

The Slaw and the Slow Cooked: Culture and Barbecue in the Mid-South

James R. Veteto and Edward M. Maclin, editors.
2011. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

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Two basic principles of biology explain much about the dishes humans eat. The first is that *plants can't run*—which is why they produce secondary metabolites, of remarkable diversity, to deal with insects. Some of these compounds are promoted to the rank of “spice” and account for the most interesting flavors in human diets. The second is that *flesh rots*—which means that we long ago learned to cook it, smoke it, and cure it with salt, sugar, and vinegar. When you take animal flesh, rub it with spices, cook it over a smoky fire, and coat it with a savory sauce with salt, sugar, and vinegar, you are recapitulating the highlights of human gastrobiology.

You are also *barbecuing*, from the Spanish *barbacoa*, from the Caribbean indigenes' *babricot*, which referred to a framework of sticks for cooking meat over coals. Spanish conquistadors regarded this form of cooking particularly savage, but, as Veteto and Maclin point out, Germans had long done some similar things to meat, and they helped establish it in parts of the south. English pioneers, too, became enthusiastic barbecuers, notes Moss. Back home, it may have been beef that was central to English identity (Spiering 2006), but in the colony their preferred meat was pork from the get-go. All meats end up in barbecues, but pork remains the *primus inter pares*, and it receives the most loving attention in this collection—from the chopped pork sandwiches the editors describe eating as they planned the book, to the whole-hog roasts that are traditional in West Tennessee (Fertel). (Talk about savage: with whole hog barbecue there is nothing to obscure the fact that it is one animal eating another.)

Veteto and Maclin are both anthropologists and native Tennesseans, and their geographic focus is on central Tennessee and points to the southwest. This is a hybrid book, aiming for both academic rigor and

public appeal. The title is a slightly obscure riff on Lévi-Strauss, and while there are scattered disquisitions on anthropological issues, much of the collection is essentially descriptive, with many accounts of cooking and eating (Bradley-Shurtz on a massive Tennessee church barbecue, Edge on an Arkansas diner, and Deutsch on a barbecue competition).

We are not surprised to learn that mid-Southerners' love of barbecue is important to their identity and that barbecue varies regionally. Sauces are particularly distinctive, and Veteto surveys the range from the saltwater-butter baste used by George Washington to the pickled peppers of Thomas Jefferson. He offers a four-pillar theory of the mid-South sauce—tomato, vinegar, pepper, and sweetener—which is interesting to read alongside Gladwell's (2004) analysis of ketchup.

Several analytic themes recur. One is the impact of technology (the jury's still out on electric cookers, but Knipple and Knipple see them as anti-artisanal). Another is the effect of swine production (those whole-hog barbecues are “in crisis” because factory farms produce the wrong kind of hog while they put small farmers out of business). There is also the role of restaurants—which created the much-discussed regional distinctiveness (Moss) but which now threaten it through McDonaldization (Maclin).

Barbecue is fun food—not just to prepare and consume, but to write about; the authors' enjoyment in the writing is palpable. For a barbecuing genius (at least in my own mind) who hangs out in Dixie a lot, it was also a fun read. As an anthropologist, I would have enjoyed a little more meat on the bone. I would have traded in a few of the descriptions of people cooking and eating barbecue for a few more insights into why they were cooking and eating barbecue. For starters, I am still not clear if, how, or why the mid-South is distinctive in its barbecuing.

However, maybe in the end, it is not really the barbecue that is distinctive, it is barbecue discourse. As *The Slaw and the Slow Cooked* luxuriates in the patterned ways we talk about barbecue, including

about how barbecue brings us together, it is participating in the social ritual of affirming a distinctive food discourse that brings us together. In the United States, barbecue discourse is as distinctly and dependably affectionate as, say, our discourse on British food is contemptuous. (Note to fellow Americans: Brits tell me they don't find this discourse amusing. One English friend, a cosmopolitan scholar, when informed of how Americans like to bond in orgies of culinary superiority over the British menu, said "Really? And this from a people whose main contribution to world food is preceded by the word 'junk'?"¹) But there it is, we talk smack about bangers and pork pies, and cannot say enough good things about barbecue: its preparation is a labor of love, it is eaten with gusto, it is a source of local pride and distinctiveness, it is cross ethnic, and it is guilt-free (sugars and fats notwithstanding). Like talking about God, nothing you say is too good; "surely there can be no finer flavors or savors than that of barbecue in the mid-South" (Knipple and Knipple). Nolan wields quantitative ethnographic methods to find out what

makes barbecue distinctive in his corner of the mid-South, basically identifying nothing in particular but still affirming that it is "delicious." Barbecue discourse.

Note

1. Actually, Veteto quotes some 18th-century English cookbooks that sound like they were actually cooking some lovely barbecue.

References Cited

- Gladwell, Malcolm
2004 The Ketchup Conundrum. *The New Yorker*. Pp. 128–135, September 6.
- Spiering, Menno
2006 Food, Phagophobia and English National Identity. *European Studies* 22:31–48.