

Joel Stein picks up oak at DW. Vasbinder's to smoke perfect brisket. LEFT (recipe, p. 38).

Learning to Barbecue Helped Make Me a Man

Writer Joel Stein heads to Houston to learn how to smoke beef—the manliest way to cook meat that doesn't involve mounting the animal's head on a wall.

FOOD PHOTOGRAPH BY HECTOR SANCHEZ

LIKE MOST OF WHAT I DO, my cooking is not manly. I fuss, apologize and occasionally—embarrassingly—look at recipes. But for the past two years, I've been trying to boost my masculinity, working on a book for which, finally, at age 39, I learn how to be a man. I've gone one round with Ultimate Fighter Randy Couture, done three days of basic training at Fort Knox, earned a badge on a Boy Scouts camping trip. But I still prepare bouillabaisse like a little girl, crying over onions and talking in French.

The manliest form of cooking that doesn't involve mounting the animal's head on a wall is barbecue; if I were really going to learn to be a man, I'd have to master it. So I went to Houston, a town that specializes in the manliest meat, beef. My plan was to eat as much barbecue as was physically possible, so I could understand life-changing 'cue. Once I knew what I was aiming for, I'd get lessons from a barbecue expert and then test my new knowledge at a barbecue contest.

I go straight from the airport to Catalan Food & Wine restaurant, where, for the moment, Chris Shepherd is chef. This fall he'll open his own restaurant, Under-

Joel Stein, a columnist for Time magazine, lives in Los Angeles with his wife and son. His book on trying to be a man comes out in 2012 from Grand Central Publishing.

belly, which will feature a full-scale butcher room (he's so manly, he calls butchering pigs his "happy place"). Shepherd is a heap of a man, incredibly friendly and passionate; the kind of guy who can get away with calling both men and women "baby." Last year, he helped create "Where the Chefs Eat" tours of Houston. And now he's going to take me on the barbecue tour, his favorite.

We head to **Gatlin's Barbecue & Catering**, where the pit boss's mother, Mary Gatlin, tells customers to "have a blessed day." Sitting outside at picnic tables, we eat soft, rich brisket from the pointy side of the cut, known in most places as "fatty meat." Because so much of the tip is exposed to the smoke, it has

the most “bark”—the blackened, tarry bits where smoke, fat and meat mix together. To Shepherd, this is the asparagus tip of barbecue. He prizes the top, boneless cap of the sparerib for the same reason.

We eat our way around the city, making a detour to the legendary **BBQ Pits by Klose**, where Shepherd bought his \$1,800 home pit. David Klose speaks quickly, delivering entirely unprovoked self-proclamations such as, “I’m a real quick draw.” He is the most Texan person I’ve ever met, in his Wrangler jeans and brown camouflage cap that says “Deer Predator.” Klose has made barbecue pits out of a phone booth, a mailbox and a police car. The more steel in the pit, the steadier the heat will be, and that,

he insists, is the trick to good barbecue. This seems to justify why men are happy to spend thousands of dollars to cook \$1.75-per-pound meat.

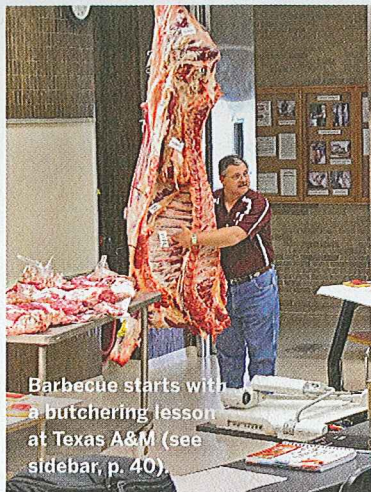
Our final stop is **Pierson & Company Bar-B-Que**, where we get a mixed trinity of brisket, ribs and sausage links that are smokier and sweeter than some we’ve tried elsewhere and nearly as satisfying. Texans believe that, just as you wouldn’t cover Kobe beef in béarnaise, you don’t smear barbecue sauce on brisket that’s been cooking for 12 hours in an oven you’d need to put a down payment on. You want to taste meat, salt and spice. This is such a basic idea that I cannot believe there isn’t a Doritos flavor named Meat, Salt and Spice.

The other lesson I learn is that barbecue is about timing: The brisket at Gatlin’s wouldn’t be nearly as delicious a few hours past its prime. Barbecue exists in time as much as it does in space. It’s why so many great, small places run out of meat by 11 a.m. Why they don’t get a bigger pit and buy more meat is something that leads me to many more questions about the South than I can possibly answer.

MY EATING TOUR COMPLETE, I am ready to actually try cooking. I wake up early the next day to meet curmudgeonly Robb Walsh, a recently retired restaurant critic and author of the *Legends of Texas Barbecue Cookbook*. He recently opened a Tex-Mex restaurant, El Real Tex-Mex Café, with *Food & Wine* Best New Chef 2009 Bryan Caswell right across the street from the space that will become Underbelly. And for the past year, he’s been running a barbecue course out of his home. He’s going to give me the simplified version. The one for Northerners.

There are three grills in Walsh’s backyard. He’s got a pricey offset smoker—in which you light a wood fire in a small cylinder called the firebox, which is below and off to the side of a big grill with an exhaust pipe on top. He’s got a “Mexican hibachi,” an oil drum cut in half—you build a fire on one side and put the meat on the other. And he’s got a gas grill, just like I do. Walsh makes it clear that I am never, ever to refer to anything I do on the gas grill as “barbecuing.” Barbecuing is cooking with smoke. Grilling is what you do to your children’s hamburgers.

He teaches me to put some charcoal in a starter chimney, which looks like a big metal travel mug, and light it with a burning newspaper. We drop the charcoal in the offset smoker’s firebox, then add oak logs along the sides, not in a pile—exactly the



Barbecue starts with a butchering lesson at Texas A&M (see sidebar, p. 40).

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Robb Walsh’s Texas Barbecue Brisket

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ACTIVE: 1 HR; TOTAL: 10 HR PLUS

OVERNIGHT MARINATING • 10 SERVINGS

The cooking times for this recipe are approximate: Temperature readings are the most reliable way to judge doneness.

One 9-pound whole beef brisket
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 3 large garlic cloves, smashed
- 1 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1 cup barbecue sauce
- 1 cup low-sodium beef broth

1. Generously season the brisket all over with salt and pepper. Place the brisket on a large rimmed baking sheet, cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight.

2. Light a charcoal fire in a starter chimney. Add the lit coals to the firebox of a smoker and heat the smoker to 275°. Place oak or other hardwood chips, chunks or logs around the coals so that the wood smolders but does not flare. Set the brisket on the grill, fat side down. Cover and smoke for 2 hours. Monitor the smoker throughout the smoking process and add more lit coals and/or wood as needed to maintain the temperature and smoke level.

3. Meanwhile, in a small saucepan, combine the butter with the garlic and coriander and cook over moderate heat until fragrant, about 2 minutes. Add the barbecue sauce and beef broth and simmer the mop for 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.

4. After 2 hours, brush the brisket all over with the mop. Turn the brisket fat side up. Continue to cook, mopping every 30 minutes, until an instant-read thermometer in the thickest part registers 165°, about 6½ hours longer.

5. Transfer the brisket to a large sheet of heavy-duty foil. Brush the remaining mop and garlic all over the brisket and wrap it in the foil. Put the wrapped brisket in a large, disposable aluminum roasting pan. Set the pan in the smoker and cook the brisket until it reaches 185°, about 1 hour longer.

6. Slice the brisket thinly across the grain and serve it with its cooking juices.

SERVE WITH Sliced white bread, chili beans, coleslaw and pickles.

★ JOEL'S GUIDE ★
to
**HOUSTON
BBQ**

CHEFS' BBQ TOUR

Chris Shepherd's "World BBQ" tour hits a Chinese barbecue spot and a top mom-and-pop ribs joint. Aug. 7; \$180; houstonculinarytours.com.

BBQ CRASH COURSE

Cookbook author Robb Walsh gives groups of 12 or fewer a two-hour tutorial. Aug. 8; \$100; robbwalsh.com.

BBQ SUMMER CAMP

The Meat Science and Technology Center at Texas A&M University offers a seminar that includes butchering as well as making sauces and rubs. June 3-5; \$495; foodwaystexas.com.

BBQ PITS BY KLOSE

Handcrafted pits can cost \$50,000 and might be built from car parts. 1355 Judiway; 713-686-8720 or bbqpits.com.

D.W. VASBINDER'S

Wood can be picked up 24 hours a day and paid for in an honor box. 2011 East Hwy. 90A, Richmond, TX; 281-342-0535.

GATLIN'S BARBECUE & CATERING

Get brisket to go or eat at picnic tables. 1221 W. 19th St.; 713-869-4227 or gatlinbbq.com.

opposite of the way the Boy Scouts taught me—so the fire smokes instead of roars. By controlling the amount of fuel and oxygen inside the smoker, we aim to keep the heat at around 275 degrees—a nice, slow, long cook to break down the tough, fatty cuts of meat that work best in barbecue.

Once the temperature hits 275 degrees, we place some pork ribs, brisket rubbed with just salt and pepper (recipe, p. 38) and a chicken marinated in Kraft Italian dressing on the grate. Walsh explains that barbecue people are "weird," spending wildly on gadgets but using inexpensive supermarket rubs and marinades. What he means is that barbecue people are men.

Unlike the brisket my Jewish family eats at Passover, this one is half fat. We set it on the grate fat side down for two hours, then flip it fat side up so it self-bastes for the next eight hours. Because we don't have to be there while all this cooking goes on, we head out on a long drive to pick up supplies and a breakfast taco.

D.W. VASBINDER'S, where we stop to buy logs, looks like a junkyard, with metal sculptures of cowboys, cow skulls and a sign with wood prices that explains the honor system of payment. We pick up some oak, which Walsh says is the purist's choice, since it imparts a neutral smoky flavor. (Mesquite can be tangy and resinous, whereas pecan gives a sweet, sooty flavor that can blacken your food.) As Walsh stops a welder to ask for a piece of metal mesh for the bottom of his hibachi grill, he says, "Places like this are why you can make great barbecue in Texas. It's like car culture in L.A." I pretend I am manly enough to be part of car culture in L.A.

When we get back, we check on the meat. The chicken and ribs are done, but the brisket has stalled out at an internal temperature of 165 degrees, about 20 degrees shy of what we need. We wait another hour, during which we work hard opening and drinking local Saint Arnold beers. But the brisket is still at 165. It's a classic barbecue phenomenon—the meat gets to a point where the internal temperature just won't budge. We have a few choices: We can keep waiting and hope the problem fixes itself. We can wrap the brisket in foil, which will raise its temperature but might make it soggy. Or we can bring it inside and put it in the oven at 275 degrees, which could dry it out. I refuse to bring it inside, because inside is for womenfolk. Walsh decides to wrap the meat in foil for just 1 hour and leave it in the smoker. Which works. We lop the giant fat cap off the parts we're going to eat first, leaving the rest on to keep the meat moist.

apple that he sprinkles on the flames to sweeten the smoke. He hands me a syringe so I can inject chickens with marinade to keep them moist; for the same reason, we place a pan of water and chicken broth on the bottom rack. But we're mostly focused on the spareribs, which are cooking with a simple rub. There is a lot of hanging

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out and chatting, but we've got to pay attention: If we screw up by letting the fire get too hot, too cool or too smoky, there's no chance to recover. Because starting over takes 14 hours.

Ramirez believes ribs need a glaze to balance the sugar and saltiness, so when they're just about finished, he pats some brown sugar on top and puts them back in the pit. Then, 30 minutes later, he brushes on a glaze of brown sugar, melted butter and pepper jelly, puts the ribs in a Styrofoam container and takes them to the judges' tent.

I help slice the brisket, stealing several pieces of bark for myself. At 5 p.m., a committee member tells Ramirez that our team didn't place in the top 10 to compete for the finals. Ramirez thanks her, smiles politely and goes right back to being the caterer for his corporate sponsor's rodeo tailgate, slicing a huge brisket against the grain to keep it tender. This is what I've learned about being a man. We've come to call it repression, but it's really self-control. It's a respect not just for the contest and the people you compete with, but for yourself.

I'm going to start barbecuing at home. Not on an \$1,800 pit that takes up half my yard, but on a little Weber with the wood off to the side. Mostly because nothing really tastes like smoked meat. But also because, unlike women, men need an activity as an excuse to talk. And we're not going to talk about salad. ●

LIKE MOST MEN, I FEEL THAT ONE DAY OF TRAINING makes me qualified to compete, so I am headed to the World's Championship Bar-B-Que Contest, where more than 400 competitors fill the parking lot of Reliant Stadium with tents bearing giant corporate logos. I join team Drillin' & Grillin', which won for the best ribs last year. The seven-man team is run by Ernest Ramirez, a pipe fitter who has built his own enormous pit. Ramirez has a good oak fire going, but he shows me a bag of pellets made out of hickory, cherry, hard maple and