. He says he heard the "usual" insensitive comments

growing up as a Muslim in a mid-sized, cosmopolitan Southern city. Those comments were more frequent when Ahmed was a medical resident in a smaller town during the decade after 9/11. "Bless your heart, you speak English really well!" possibly well-meaning patients would say. Others, not so well meaning, asked, "How come y'all don't apologize for 9/11?" They might conclude, "Well, you're one of the good ones." I've heard comments like these, too. I call them xenophobia's greatest hits.

Ahmed couldn't understand how Islam's nearly two billion global adherents translated to a community that often felt invisible or misunderstood in the United States. But sometimes those clumsy questions led to honest conversations about Islam with folks who genuinely wanted to learn. Ahmed looked for ways to build on the sense of hope those encounters gave him. When he eventually settled in Dallas, he began smoking Texas-style brisket with a group of fellow Muslim barbecue aficionados. Six years ago, the group hosted their first halal barbecue competition, just for fun. They recruited a couple barbecue judges from

their local community and cooked for a crowd of thirty or so. The next year, they did it again. This time, over two hundred folks showed up. Eleven teams competed, with local chefs vying for spots as judges. The event became a catalyst for building interfaith connections. A few years later, Ahmed's team became the first group of Muslim barbecue cooks invited to a kosher barbecue competition.

At a Big Green Egg barbecue event in Texarkana, Ahmed encountered another Muslim barbecue team for the first time. It was eye-opening, he remembers. His team returned home inspired to create a new spice blend that reflected their global influences. He credits that Texas Tandoori Rub with their next victory at a competition in Dallas in 2019. After that, Ahmed says, Muslims around the world reached out to him. Some wanted tips; others just wanted to share their own barbecue stories. So he started a website and, later, the WhatsApp group. In a few weeks, the group swelled to several hundred members. They hailed from Dallas, Dubai, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Soon, the number of participants reached the WhatsApp-mandated maximum, and Ahmed was forced to keep a waiting list. By the time I discovered the chat, it was closed to new members. Ahmed told me he would send me a link to join when someone dropped out, but he warned me to act quickly once the invitation came—he couldn't hold my spot. One night last summer, I received an invitation by text message at 4 A.M. Pacific Time. By 4:03, I was in.

Lurking on Halal BBQ Pitmasters, I've seen recipes for a global array of meat preparations—Texas-style brisket, Middle Eastern kofte, Nigerian suya, and Yemeni mandi. Smoked tandoori chicken and brisket biryanis, too. And I've learned that American Muslim barbecue offers everything that Southern barbecue does, from controversial opinions and spirited debates to genuine community. There are modernists and traditionalists. Minor celebrities and unsung heroes. Tons of tips on cooking techniques and links to meat-thermometer deals. I've seen hot takes on politics and memes about married life. Halal restaurant recommendations across continents. Somehow, the chat manages to offer the same comfort of my childhood mosque's potlucks: a place to gather and feel heard.

Of course, when a topic as fraught as barbecue meets the relative protection of the digital space, someone is bound to pick a fight. It might not even be about brisket. Shortly after I joined Halal BBQ Pitmasters, I witnessed what I came to call the Great Biryani Battle of 2022, in which Hyderabadis faced off against Pakistanis over who made the best version of the totemic Muslim rice dish. Amid the flying jokes and insults, a few chat members shared photos of their favorite biryanis. And then something fascinating happened. I began to see guys trading pictures of a dish called Canton biryani. As in Canton, Michigan, a suburb west of Detroit. It turns out that there's a hyper-regional American biryani that's influenced by the local population, a combination of Hyderabad and Arab immigrants. You can find it only in Canton. The anthropologist in me was hyperventilating.

I immediately called a Hyderabad friend of mine, who was kind of upset that the secret was out but did confirm the authenticity of the biryani in question. As the Biryani Battle raged on, opinions proliferated on smoked brisket biryani. I hungrily took notes.

In this chat, there's a thin line between smack talk and smacking lips. How American Muslim food evolves correlates to how long communities have been here. Detroit and Dearborn, home to the largest Muslim population in the United States per capita, where you'll find second- to fourth-generation Muslim families, is where you're likely to find more Muslim barbecue restaurants and new American biryanis. In Texas, where you'll find a mix of first- to third-generation families, there are underground barbecue restaurants where you can get brisket shipped to you by just sliding into Instagram DMs or WhatsApp chats.

When people think of the immigrant experience, they often assume it's a two-dimensional Venn diagram, where we have our feet planted at the intersections of cultures. Immigrants don't just plant their feet. We move. We dance. We pull the world toward us and share out at the same time. That's what American Muslim barbecue is, too. And there's still so much to discover and create. I plan to keep learning as much as I can. Just don't tell my parents about my pork habits. 🍖

Born in Greenville, North Carolina, and based in Seattle, S. Farhan Mustafa is a full-time data analyst and a part-time freelance writer. His previous work experience includes waiting tables, cooking in restaurants, reporting for Al Jazeera English, and founding a venture-backed tech startup.