EST D 2019

AARON FRANKLIN

TEACHES TEXAS-STYLE BBQ

MADE WITH LOVE
& POST OAK

WITH MASTERCLASS

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GENERAL BBQ TIPS

While the times and temperatures will vary for different cuts of meat, the process of making barbecue abides by the same basic principles, regardless of what's in the smoker. In this class, Aaron Franklin walks us step by step through the specific needs and processes of smoking pork butt, spare ribs, and brisket, but first, here is an overview of seven recurring themes and practices that apply to all of his recipes.

MAKE A GAME PLAN

Before each cook, Aaron writes out a detailed schedule, working backward from the time he plans to serve the meal. For instance, if he wants to serve brisket at 5 p.m. and anticipates a 12-hour cook with an additional hour for the brisket to rest, then he needs to begin the cook at 4 a.m. If he's going to cook at 255°F for the first three hours before pushing it to 265°F, he writes down 7 a.m. as the time he needs to start increasing the heat. If he plans to wrap the brisket eight hours in, he makes a note that he should do so at noon.

Making a game plan should be your first step whenever you're making barbecue. It's easy to get fatigued or forgetful during a long cook; the game plan is a way to keep you on track.

BE AS ACCURATE AND PRECISE AS POSSIBLE

When you first start smoking meat, you should aim to be precise within five degrees of the temperatures Aaron suggests. If he recommends a temperature of 265+, your fire should ideally run between 265°F and 270°F. If he says 265-, it should burn between 260°F and 265°F. That doesn't mean you should panic if you look up and your temperature gauge suddenly reads 275°F. The idea is to avoid wild, prolonged swings in temperature. You can make adjustments to future cooks if you find that Aaron's temperatures don't work for you, but the only way to know that is to follow his lead closely at first.

COLLECT DATA

Barbecue is unpredictable.

Even if you built a smoker from scratch using a plan that Aaron personally gave you, you would still have your own set of idiosyncrasies to discover and work around. The quality of your wood, the composition of your meat, and even the elevation and climate of your environment can change the cook in ways you didn't anticipate. Consider his suggested temperatures and times as guideposts to learn from. Use your game plan not only to stay on schedule, but also to collect data on the cook as it happens.

Let's say your brisket cooked a little too fast during the first three hours — did you have trouble maintaining your target temperature? If so, make note of it on the game plan. Was it a cool or hot day? Was it windy? Write down the weather conditions along with anything else that seems relevant, unique, or unusual. Whether your brisket disappoints or turns out even better than expected, having a step-by-step account of the cook is the best way to figure out what went right and wrong.

KEEP THE SEASONING SIMPLE

When it comes to seasoning meat for barbecue, Aaron likes to keep things relatively simple so that the flavor of the smoke and the meat shine through. He uses kosher salt and 16-mesh "café grind" black pepper, which have roughly the same granular size, and mixes the two together evenly. He's not a fan of additional seasonings like garlic or onion powder, although for pork butt and ribs he does include a small amount of paprika to impart color. To make seasoning easier, Aaron mixes his rub ingredients in a plastic shaker with an adjustable lid and then sprinkles the rub onto the meat directly from the shaker.

Before applying the rub, Aaron may apply an emulsifier like mustard or hot sauce to help the rub stick and form a bark. After a long cook, the slather won't have much impact on the flavor of the meat but it's still good to be judicious in how much you apply. The more slather you use, the more likely it is that your bark will flake off as the meat shrinks during the cook (though that's a much bigger concern for a cut like brisket than for, say, pork butt). Aim to get the meat tacky, but not wet.

Finally, always apply the rub to the "presentation side" of your meat last, so as to avoid messing up its appearance when you flip the meat over to season the other side.

WORK CLEAN

At various stages during prep and the cook, you'll be handling raw meat, knives, parchment paper, and seasoning at the same time. For efficiency and cleanliness, Aaron recommends using your nondominant hand to move and turn the meat, while keeping your dominant hand free and clean for tasks like trimming and distributing the rub. For heavier cuts like pork butt and brisket, use the flat of your knife as another "hand" to help flip the meat over.

KEEP THINGS MOIST

As discussed in Chapter 3: Smokers, Aaron recommends putting a water pan (filled with a few inches of warm water) inside your smoker to add humidity to the cook chamber and keep the surface of the meat moist and tacky, allowing the smoke to stick better.

During the course of each cook, you'll also need to spritz the exterior of the meat from time to time to prevent certain parts from drying out and overcooking. For this, you'll want a spray bottle with an adjustable nozzle. Go with a setting that splits the difference between mist and stream. If it's too misty the liquid will evaporate almost instantly, but if it's too forceful the stream could break up your bark.

Like the slather, what's in your spray bottle won't have much impact on the flavor of the meat. Water, beer, and apple cider vinegar are all fine choices. Avoid sugary liquids like apple juice, as they're more likely to burn.

WRAP IT UP

While not all pitmasters wrap their meat in the final stages of a cook—in barbecue circles, wrapping in foil is known as the "Texas crutch"—wrapping is an effective way of finishing a long cook without drying out the meat. Wrapping also captures the meat's fat and juices, so they can be reabsorbed once the meat is taken off the smoker to rest. Aaron wraps pork in aluminum foil and brisket in uncoated butcher paper. Be sure to purchase "wide" rolls of whichever material you're using.

FIRE AND SMOKE

Building and maintaining a fire that produces clean, flavorful smoke is the key to great barbecue. Aaron's philosophy is simple: let the wood burn the way it wants to burn. In practice there are a number of unpredictable variables that can make his simple philosophy more challenging than it sounds—anything from sudden changes in weather to logs that aren't as dry and seasoned as you might have thought—but barbecue is about adapting to these conditions as they arise.

The only way to learn how to properly work a fire is to do it as often as you can. Especially when you're first getting to know your smoker, it's a good idea to do trial runs where you're burning wood and generating smoke but there's no meat inside the cooker. Practice during the hottest part of the afternoon and the coolest part of the morning to see how your smoker reacts to differences in external temperature. Try it on days where the weather is calm and pleasant, as well as days that are rainy or windy. Experience breeds confidence.

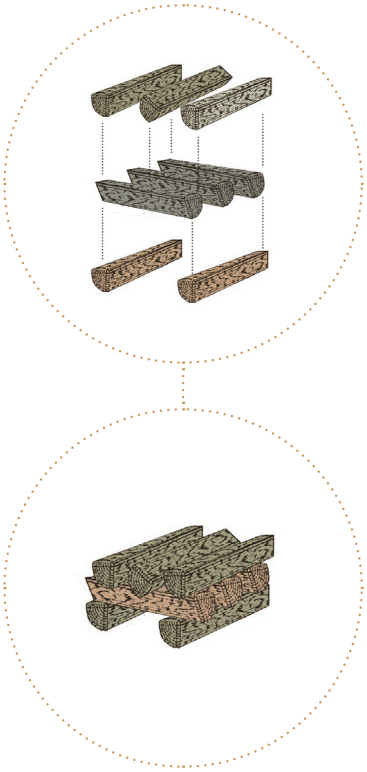
Building a Fire

In the early stages of the fire, your only real concern is getting the smoker up to temp and establishing a solid bed of coals that will continue to fuel the fire for many hours. You don't need to worry about the quality of your smoke until there's actually food in the smoker, so hold off on using heftier pieces of wood that will burn longer and produce more flavorful smoke.

When building a fire, you want to combine thinner, drier pieces that will quickly catch with denser logs that will burn slower and generate heat over a longer period of time. The arrangement of your logs should maximize air flow. Start by placing two dense logs on either side of your firebox as a foundation, then three drier pieces of wood perpendicularly across the top, leaving at least an inch of space between each piece. Place another dense log across the thinner ones and a lighter piece on either side, again with an inch of space between. You should now have three distinct layers forming a basket weave-type pattern.

To ignite, moisten a crumpled sheet of butcher paper with a drizzle of cooking oil (like grapeseed), slide it between the two bottom logs, and light. (If you have a piece of greasy butcher paper lying around from a previous cook, use that.) Newspaper and kindling are also fine alternatives, but avoid using

WOOD DIAGRAM



petroleum products like lighter fluid. As the fire grows and the logs catch, the middle layer of thinner, drier wood should catch first, eventually collapsing into coals with the uppermost log falling on top. (Alternatively, you could light charcoal in a chimney starter and add them to the firebox, followed by pieces of wood.) Whatever tinder you use to start the fire, make sure you add enough to keep the fire burning while you wait for the heftier logs to catch.

If you're having trouble getting the logs to catch, try rearranging them with a poker or shovel to give them more space and facilitate airflow through the structure. You can also add smaller pieces of kindling to help the fire build. If the logs are producing a lot of smoke without catching, they may not be dry enough. Try carefully replacing a few of the bigger logs with thinner, drier pieces and see if it makes a difference.

Clean Fire, Clean Smoke

The temperature gauge on your smoker will indicate how hot the fire is burning, but if you want to know how clean it's burning, look at the smokestack.

Wood produces its best, cleanest smoke after it fully combusts and catches flame at temperatures in excess of 600°F. On your way to clean smoke, you'll be burning off moisture, gases, and oil-soluble chemicals in the wood, eventually reaching the optimum stage where most of your smoke is water vapor. As that vapor moves through the smoker, it settles on the surface of the meat and then evaporates, leaving behind traces of compounds like syringol and guaiacol, which give barbecue its flavor and aroma.

If you have a clean fire, the smoke from your smokestack should look thin and light with a bluish hue. What you don't want is smoke that's thick and sooty or gray-black. The heavier and dirtier the smoke looks, the more particles like creosote it contains. If you've ever eaten a piece of brisket that tasted like the inside of an ashtray, creosote was likely to blame. Meat doesn't need a lot of smoke. What it needs is the right smoke.

To get that perfect smoke, you first want to make sure you have a supply of good quality wood, but you also need to create the conditions where combustion can happen in a natural, organic way.

Over the course of a long cook your meat can survive short periods of bad smoke, provided you fix the problem as soon as it emerges. As for why you're getting bad smoke, it could be that your wood didn't cure long enough or was recently soaked by rain, in which case it's going to take a lot more time and heat to burn off the extra moisture and reach full combustion. Maybe you've buried a new piece of wood too deeply in the coals, or the door or dampers of your firebox aren't open far enough and the reduced airflow is keeping the wood from catching flame. Or maybe you have too much airflow and the fire is too intense, which can cause residue and other nonwoody particles inside the firebox to burn off and mix with the smoke from your wood.

Your job for the duration of the cook is to keep an eye on the smokestack and make adjustments as needed along the way.

Working the Fire

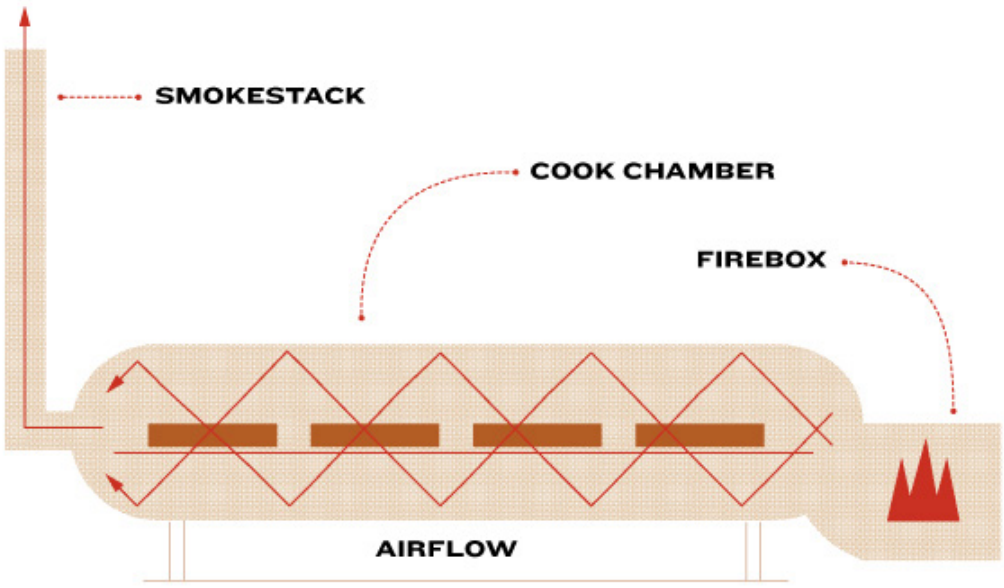
Once your food is on the smoker, your primary job is to keep the temperature steady and the smoke clean. Every time you pick up a new log to the add to the fire, try to anticipate its heat curve. How quickly will it catch? How much heat will it generate? And how fast will the heat dissipate? The heat curve of a thinner, drier piece of wood is much steeper than a thicker, denser piece. In other words, a thin piece of wood will catch quickly and burn fast. Ideally when you add a new piece of wood, you're timing things such that the new piece will approach the peak of its heat curve just as an older piece is starting to burn out. That will help keep your cooking temperatures level rather than oscillating between too hot and too cold.

The early stages of a cook are the most critical—that's when the meat is going to take on the most smoke and flavor. Try to use your heftier, denser logs in the first three hours after your meat goes in the smoker—they'll burn longer after combustion and produce the most flavorful smoke. Save thinner, drier pieces that will burn out more quickly for later, once you've wrapped the meat and you're trying to maintain temperatures rather than add flavor.

If at any point your fire starts burning too hot, resist the temptation to cool it off by shutting the firebox door. Suddenly choking off oxygen will kill the fire and you'll end up having to build it back up, creating more extreme temperature variations and dirty smoke. Instead, try removing a log with a shovel and letting the fire cool naturally for a minute. Aaron recommends leaving the firebox door fully open at all times unless the weather turns cold, wet, or windy. Even then, his preference is to move the cooker (if possible) so the firebox is shielded from the elements. If you have no choice but to shut the door, leave it open just enough to protect the fire but not so much that it's stifled. You can also rake some of your coal bed close to the firebox door so the colder, wetter air outside heats up as soon as it enters.

Conversely, you should never force air into the firebox. If the fire seems to be petering out, a few good puffs of breath are more than enough to get things going again. If one log in particular seems like it's having trouble catching, make sure there's room for air to flow between the wood and the coal bed beneath it. Use a shovel to dig a divot under the wood, if necessary. Once the log has fully combusted, you can safely bury it in the coals to make room for new wood.

AIRFLOW IN OFFSET SMOKERS



SMOKERS

Aaron barbecues exclusively on wood-burning offset smokers and as such they're the focus of this class. If you're using a different kind of smoker, especially one that runs on charcoal or gas, you will need to make adjustments to the cook times and temperatures he provides.

COOKING METHODS

All smokers fall into one of two broad categories: direct heat and indirect heat. The difference between the two is illustrated in Aaron's steak and broccolini cook, where he establishes different temperature zones on his grill by arranging lit coals under just one half of the grate. It allows him to alternate between direct and indirect heat simply by moving the steak from one side of the grill to the other.

The same basic principle applies to smokers. If you're using an offset smoker like Aaron's, then your cooking method is always going to be indirect. If, on the other hand, your smoker is designed with the heat source directly beneath the grate, you're cooking with direct heat. Neither is better or worse than the other; in fact, you'll find both are used at barbecue restaurants throughout Texas. The main thing with direct heat is making sure there's enough space between your fire and your food. Put them too close together and you'll end up grilling rather than barbecuing.

FUEL SOURCES

Smokers can also be categorized according to how they generate heat. Aaron firmly believes that the best, most authentic central Texas barbecue is cooked on smokers that generate both their smoke and their heat exclusively from burning wood. That's not to say you can't make great food on a smoker that runs on charcoal or gas. It's just fundamentally different from the style of barbecue Aaron cooks.

Stick Burners

As the name implies, these smokers (like the offsets Aaron uses) rely solely on wood as their fuel source. They require near-constant attention during the cook and also have a steep learning curve.

High quality offset smokers like Aaron's are often custom made with heavy-duty materials and quite expensive. His cook chambers, for instance, are recycled propane tanks. If you know how to weld or know someone who does, you can find instructions for building an offset smoker in Aaron's book, *Franklin Barbecue: A Meat Smoking Manifesto*. There are also prefabricated models available from manufacturers online.

Inexpensive offset smokers sold at hardware and department stores are notoriously flimsy, leaky, and bad at retaining heat, but they can work with a few meaningful modifications. Aaron cooked his first brisket on an offset smoker he bought for $100 at a sporting goods store. With or without the modifications mentioned below, a cheaper smoker can absolutely get the job done. You'll build experience with each cook and decide for yourself if and when you need to upgrade to a more expensive model.

Charcoal Smokers

This category includes bullet smokers (like the Weber Smokey Mountain), ceramic kamado ovens (like the Big Green Egg), and drum smokers (like the Pit Barrel Cooker). While not totally hands-off, charcoal smokers don't require nearly the level of attention as a stick burner. Once the coals are lit, you adjust the temperature with built-in dampers that control airflow. While most of the smoke comes from the charcoal, you can add wood chunks or chips for extra flavor, but because the wood smolders rather than combusts, its smoke isn't quite as clean and flavorful as the smoke from a stick burner can be.

Pellet Smokers

Like a kitchen oven, a pellet smoker is thermostatically controlled. Plug it in, set the temperature, and the smoker does the rest, automatically feeding pellets of compressed sawdust into a fire pot to combust as needed for smoke and heat. Pellet smokers are easy to use but the advanced tech also means they're breakable in a way other smokers aren't. And while pellet smokers have their proponents, Aaron personally believes a live, active fire can make the difference between barbecue that's great and barbecue that's merely good (or even bad).

Gas Smokers

Gas provides consistent cooking temperatures but doesn't produce smoke, so the addition of wood in the form of chips or chunks is mandatory for barbecue. For longer cooks, make sure you have multiple tanks of propane on hand, as a single tank might not suffice.

Electric Smokers

An electric smoker uses wood chips, water, and a heating element to produce smoke rather than an open flame, and the lack of combustion gives its smoke a much different flavor than a live fire.

Kettle Grills

The live-fire cooking apparatus that home cooks are most used to seeing (and owning) is the standard kettle grill. Kettle grills aren't really built for slow smoking, but they will absolutely work if you approach them thoughtfully. You'll need to set up the grill for indirect heat by restricting the charcoal to one side of the grill. (Aaron demonstrates this in Chapter 6: Grill: Steak and Broccolini.) Your smoke will come from wood chunks or chips that you add to the charcoal. Make sure you have a thermometer set up close to where the meat sits in order to get an accurate temperature reading.

MODIFICATIONS

Temperature Gauge
One of the easiest and most common modifications to make, this could be as simple as swapping out the factory part that came with your smoker for a dial that's bigger or more to your liking, or even installing a WiFi-enabled device that allows you to keep track of the temperature from inside your house.

You may also realize over time that the temperature gauge is situated too close to your fire or too far from where you normally place your meat. If so, drill a hole and install another gauge wherever you want it. Having multiple gauges at different ends of the cook chamber also comes in handy if you regularly cook multiple briskets or racks of ribs at the same time.

Water Pans
Adding warm water to a container inside the cook chamber adds moisture and humidity to the environment, which can help keep the meat from drying out. A disposable aluminum pan is all you need.

Drip Pans
Over the course of a long cook, your meat is going to drip grease and rendered fat into the bottom of your cook chamber. It's messy and can turn rancid if it isn't dealt with. It's also a fire hazard. Some smokers come equipped with a drain or drip pan already installed, but if not, you can add a large, shallow pan beneath the grate of your smoker. Even a disposable aluminum pan will do in a pinch.

Baffle Plates
An offset smoker cooks food via convection, pulling air from the firebox through the cook chamber and then out the smokestack. Air and smoke is hot when it leaves the firebox, and because heat rises, the air and smoke naturally wants to rise to the top of the cooking chamber. If, on the other hand, you install a steel baffle plate right where the air and smoke enter, you effectively guide the flow of the smoke, forcing it down before it eventually rises up, thus distributing the heat and smoke more evenly. You can permanently install a baffle plate or even just insert emporary piece of metal at the opening.

WOOD SELECTION

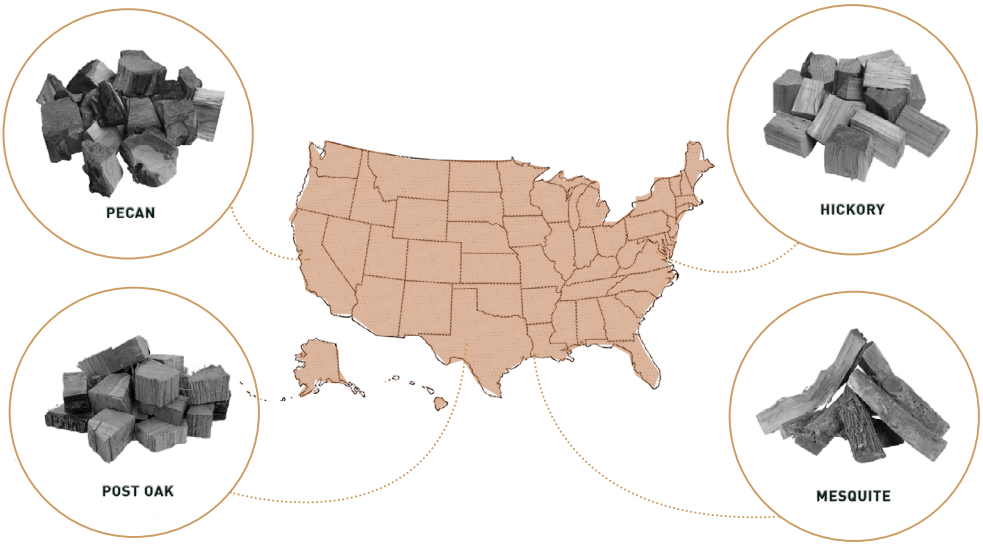
In the early days of barbecue, the trees that were native to a region had as much to do with the development of a regional style as the kinds of livestock the local farmers raised and the types of sauces, marinades, and rubs that were used on the meat. Over time it's gotten easier to source different woods from around the country in the form of chunks and chips, but if you're cooking with logs, you're still likely to end up working with what's growing around you.

SOURCING WOOD

If you use chunks or chips it's easy to pick up a bag of wood online or at a local barbecue or hardware store. Logs aren't quite that simple. Much of the packaged firewood sold in stores is kiln-dried and will burn up so fast, producing so little smoke it won't do you much good at all. It's better to look for wood that was cut down locally, allowed to dry naturally, and is available for sale in bulk. If you live near a rural area, you might find wood for sale just by driving around, but if you live in a city, you can find ads for firewood on Craigslist and in the classifieds.

Firewood is typically sold in a measured amount known as a cord: four-feet wide by four-feet high by eight-feet long, a total of 128 cubic feet. A face cord is equal to a cord in height and length but less than half a cord in width. The price of wood always fluctuates based on supply and demand, but asking sellers their price per cord gives you a reliable way to shop for the best deal. Aaron cautions against sellers who offer wood by the trailer or truckload, as they'll sometimes deliberately stack the wood in a way that makes it difficult to measure. He also says to watch out for sellers who try to pass off a face cord as a full cord.

MAP OF WOOD TYPE AND REGIONS



OTHER WOODS

Alder
Abundant in the Pacific Northwest, alder produces delicate, sweet smoke that pairs well with poultry and fish, especially salmon, which is often grilled on alder planks.

Apple, Cherry, Peach, and Pear
Similar to pecan, these fruitwoods burn faster than oak and hickory and produce smoke with an extremely subtle and well-rounded sweetness. For those reasons they aren't the best choice for brisket, but Aaron does recommend them for fish, poultry, and pork.

Always insist on inspecting the firewood before you buy. You'll never find a cord where every log is absolutely perfect but on the whole you want wood that still has some energy and life to it. Avoid wood that looks powdery, rotten, or waterlogged. If the wood was recently cut down it likely has more internal moisture than you'd want for a cook, but you can always store it for use at a later date. How long it takes to dry out will depend on climate. During a dry, hot summer the wood could be ready to go in a matter of weeks if it gets enough sunlight; during a cold, wet winter it may take months—or even a year!

The best way to tell if a log is ready for the smoker is to simply pick up different logs from your pile and compare how they feel. The heavier a piece of wood is, the more internal moisture it has. During the cook you'll want some heftier logs that will burn longer and produce more smoke, but you don't want logs with so much moisture that they have trouble combusting. If the bark on the wood is starting to fall off or there are noticeable cracks in the grain, that's a good sign that the wood is properly seasoned. You can also thump the wood with your thumb: seasoned wood will give you a deeper, more full-bodied sound than fresh wood, which will sound more clipped and dull.

TEXAS WOOD

The defining wood of central Texas barbecue is a local form of white oak called post oak. One of the many uses of white oak is the production of whisky barrels, and if you use white oak or post oak for barbecue, you'll notice the smoke gives the meat a slightly sweet, vanilla-tinged flavor similar to a Kentucky bourbon.

The three other woods most commonly used across the state are hickory, pecan, and mesquite.

Hickory is one of the more popular choices for longer cooks. Like oak, it burns clean but has a slightly stronger flavor that's comparable to bacon. Pecan has a mild, sweet flavor but in Aaron's experience doesn't burn as long as oak or hickory. He recommends it for shorter cooks like fish, ribs, and poultry. Mesquite is one of the most abundant woods in Texas. It burns hot and fast, produces lots of smoke, and has an intense, earthy flavor. Mesquite take a long time to cure but can be tamed. It's best used for quick cooks like steak, or burnt down as coals.

THE BASIC DO'S AND DON'TS OF WOOD SELECTION

DO

- Use wood that's aged naturally outdoors for six months to a year. This drying-out process is called curing or seasoning. A freshly cut piece of wood, known as green wood, has too much internal moisture, which will produce more smoke as the wood burns and slow down the combustion process.
- Have more wood on hand than you think you'll need for your cook, especially if you're using wood as your primary fuel source rather than coal or briquettes.
- Have a good mix of wood in terms of density, size, and quality. Drier, lighter pieces will burn much faster than denser, heavier ones, but they also won't produce as much of the clean, flavorful smoke you want to taste on the meat. Both will come in handy at different stages of the cook.
- Source your wood from trees that have died of natural causes like drought, disease, or insects. Don't kill healthy trees in the name of barbecue.

DON'T

- Use woods that may have been exposed to paint, stains, or other chemicals. Scraps of wood from a lumber yard are a bad idea.
- Use wood that's covered in mold or fungus.
- Use softwoods like spruce, pine, or fir. These woods are higher in resin and oils that produce thick, acrid smoke when lit. Cook with hardwoods only.
- Buy wood that's been cured or seasoned in an oven or kiln. The exposure to high heat makes the wood extra dry, which causes it to burn faster and lose flavor.

MEAT QUALITY AND SELECTION

The USDA assigns eight different quality grades to beef based primarily on the age of the animal at slaughter and the amount of marbling in the meat. More marbling means more fat distributed through the muscle, which is exactly what you want for barbecue. Fat helps with flavor and moisture, and absorbs smoke flavor well. Of the eight grades, the top three (in descending order) are **prime**, **choice**, and **select**.

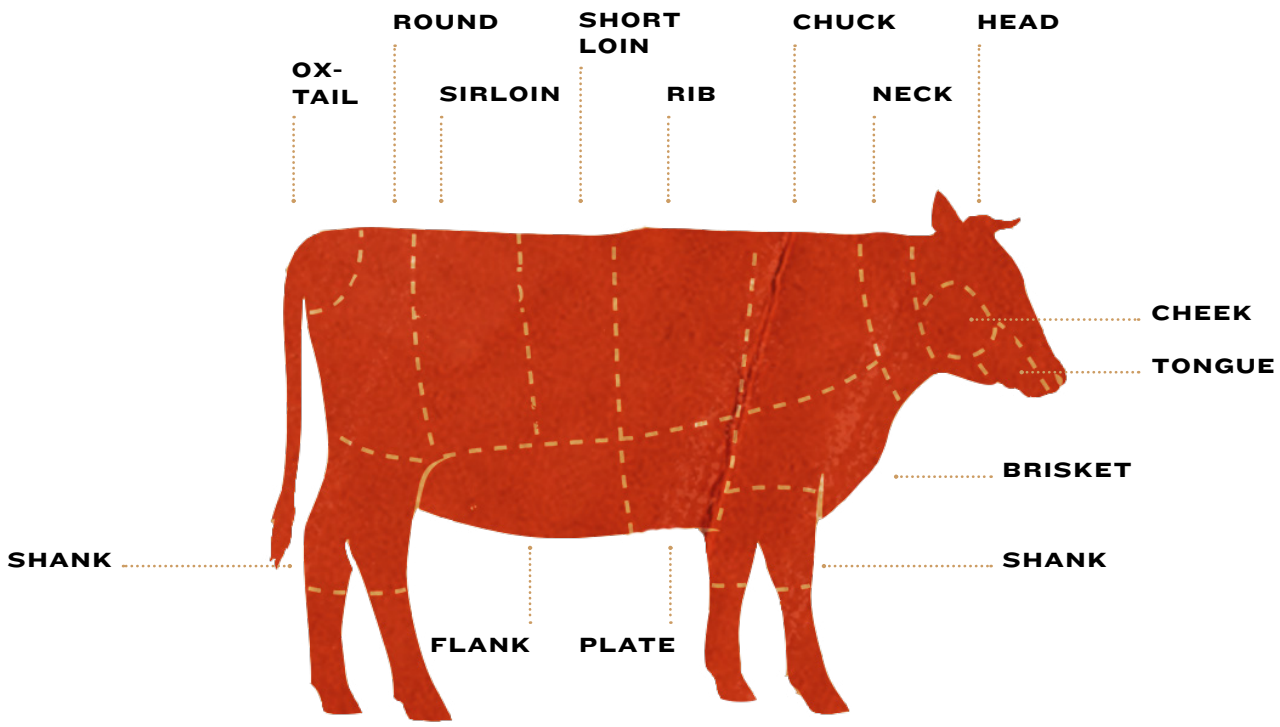
GRADES OF BEEF

PRIME, the most expensive grade available (according to the USDA), was once served almost exclusively in hotels and restaurants but has started turning up in grocery stores and even national chains like Costco According to USDA guidelines, prime beef must have at minimum a "slightly abundant" amount of marbling. The best stuff, sometimes referred to as high prime, features "moderately abundant" to "abundant" marbling and is usually found in commercial kitchens.

CHOICE is the most common grade in supermarkets and can vary widely in quality. Its marbling scores range from "moderate" to "modest" to "small." The majority of choice cuts fall into the bottom tier and have a small amount of marbling. Aaron refers to choice beef with modest to moderate marbling as "upper two thirds." You'll often see this beef labeled "upper choice," "top choice," or "high choice." The upper tier of choice cuts is comparable to the lower tier of prime, but usually cheaper in price.

SELECT cuts are the cheapest of the top three beef grades, but only contain a "slight" degree of marbling. If you're cooking a select brisket, be aware that it will likely dry out faster than a choice or prime cut due to the lower fat content. You might want to consider a shorter cook time at higher heat, or wrapping earlier in the cook to retain moisture.

BEEF CUTS



Wagyu

By now, you've likely heard the term Kobe or Wagyu tossed around. Wagyu translates literally to "Japanese cow," and refers to one of the more expensive products on the market. It is revered for its extreme level of marbling, which leads to meat that is exceptionally moist and tender, though Aaron finds its flavor less beefy. While the Wagyu beef sold in the U.S. does come from cows with Japanese heritage, many are interbred with breeds like Angus that are better suited to American agricultural conditions. (Kobe beef is a variety of Wagyu produced exclusively in one region of Japan. (Kobe-style or American-style Kobe are marketing terms for domestically produced beef that has been crossbred with Wagyu cattle.)

Wagyu is graded both on its yield (the ratio of meat produced relative to the total weight of the carcass) and its quality. Yield is rated A (72% or higher), B (69–72%), or C (below 69%). Quality is graded on a scale of 1 to 5 based on the degree of marbling, firmness and texture, the color and brightness of the meat, and the color and brightness of the fat. Thus, there are 15 total grades of Wagyu—A5 being the highest, C1 being the lowest.

Grain Fed Vs. Grass Fed

Cows are ruminants, meaning they are naturally designed to graze on grass. Many beef cows begin their lives eating grass, before proceeding to a diet of grain and/or corn. (The phrase "grain fed" describes how an animal's diet changed as it got closer to slaughter.) Grain-fed beef is typically fattier with a beefier flavor than grass-fed beef, which is why Aaron prefers grain fed for longer cooks like brisket and grass fed for quicker cooks like steak.

It's true that grain-fed cattle are more often associated with commercial farming and feedlots, but diet alone is not a true indication of how the cattle was raised. If you want to be sure you're buying humanely raised, all-natural beef, ask your butcher where and how the beef was sourced.

What About Pork?

Unlike beef, the USDA grades pork solely on size and whether the animal was male or female. There are no grades that indicate the degree of marbling or maturity, though that doesn't mean there is any less variation in the quality of pork you can buy. When selecting a cut, consider the color and fat content of the meat along with the ethical and environmental factors discussed in this chapter.

Ethical and Environmental Concerns

Most of the meat available in our local grocery stores comes from what are known as commodity breeds. It is produced on an industrial scale, which is why it tends to be cheaper than what you'll find in higher-end supermarkets or specialty butchers. It also means that it may have been raised in less than ideal conditions—both for the cows and the environment. An industrial operation aims to produce a high yield with as little cost as possible, which is why questionable practices like overcrowding, force feeding, and the use of antibiotics and growth hormones have become so widespread.

If ethical and environmental concerns factor into your decision making, the best choice is to be an informed buyer. Read up on the merits of various practices and buy from a reputable butcher or directly from a trusted producer. Many farms now sell directly to consumers online and can answer any questions you may have about their farming practices before you purchase. However, if you're limited to supermarket options, Aaron's advice is to look for the most natural version of a commodity product you can find. Look for meat that's labeled antibiotic- and hormone free. Avoid "enhanced" meats that are treated with salt water and other additives. Aaron's personal belief is the best meat comes from animals that have lived the happiest lives, so try to buy meat that's advertised as free range, pasture raised, or animal centered.

GRILL

STEAK AND BROCCOLINI

Cooking a steak requires much less time than a brisket or pork butt, yet still involves all the same concepts and practices that will come into play as you get more ambitious with your cooks. Cooking this meal is a good way to acquaint yourself with the basic principles of wood-fire cooking.

How Broccolini Is Like Brisket

One of the biggest challenges you'll face when smoking a large piece of meat like brisket is that every part of it is going to cook at different rates. To fully cook the thicker, fattier point muscle you'll need to run your smoker at increasingly higher temperatures over a long period of time, but you don't want to ruin the thinner, leaner flat muscle that could more easily dry out in the process.

Broccolini is obviously far less complex than a brisket but the same challenge applies. The crown is delicate and will burn quickly if set over a ripping hot fire for too long. On the other hand, the stalk is more dense and needs a little longer to cook to the proper doneness. You want both the crown and the stalk to have the same level of doneness and an even char on all sides when they come off the grill.

Meanwhile, a perfectly cooked steak should have a crisp sear on its exterior, while remaining tender and juicy inside. The sear is the result of a chemical process between amino acids and reducing sugars known as the Maillard reaction that occurs most quickly when the exterior of the meat reaches temperatures upward of 300°F. But the internal temperature of even a well-done steak is only 160°F, while a rare to medium steak falls in the range of 120°F to 140°F. The trick is getting the steak hot enough that it develops a crust on the outside without overcooking the interior.

In all three cases—brisket, broccolini, and steak—you're trying to create different interior and exterior textures by controlling the level of heat the food is exposed to, how direct, and for how long. You have to watch your fire closely, see how the food is responding, and either ramp up or pull back on the intensity accordingly.

Temperature Zones

When you're smoking meat over a period of hours, changes in temperature happen slowly and incrementally. When you're grilling steak or broccolini over charcoal, you're dealing with direct,

intense heat and more rapid cooking times. If you spread white-hot coals evenly on the bottom of a grill and then throw a piece of broccolini on the grate, the crown and the stalk will be exposed to the same high temperatures simultaneously. By the time the stalk is tender, the crown will be burnt to a crisp.

A better approach is to create different temperature zones by keeping your coals confined to one area of the grill. This is essentially what Aaron does when he cooks broccolini on a grate over the coals in his chimney starter. The heat is concentrated to a small area, so he can keep the stems over the fire while leaving the more delicate crowns unscathed. Once the stems are done, he flips the broccolini around and quickly chars the crowns.

Different temperature zones are also the secret to perfectly grilled steak. In a charcoal grill, Aaron creates a "cool zone" by placing a log on one side of the bottom of the grill, and dumping the coals next to the log. This way, if you've already achieved a perfect sear directly over the coals but the meat still feels a little undercooked and spongy, you can move the steak off the coals into the cooler zone above the log and finish it via indirect heat without risk of overcooking the exterior. Or vice versa: you could cook the steak to the desired internal temperature entirely over the cool zone, then move it over the coals at the very end to form the crust (a technique known as reverse searing).

A Strategy for Steak

SEASONING

The purist philosophy of seasoning a steak is to keep things simple and allow the natural flavor of beef to shine. A little oil and salt are all you need. Aaron recommends a neutral oil like grapeseed, which has a high smoke point that can stand up to the hottest points of the fire and a mild flavor that won't impact the flavor of the beef. Drizzle a little oil on the steak, then season the steak generously with salt well in advance of cooking. (Kosher salt is Aaron's preferred choice.) Salt draws the steak's internal moisture to the surface through osmosis. As the moisture rises, it dissolves the salt and creates a brine that breaks down and tenderizes the steak's muscle tissue.

FLIPPING

There's a school of thought that says once a steak goes on a grill, it should sear on that side for several minutes before flipping. A perfect steak, however, is one that's evenly cooked throughout, and Aaron makes the point that if only one side of the steak is coming into contact with the heat source for an extended period, then that side is cooking much more rapidly than the other. Plus, fires change as they burn, and no two steaks are shaped exactly the same. He recommends regular flipping and moving the steaks around the grill according to what you think it needs. Again: fire is active, and good grilling means making adjustments depending on how the steak is responding.

WHEN IS STEAK DONE?

If you have a lot of experience, you might feel comfortable gauging the internal temperature of a steak by pressing the meat with your fingers or squeezing it with a pair of tongs. But steaks are cut from all different parts of a carcass, and each one of those parts is going to respond differently to the touch. As for the myth that the degrees of doneness correspond to how the fleshy base of your thumb feels when it touches your fingers (index = rare, middle = medium, ring = well), Aaron makes the obvious point that this would only make sense if every human hand were squishy in the exact same way. Don't take it seriously.

The only way to know for sure is by checking the temperature with an instant read thermometer. (But even this is not perfectly accurate, as every piece of meat reacts to heat differently.)

120°F = **Rare**
130°F = **Medium Rare**
140°F = **Medium**
150°F = **Medium Well**
160°F = **Well Done**

RESTING AND SLICING

The muscles in a steak constrict as they're exposed to heat, so after the steak comes off the grill, give it a few minutes to rest and reabsorb some of the juices that have been squeezed during the cook. For slicing, always cut against the grain of the steak as it will make each bite easier to chew. Season once more with salt—Aaron flavors with flaky sea salt, like Maldon—before serving.

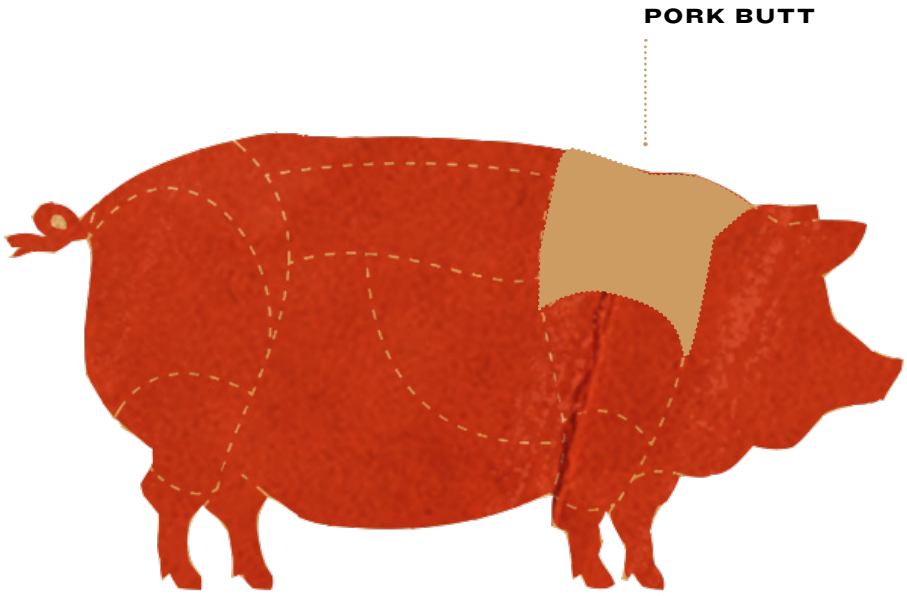
Steak and Broccolini

SMOKE

PORK BUTT

Pork butt, also known as Boston butt, is a cut from the upper portion of a pig's front shoulder. It's a relatively inexpensive and forgiving hunk of meat that you'll most often see served as pulled pork in barbecue restaurants. The muscle has a lot of connective tissue that needs to be broken down through slow cooking, but it's also extremely fatty, so it's less prone to drying out, even at higher temperatures. The relatively forgiving nature of the cut and consistent cooking temperature make this a great cook for beginners or anyone who wants to practice their fire-maintenance skills.

Pork butts are sold both bone-in and boneless, but Aaron recommends bone-in. Boneless butts have a less uniform shape, which can result in uneven cooking. Leave the bone in, and once the meat is done, it should slide out easily.



PREP

TRIMMING

If your pork butt was sold with the skin on, remove it or ask your butcher to do so. The skin will block the smoke and rub from penetrating the meat, and by the end of the cook, it will be too tough to eat.

Like brisket, pork butt often has a lot of fat on its surface that won't render and isn't great for eating. However, because you'll be shredding the pork rather than slicing it, it isn't necessary to trim the excess fat in advance. You can simply remove those larger pockets of fat with your fingers once the cook is done.

SLATHER AND RUB

Pork butt is almost impossible to over season. However salty or peppery your bark is, it's going to end up torn apart and mixed with the less seasoned interior meat. For the rub, use equal parts kosher salt and 16-mesh "café grind" black pepper mixed with a small amount of paprika for color. You'll need about ½ cup of seasoning for an 8- to 10-pound pork butt. Mustard or hot sauce make for a good slather.

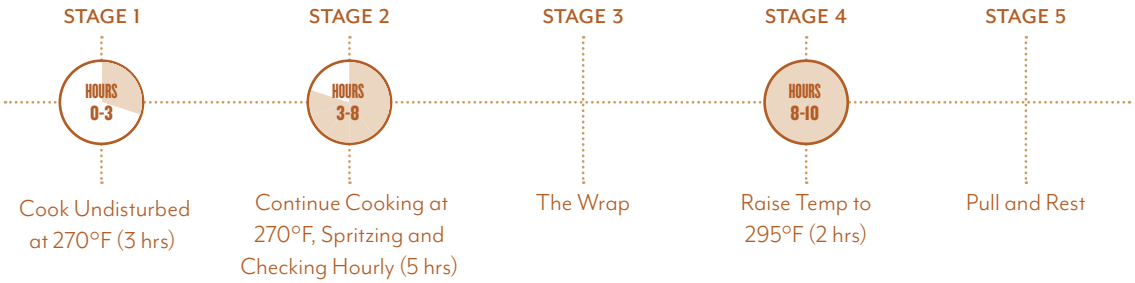
The fattier side of your pork butt is its "presentation side," so apply the slather and rub to this side last. As always, use one hand to slather and turn the meat and the other to sprinkle the rub. Starting with the non-presentation side, slather the meat with mustard or hot sauce, then shake or sprinkle the rub from side to side in an even layer until the surface is covered. Next, slather the sides of the meat and season with the rub. Cup one hand along the side of the pork and use it to catch the rub and press it evenly onto the meat. Flip the butt over, so the fat side faces up. Slather and rub. Allow the pork butt to rest for 30 to 40 minutes. This will give the rub some time to penetrate the meat and begin drawing out the internal moisture.

THE COOK

GAME PLAN

(All times are approximate)

Total Cook Time: 10 hours for an 8–10 pound bone-in pork butt



STAGE 1

Once your smoker has reached a consistent temperature of 270°F and you're producing clean smoke, place the pork butt inside the cooking chamber with the fat cap facing up. The high fat content of pork butt means you don't have to worry about starting the heat lower as you would with brisket. Spend the next three hours tending to the fire, maintaining a constant temperature and the cleanest possible smoke, while the pork butt cooks undisturbed.

STAGE 2

After three hours, open the smoker and give the pork butt a thorough spritzing of water, beer, or apple cider vinegar to cool off the exterior. Continue to cook at 270°F for approximately another five hours, checking and spritzing the pork butt once per hour. As the meat continues to cook and the fat renders, the pork butt will gradually shrink, eventually causing the bark that's formed on top of the fat cap to split. Once that happens, you're ready to wrap.

STAGE 3

Your pork butt should be ready to wrap approximately eight hours into the cook. For the wrap, you'll need two sheets of wide aluminum foil that are four times as long as the widest side of your pork butt. Place one sheet on a clean workstation, shiny side facing up, with the longer edge of the foil running perpendicular to you. Place the other sheet of foil on your workstation, so that it overlaps with the first piece by about half its width. When you place the ribs back inside the smoker you'll want the duller side facing out so it absorbs rather than reflects the heat.

Lay the pork butt on the foil, fat side up, about eight inches from the bottom edge of the foil. The longer side of the pork belly should run parallel to the bottom edge of the foil sheets. Give the pork one last spritz, then lightly spritz the surface of your foil.

The Wrap, Step By Step

1. Tightly fold the bottom of the foil over the top of the pork butt.

2. Tightly fold both sides of the foil at an obtuse angle to you so that the meat is wrapped tightly but the sides can still be folded in once more.

3. Roll the pork butt over, then fold both sides of the foil inward again.

4. Roll the pork butt over one more time, then tuck in any excess foil.

5. Feel around the wrap, making sure the foil conforms tightly to the meat and there are no air pockets trapped inside.

STAGE 4

Once the pork butt is wrapped, return it to the smoker and cook for another hour at 270°F, then raise the temperature to 295°F and cook for one final hour.

STAGE 5

After 10 hours in the smoker your pork butt should register an internal temperature of just over 200°F. You can poke through the wrap with a meat thermometer—try not to make more than a couple holes—to get a temperature reading and to feel the meat for tenderness. If you want to judge the doneness entirely by feel, pick the pork butt up and move it around in your hands. It should be squishy and soft. Remember that the meat will continue to cook for a while even after you've taken it off the smoker, so if there are any pockets that don't feel exactly right just yet, they will soon enough. Allow the wrapped pork butt to rest at room temperature for an hour before serving.

PRESENTATION

Carefully unwrap the pork, being careful not to let the trapped juices spill out of the foil. Pour the juices over the pork, then shred with your fingers or tongs. Discard the bone, which should slide out easily, or save for another use. If there are big unrendered pockets of fat, you can remove them with your fingers or chop them up and mix them into the meat. Serve.

Pork Butt

SMOKE
PORK RIBS

SPARE RIBS

Cooking spare ribs falls between pork butt and brisket in terms of difficulty. They spend the least amount of time in the smoker and will cook at a consistent temperature throughout. However, because they're a comparatively thin cut of meat, there isn't as much margin for error. Spare ribs also need a certain amount of trimming during prep—more than pork butt, but not as much as brisket. This is also the only cook in this class that involves a sauce, which we'll apply to the ribs just before wrapping so that it emulsifies with the fat as it renders.

There are two basic cuts of pork ribs: Baby back or loin ribs are taken from the upper portion of the rib cage that connects to the spine. Spare ribs come from the lower portion around the belly and sternum. Baby backs tend to have shorter bones and leaner meat, while spares are typically fattier. If you've ever had St. Louis-or Kansas City-style ribs, those are spare ribs that are trimmed in a specific way. Riblets and rib tips also come from spare ribs.

When shopping for spare ribs, look for a rack with a good amount of white fat and red-pink meat. Avoid ribs that look dry or gray. If you see any exposed bones on the surface of the meat, pass on those as well. The exposed bones are known as shiners and they're the result of bad butchering.

As discussed in Chapter 5: Meat Quality and Selection, Aaron's recommendation is to buy the most natural product you can find. Avoid "enhanced" pork that has been injected with salt water and other additives. Not only does salt water give you less control over flavor, it makes the ribs heavier and thus more expensive. Also note that an excessive amount of blood in the packaging is a sign that the ribs were previously frozen.

PREP

TRIMMING

First things first, acquaint yourself with the rack of ribs. Lay the rack parallel to the bottom edge of your cutting board and identify the "top" and "bottom" edges. The top of the ribs should be more or less a straight line, whereas the bottom edge will have more of a curve, this is where the ribs connect to the sternum and belly.

Now, the presentation side of the ribs (the "outside") will be the side that looks cleaner and meatier. The "inside" of the ribs is where you'll find the skirt, the silverskin, and more pockets of fat.

Trimming a rack of ribs involves cutting through tough cartilage, so Aaron uses a sturdy 10-inch chef's knife rather than the lighter boning knife he uses when trimming brisket.

STERNUM

The first thing you'll want to remove from the rack of ribs is the sternum (also known as the breastbone) and the thick section of cartilage behind it. Not only is it tough to eat, it's going to get in the way later when you're feeling around the ribs to check for tenderness.

Cut the sternum off at an angle, then clean the bottom edge with a thin slice along the bottom length of the ribs, removing any stray bits of flesh and cartilage and leaving a smooth, slightly curved edge. Finish this part of the trim by rounding off the far end of the rack opposite the sternum, so that it has a clean, aerodynamic shape. This is essentially a more conservative version of the trim used for St. Louis-style ribs, which end up looking more rectangular.

SILVERSKIN

The silverskin is a thin white membrane located on the "inside" of a rack of ribs. Lots of people remove it, but Aaron personally likes to leave it on, as it doesn't actually get in the way of the ribs taking on flavor. Whether you leave it on or not is totally up to you.

SKIRT

Also on the inside of the ribs is a diagonal flap of meat known as the skirt. Sometimes butchers remove it in advance, but if it's still attached, go ahead and trim it off. The skirt is actually a good piece of meat, so do try to find a use for it. For instance, you could easily toss it into a batch of sausage or a pot of beans.

ANYTHING WEIRD

Feel all around the rack of ribs for any stray pieces of bone or cartilage that might have been chipped off during butchering, and remove them with your fingers. You might also find random pieces of connective tissue still attached to the ribs that you can cut off as well. If it seems like the rack is excessively fatty, you can trim some of that, too, but only do so if you're confident it's for the greater good.

SLATHER AND RUB

A single rack of ribs will need about ¼ cup of seasoning. Since ribs are a thinner cut of meat than pork butt and brisket, we go with a rub that's heavier on pepper than salt. A 2:1 ratio with a small amount of paprika for color is Aaron's recommendation. Go light with the slather on the meatier side of the ribs—the texture should be tacky rather than wet—and a little heavier with both the slather and the rub on the fattier portions, as the extra stickiness will help the smoke adhere and give the ribs a more uniform flavor.

The "outside" of the ribs is your presentation side, so apply the slather and rub to the "inside" first. As always, use one hand to move and slather the meat, and the other to apply the rub. Slather with mustard or hot sauce, then shake or sprinkle on the rub. Moving from side to side, parallel to the rib bones, distribute the rub in an even layer along the length of the rack, then flip it over to the presentation side and repeat. Allow the ribs to rest at room temperature while you build your fire and get the smoker up to temp.

AARON'S RIB SAUCE

2 tbsp fat (beef tallow, vegetable oil, lard, or bacon fat)
⅓ large yellow or white onion, roughly chopped
4 cloves garlic, roughly chopped
1 cup light brown sugar
1 cup apple cider vinegar
2 cups organic or all-natural ketchup (see note)
1 tsp smoked paprika
1 tsp mustard powder
1 tsp fine sea salt
1 tsp black pepper
4 dashes Worcestershire sauce

1. Heat a saucepan over medium heat, then add the fat. Once the fat has coated the pan and begins to shimmer, add the onion and cook until soft and translucent, about 6–8 minutes. Add the garlic and continue to cook over medium heat until the onion has started to brown and the garlic has started turning crisp, about 3 minutes more.
2. Add the brown sugar and cook, stirring frequently until the sugar melts and starts to form a glaze, about 2–3 minutes.
3. Stir in the apple cider vinegar, ketchup, paprika, mustard, salt, and pepper. Bring to a simmer and cook for 3–5 minutes, or until the sauce has thickened slightly, then add the Worcestershire sauce and simmer for 1 more minute.
4. Transfer the sauce to a blender and blend at high speed until the sauce is smooth and takes on an orange hue, approximately 1 minute. Be careful, as hot liquids are liable to splatter in a blender. Pulse once or twice before proceeding to a full blend. Transfer to a heat-resistant container and allow to cool to room temperature. Store in a refrigerator for up to 1 month.

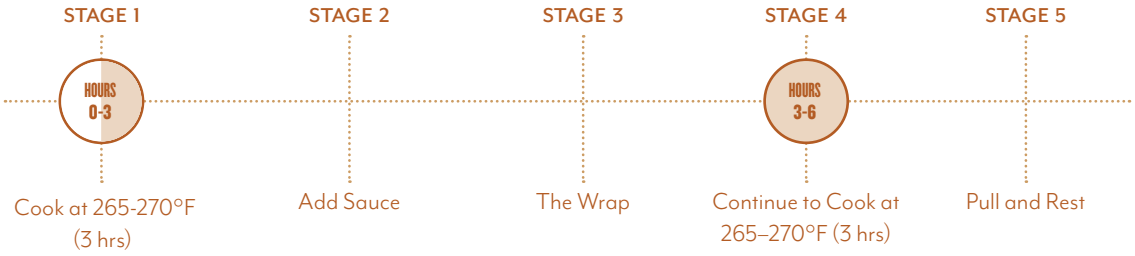
NOTE: Aaron prefers to use organic or all-natural ketchup that isn't made with high-fructose corn syrup, as the lower sugar content makes the sauce less likely to burn in the smoker.

THE COOK

GAME PLAN

(All times are approximate)

Total Cooking Time: 6 hours for a 3.5–4.5-pound rack of spare ribs



Some pitmasters will do what's called a "3-2-1" with their spare-rib cooks: 3 hours on, 2 hours wrapped, and 1 hour unwrapped. Aaron follows more of a "3-3" game plan, leaving the ribs wrapped for the whole second half of cooking.

STAGE 1

Once your smoker has reached a consistent temperature of 265 to 270°F and you're producing clean smoke, place the ribs in the cooking chamber with the thickest part closest to the fire. Check the meat at the end of the first and second hours, spritzing the edges with water, beer, or apple cider vinegar as needed to cool them off and keep them moist.

If at any point during the first three hours of your cook, it looks like the fat in your ribs is starting to render, reduce your cooking temperature. The strategy is to have the fat render only after the ribs are wrapped, so it can emulsify with your sauce.

STAGE 2

After the second hour of cooking, combine equal parts warm barbecue sauce and apple cider vinegar in a squeeze bottle and shake thoroughly. Mixing the two will make the sauce thinner and reduce the overall amount of sugar (which is liable to burn in the smoker).

Two and a half hours into the cook, spritz the rack of ribs thoroughly so the surface is wet to the touch. Squeeze the diluted barbecue sauce on top of the ribs in an even layer parallel to the bones, in the same way you distributed the rub. With your hand, work the sauce around the sides and surface of the ribs until the entire presentation side is coated. Give it one more light spritz, then close the lid and allow the sauce to set for approximately 10 minutes. Flip the ribs over and repeat the saucing process on the other side.

The Wrap, Step By Step

1. Fold one end of the foil over the ribs, then the other. Both ends should overlap in the center.

2. Use your fingers to tuck the foil tightly around the bottom edge of the rack until the foil conforms to its shape.

3. Locate the diagonal edge of the ribs where the sternum used to be, and fold the foil over the top of the ribs. Smooth out the foil and tuck it in tight. Repeat with the opposite corner.

4. Use your fingers to tuck the foil tightly around the top of the ribs just as you did along the bottom, making sure the foil conforms to its shape.

5. Fold the top edge of the foil over the ribs. Tightly fold in both sides of the foil at an obtuse angle to you so that the meat is wrapped tightly but the sides can still be folded in once more.

STAGE 3

After the sauce has had a chance to set on the non-presentation side of your ribs—about 10 minutes more—remove the rack from the smoker. Be sure to use your hands for this rather than a pair of tongs, as the jagged metal could cut into the ribs as you move them. A trick Aaron recommends is spritzing your hands to cool the skin before you touch the ribs, though you could also pick up the ribs with a towel.

This is the last time you're going to see the ribs before they're finished, so give the rack a thorough once-over before you wrap. You might notice little chunks of bone have started to emerge as the meat has shrunk—pull those out if you can so they don't puncture the foil when you wrap. Also note if the meat feels too dry or the sauce is starting to burn. If so, consider lowering the heat in your smoker for the final stages.

Cut a sheet of wide aluminum foil that's twice as long as the length of your ribs. Place the foil on your workstation with the longer edge running parallel to the bottom of your workstation and the shinier side facing up. When you place the ribs back inside the smoker you'll want the duller side facing out so it absorbs rather than reflects the heat.

Spritz the foil and spread a little more barbecue sauce on top, then lay the ribs presentation side down on top of the sauce, about 3 inches from the bottom of the foil. Give the non-presentation side of the ribs one last spritz.

STAGE 4

Return the wrapped ribs to the smoker with the seam of the foil facing up and cook for three more hours at 265–270°F.

STAGE 5

After the final three hours on the smoker, remove the ribs and set them on your workstation with the seam of the foil facing up. Feel around the sternum for the third rib bone. If the meat around the bone feels soft and pliable, that's a good indication that your ribs are done. Allow the ribs to rest in the foil for about 30 to 40 minutes.

PRESENTATION

Unwrap the foil, being careful not to spill any juices. With the bottom of the ribs and sternum facing away from you, grab the far end of the foil and lift it up, flipping the ribs toward you. The ribs should land presentation side up on your cutting board with the juices pouring on top. With a chef's knife, slice the ribs in between each bone and serve.

Ribs

SMOKE BRISKET

The Mother of All Texas BBQ Cuts

Brisket is one of the eight main (or primal) cuts of beef. It is comprised of two pectoral muscles that start under the chuck and extend towards the place, until the fifth rib. Like the chuck and shank, brisket is composed of muscles that a steer uses frequently. Over the course of a 12-hour cook, the fat will render and connective tissue will break down, making brisket an optimal choice for extended smoking.

A full brisket comprises two overlapping muscles separated by a layer of **seam fat**. The leaner, more rectangular muscle is the *pectoralis profundus*—more commonly known as the **flat**—while the fattier, more bulbous muscle is the *pectoralis superficialis*, aka the **point**. The flat is often sold by itself in butcher shops, but for central Texas–style barbecue, you'll want a **packer cut** that includes both the point and flat.

When choosing a brisket, look for cuts that have a good amount of fat marbling. Remember: prime grades will have the most, followed by choice and select. Give the brisket a once-over and then see how it feels in your hands. It should be firm but not completely stiff. A brisket that's too rigid may not have a lot of marbling. A thick, hard fat cap is also an indication that the cow might have been raised on hormones, antibiotics, and industrial feeding methods to get it to slaughtering weight more quickly.

If the brisket is enclosed in Cryovac, take note of how much blood there is in the packaging—if there's a lot, that's a good sign that the brisket was previously frozen. Freezing is detrimental, because ice crystals can tear apart the meat fibers. The torn fibers may also make a previously frozen brisket feel mushy and saggy when you hold it in your hands.

Finally, while the brisket will always be thicker at the point than the flat, the closer the two muscles are in size, the easier it will be to cook them at approximately the same rate.

PREP

TRIMMING FOR THE GREATER GOOD

Since every animal is different, every brisket is going to have different needs when it comes to trimming.

At the end of the day, you want each slice of brisket to have the perfect balance of meat, fat, bark, and smoke. Every trim you make is always in service of that goal. First and foremost, that means removing excessive fat. While marbled fat is crucial to a good piece of beef, a brisket will usually have a thick cap of subcutaneous fat that is more than you want to eat. However, trimming too much of that fat can sometimes threaten the structural integrity of the brisket. It's always better to leave a little extra fat if it means preventing the brisket from falling apart in the smoker. Always ask yourself what serves the greater good.

The second reason we trim is to enhance the shape of the brisket. You want to maximize airflow around the meat and remove any protruding parts that are liable to dry out during the cook. Like an airplane or a sports car, your brisket should have smooth, aerodynamic curves: no boxy lines, no 90-degree angles.

STANDARD TRIMS

While you'll ultimately call upon your own judgment and experience in deciding what to trim from the brisket, there are a few standard trims Aaron makes with each brisket. He prefers to use a stiff, curved, eight-inch boning knife that allows him to slice into the fat and meat more easily than a knife with a straight blade.

BRISKET SIDES

If you look at the long edges of your brisket, you'll notice that one side is rougher in texture and likely has some discoloration. This is the side that was split from the carcass and treated during processing. It's already been cooked a tiny bit, which means it won't take on any smoke or flavor during the cook. Remove about half an inch from this edge with two or three long, smooth strokes of a boning knife. Do the same on the other side as well, to better expose the flat and even out the shape.

Next, depending on how thin the flat of your brisket is, you may want to trim off a couple inches from the end to reach a point where the meat is thick enough to survive a long cook without drying out.

FAT

Lay your brisket fat-cap side up and look for dimples on the surface of the fat near the center of the brisket — that's where the fat cap likely ends. With your boning knife, cut into the fat at a curved angle and then move the blade along the length of the flat, peeling back the top layer of fat with your other hand as you go. You're trying to expose the soft white fat beneath the waxy exterior. Gently shave the upper layers away with your knife until all that's left is a layer of pillowy fat approximately a quarter-inch thick.

Next, trim away some of the hardened fat from the side of the point. You'll notice a thick, unrenderable pocket of seam fat directly beneath the point. Leave that for now—removing it before the cook could make the point collapse. You can trim it later when you're slicing the cooked brisket.

Turn the brisket over so the fat cap is facing down. You'll see a big chunk of exposed seam fat right where the flat and the point connect. Make a few entry cuts into the fat, then peel and slice it off, in the way you did the fat cap. Finish by removing any other stray bits of fatty membrane.

ANYTHING WEIRD

A packer cut may or may not include the **deckle**, a thick layer of hard fat that connects the flat to the rib cage and will contribute nothing to the quality of your brisket. If it's there, get rid of it. You should also remove bits of **silverskin**—shiny bits of connective tissue, like the membrane on the underside of a rack of ribs—and any strange, unidentifiable bits of muscle from other parts of the carcass that were left attached to the brisket.

A NOTE ON TEMPERATURE

Brisket should spend some time at room temperature before it goes on the smoker, but for trimming you want it good and cold. Fat becomes sticky and more difficult to work with as it warms, so keep the brisket refrigerated until you're ready to trim.

SLATHER AND RUB

With brisket it's best to keep the seasoning simple and clean. Every bite should taste of smoke and the natural flavor of the beef.

For the rub, use equal parts kosher salt and 16-mesh "café grind" black pepper. In general you want to taste both in equal measure, but you can go a little heavier on salt with the fattier point and heavier on pepper with the leaner flat if you prefer. You'll need about ½ cup of seasoning for a 12-pound brisket. For the slather, use either mustard or hot sauce; after 12 hours in a smoker, you won't really taste it anyway.

The fattier side of the brisket is the presentation side, so apply the rub to it last. As always, use one hand to move the brisket and apply the slather, and the other to sprinkle on the rub. Starting with the fat side down, slather the meat with mustard, hot sauce, or a bit of water, getting the surface just wet enough for the rub to stick. (No need to over-slather—after 12 hours in a smoker, you won't really taste the slather anyway.) Next, shake the rub across the brisket from side to side in an even layer until the entire side is covered. Keep an eye out for any gaps or imperfections in the surface of the meat as you go, and avoid filling deep pockets with salt and pepper. Gently pat the rub into the meat once you've finished.

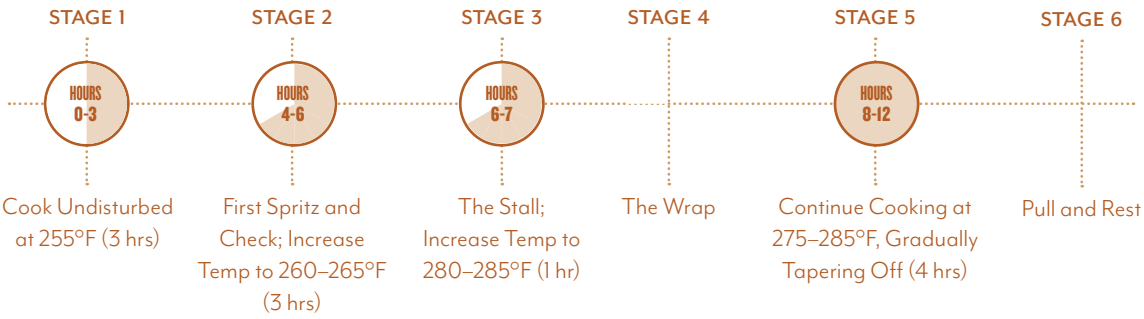
With the meatier side still facing up, cup your free hand along one edge of the brisket. Pour the rub directly into your hand as you move along the length of the brisket, evenly pressing the rub into the side as you go. Repeat on the other side, then flip the brisket over so it's s fat side up. Apply the slather to the fat side, then sprinkle the rub on top, patting it in at the end. Allow the brisket to rest at room temperature for 30 to 40 minutes. The meat will begin to absorb the rub and the salt will start drawing out the internal moisture.

THE COOK

GAME PLAN

(All times are approximate)

Total Cook Time: 12 hours for a 12-pound brisket



STAGE 1

While your brisket sits at room temperature, bring the smoker's temperature to a consistent 255°F. If it runs a little lower at first, no big deal. Even though the brisket has been sitting out, the internal temperature will still be quite cold. You don't want to shock it with sudden exposure to high heat.

Place the brisket in your smoker with the point closest to the fire source and shut the lid. Leave undisturbed for the first three hours of the cook, maintaining a constant temperature of 255°F and clean, light smoke with a bluish hue. It's in these early stages that the brisket's flavor base is established, so it's important to focus on your fire and the quality of smoke coming out of the smokestack.

STAGE 2

After three hours, open your smoker and check in on the brisket. By this point it should have a mahogany hue and a consistent bark.

If the brisket looks like it's burning, if the bark is splotchy, if it's turning dry and crisp in places, or if the fat is already starting to render, chances are you need to cut back on the heat. Discoloration without signs of dryness or rendered fat could also be the result of dirty smoke. Pay close attention to the quality of wood you're burning and the appearance of your smoke over the next few hours. If your cook has gotten off track a bit in the early stages there's still time to course correct.

Before closing your smoker, spritz the dryer, vulnerable edges of the brisket to cool them off.

Unless your fire has already been running too hot, raise the temperature to between 260°F and 265°F and continue to cook for another three hours, checking the brisket and spritzing once per hour.

STAGE 3

After approximately six hours, your brisket will hit a stage known as the stall. It's a product of **evaporative cooling**: once the internal temperature of the brisket hits around 165°F, the muscles will start to tighten up, forcing moisture to the surface of the meat, and thus, cooling down the brisket. Beef is technically considered well done by the time it hits 165°F, but if you attempted to eat the brisket at this stage, the meat would be incredibly tough. The key to getting it tender is raising the internal temperature above 180°F, at which point tough collagen in the meat will start to break down into gelatin.

To push the brisket through the stall, begin ramping up your cooking temperature to between 280°F and 285°F, right before the stall. Don't worry about burning the brisket — the moisture that's rising to the surface will counteract the higher heat. Cook for approximately one hour at this temperature, then lift the brisket and check for stiffness. If it bends at the edges, that's a good sign you're through the stall.

STAGE 4

Once you're through the stall, it's time to decide when the brisket is ready to wrap. The fattier point has more margin for error if it overcooks, so the flat should be your barometer. Lift the edge of the flat from the underside with your fingers; when it's firm but a little floppy, it's ready to go. Another telltale sign is the bark—if it's starting to crack in places, that means the fat is rendering.

You can wrap the brisket in foil if you like, but butcher paper is more breathable and traps less steam, keeping the brisket moist without making the bark soggy. If you prefer a super crunchy bark you can also leave the brisket unwrapped, though you'll need to be careful it doesn't dry out.

For the wrap, you'll need two wide sheets of foil or butcher paper that are four times longer than your brisket is wide. Place one sheet of paper on your workstation, with the long edge running perpendicular to you. Place the second sheet on top so it overlaps by about half its width. Lay the brisket lengthwise across the paper, presentation side up, about one foot from the bottom edge. Give the brisket one last spritz anywhere that a needs little moisture, then lightly spritz the surface of your wrap for good measure.

STAGE 5

Once you've wrapped the brisket, return it to the smoker with the point closest to the fire. At this point the brisket won't take on any more flavor from the smoke, so you should concentrate on temperature rather than maintaining a clean fire. If you have junkier pieces of wood you've held off on using, you can toss them in now.

Cook undisturbed for approximately three hours at 275 to 285°F, then gradually allow the temperature to taper off for another hour as your cook gets closer to the end. Bear in mind that residual heat will continue to cook the brisket even after you take it off the smoker.

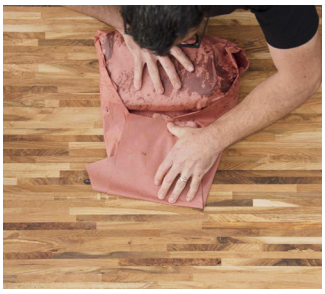
The Wrap, Step By Step

1. Fold the bottom edge of your paper over the top of the brisket and pull it as tight as you can. Every fold you make should conform with the shape of the brisket.

2. Tightly fold in one side of the paper over the flat, so that it conforms to the shape of the brisket and runs at an obtuse angle away from you. Smooth out the paper..

3. Tuck part of the paper on the opposite side under the point to secure it, then fold in the paper over the top, so that it conforms to the brisket and runs at an obtuse angle away from you. Smooth out the paper.

4. Holding the wrap tightly around the brisket on all sides, roll the brisket over and pull tightly to secure the paper. Fold in the sides again.



5. Fold the top end of the paper over to double its thickness.

6. Roll the brisket over one more time. The presentation side should now be facing upward with a double layer of wrap beneath it and the wrap tightly surrounding it on all sides.

STAGE 6

Using a towel to protect your hands, pick up the brisket and carefully move your fingers up and down the length of it, checking for tenderness. It's important to keep checking on the brisket at regular intervals at this point, roughly every 15 minutes or so. As the collagen continues to break down and the fat continues to render, the brisket will become more soft and pliable, but if you leave it on the smoker for too long it will overcook. Better to pull it too soon than leave it on too long. If the brisket feels loose and somewhat flexible in your hands, even a bit jiggly, it's done.

Once you've pulled the brisket, allow it to rest in its wrapping until it cools to an internal temperature of 140 to 150°F. That will take a little time. The outermost layers of the brisket receive heat immediately from the convection of air and smoke inside the cooker, but the innermost layers receive heat via conduction—the slow, gradual absorption of heat from the outer layers. So even though the brisket is technically no longer receiving heat, the interior of the brisket will continue to cook. This is known as **carryover** cooking. How long it takes will depend a lot on the temperature of your environment and how hot your cooker was. (Think: Momentum). It'll happen faster on a cool, breezy day than a hot, humid one. Factor in at least 30 minutes and up to an hour or two.

PRESENTATION

SLICING TECHNIQUE

Once you start slicing the brisket and the meat is exposed to the air it will immediately start to oxidize. You only have a limited amount of time with it in its perfect state, so hold off on slicing until you're ready to serve.

To slice the brisket you'll need a knife with a long blade that you can push and pull through the meat in smooth, even strokes. It doesn't have to be anything fancy—Aaron's preference is an inexpensive 12-inch serrated bread knife—it just has to be capable of cutting through the brisket with minimal pressure.

Typically when you're using a knife in the kitchen, you'll curl the knuckles of your guide hand so you don't end up accidentally cutting your fingers. With brisket, you'll need to use your guide hand to shape and protect the meat as you slice. Always be aware of where your fingers are and be careful.

Note the different effects that pushing and pulling the knife have on the meat. For instance, say the side of the brisket closest to you is a bit drier and more liable to fall, apart, finishing the slice on a push stroke will help keep the entire slice intact.

The traditional way to slice brisket in central Texas is to slice the flat and point separately so your guests can have a combination of lean and fatty meat. In both cases you'll be slicing against the grain of the meat, but you'll approach each in a different way.

THE FLAT

Starting with the corner opposite the point, begin slicing the flat at an angle against the grain. Each slice should be about the width of a No.2 pencil. As you progress along the length of the flat, gradually start tapering the slices in thickness. That means you'll have some slices that are slightly thicker on one end and thinner on the other, but by the time you finish with the flat, your slices should be perfectly straight across.

THE POINT

Cut off and discard the thick pocket of seam fat that lies under one side of the point—the piece we left in place so the brisket didn't collapse. Next, slice the point in half lengthwise — this is known as the "money shot" of central Texas barbecue. Both the marbling fat in the muscle and the seam fat running through the center should have rendered perfectly. The bark should have a nice texture. The front part of the brisket that was closest to the fire shouldn't be crunchy or dry and the fat cap on top should be less than a quarter-inch thick. If your brisket didn't turn out quite right in any of those areas make a note of it—you can then revisit the data you collected on your game plan and figure out what adjustments to make next time.

Point slices should be a little thicker than the flat—about ⅜-inch thick. Start with even slices that cut straight across the muscle, then gradually taper the slices on the side closest to you so they're a little thicker on one end than the other. That way you can avoid having a final slice that's nothing but bark.

Repeat the process with both halves of the point, making adjustments as necessary in the length and thickness of your slices to avoid any pieces that are too fatty or too dry. Under one half of the point, you'll find another thick pocket of seam fat that didn't render but was left in place so the point didn't collapse. Trim this off. Once you've done that, you'll be left with a final piece of the flat that was beneath the seam fat and the ridge section of the point that was directly above it. Rather than serve them up as individual slices, Aaron recommends adding this last piece of meat to a pot of beans or serving it as chopped beef, while cutting the ridge piece of the point (what's known as **burnt ends**) into bite-size snacks.

Your exact slicing technique will vary brisket to brisket, but your end goal with every slice remains the same: a perfect balance of meat, fat, bark, and smoke.

Brisket

HISTORY OF CENTRAL TEXAS BARBECUE

HOW BRISKET BECAME KING

What we know today as central Texas barbecue began in the late 19th century with the emergence of meat markets operated largely (but not exclusively) by German and Czech immigrants. Up until that point, barbecue had been primarily restricted to large social gatherings, where pitmasters would cook whole steers in open, underground pits. The meat markets turned barbecue into a business.

At first it was a practical decision. The markets sold fresh meat from animals the proprietors had slaughtered themselves, but with limited means of refrigeration, any unsold meat was turned into sausage or smoked for preservation. Barbecue was another way of selling meat and reducing waste.

The butchers began selling simple meals of smoked meat with sides like white bread, pickles, and sliced onion. But over time barbecue went from a sideshow to the main attraction. Smoking operations branched into full-fledged standalone restaurants and multiplied over the ensuing decades, particularly in the immediate post–World War II era as young GIs returned home looking to start their own businesses. As older pitmasters passed their techniques onto younger generations, a distinct regional style coalesced around the use of beef and local Texas oak, both of which were available in abundance. Sauces were sparse. For most cooks, salt and pepper sufficed.

Although it's now considered the defining cut of central Texas barbecue, brisket didn't become a fixture of restaurant menus until the 1960s. According to barbecue critic and historian Daniel Vaughn, the change happened in part because the USDA formalized a series of Institutional Meat Purchase Specifications (IMPS) that enabled consumers to order precise cuts of meat from wholesalers and processing plants. Coupled with the increasing ubiquity of refrigerated delivery trucks, a barbecue restaurant could now order IMPS #120—a full boneless brisket, big, fatty, and tough to cook, but relatively inexpensive and uniquely suited to long stints in a smoker.

Brisket became the standard by which central Texas barbecue is judged, but over time central Texas barbecue expanded far beyond the region. Barbecue joints from New York to California now specialize in Texas-style brisket. Likewise, there are pitmasters all across Texas serving pulled pork and whole hog sandwiches in the style of the Carolinas. Despite their origins, regional barbecue styles are intermingling more and more.

Further Reading:

The Prophets of Smoked Meat : A Journey Through Texas Barbecue by Daniel Vaughn (Anthony Bourdain/Ecco, 2013)

Legends of Texas Barbecue Cookbook: Recipes and Recollections From the Pitmasters by Robb Walsh (Chronicle Books, updated edition 2016)

Barbecue: The History of an American Institution by Robert F. Moss (University of Alabama Press, 2010)

Texas BBQ, Small Town to Downtown by Wyatt McSpadden (University of Texas Press, 2018)

Franklin Barbecue: A Meat-Smoking Manifesto by Aaron Franklin and Jordan MacKay (Ten Speed Press, 2015)