

# Think you know barbecue? Maybe not

"A lot of people confuse grilling and barbecue," Willard Sterling, chef and co-owner of Tootie's Texas Barbecue LLC, told me.

Until Sterling put me straight I confess that I had been one of those people — but then I have an excuse. I'm not American.

From watching at parties I had attended round the States, I had been led to believe that if you throw something on the barbecue and smother it in barbecue sauce, then it must be barbecue. Nothing, it turns out, could be further from the truth — no matter how good the results may taste.

"Barbecuing," says Steven Raichlen in his book, "The Barbecue Bible," "lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from true grilling."

That means that barbecuing is slow, very slow, and the cooking is indirect, done near (not over) a low, smoky fire and cooked until it is so tender it doesn't need a knife.

"The whole concept of low and slow is not just a catchy phrase," Sterling said. Brisket at Tootie's,



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for example, can take 14 to 17 hours to cook.

That sort of time commitment is something few people like to make nowadays, which may be why so many people go out to buy their barbecue. It can cause difficulties even for the professionals — you can't just turn around and make a new batch when you run out. Until Sterling grew to understand the ebbs and flows of business he sometimes got caught by customers coming in to buy for large parties.

"If someone buys 20 pounds of brisket that can throw me out of sync," he explained. "Or somebody orders for a party of 25 people — a couple of those can wipe you out."

"Barbecuing," Sterling said, "is a very broad term. In their mind people think they know what barbecue is and they're very positive about it."

But barbecue varies in style across the country. "We serve East Texas barbecue," he said firmly. "I know our name says Texas Barbecue, but it could say 'East Texas Barbecue.'

Barbecue is different across Texas. East Texas is completely different from West Texas. We do a lot of explaining.

"White bread is the bread of choice with barbecue. But we do tortillas too and we have jalapeno cheese bread," he said. "And in Texas, barbecue sauce is a condiment — it's often served on the side. The meat you can eat by itself."

In short, it's the perfect Atkins diet meal.

Jensen's Fine Foods has been selling Western-style barbecue for seven or eight years now. Their best sellers are the Tri tips and the baby back ribs, Homer Weaver, director of deli services for all the Jensen's stores, told me.

The popular side dishes are, naturally, baked beans, potato salad and coleslaw. Everything is made at the individual stores, but that doesn't mean, Weaver assured me, that there's any inconsistency in product. You won't, for example, find a better barbecue by going to La Quinta instead of Palm Springs (or vice versa).

"We've got recipes for everything," Weaver said. And the ingredients are all the same. That way customers know what they

will be getting — and they like it."

The chain does make changes, though. Two years ago Jensen's switched its barbecue sauce to use Jack's Barbecue sauce, partly because it's a local product (the distribution office is in Indio), and partly because it is just so good.

"It's awesome," said Weaver sincerely. Then, with a more professional restraint: "It's a good product."

That's a widely held view. The sauce has an enthusiastic following among such barbecue enthusiasts as Al Roker and Quincy Jones, and is something of a cult item among aficionados.

Jack LaRoche, the founder of Jack's, markets three sauces: the "Original," the "Cowboy" sauce, and "Smokin' Hot," in order of escalating spiciness. He also produces a rubbing spice called "Trail Dust."

LaRoche first started bottling his sauce as party favors at his daughter's birthday parties, where his barbecue was a traditional favorite. Then he expanded into making it as Christmas and holiday gifts. Then he decided to go commercial.

He "fumbled" with it in 1997, but in 1998 the full commercial process began and Jack's hasn't

looked back. Al Roker became a fan when LaRoche sent him a sample. Roker mentioned the sauce enthusiastically in a book on barbecue and had a shipment of the Cowboy sauce sent to Manhattan to give away as party favors at his book party, where it won some rather high profile East Coast admirers.

The sauce is used at several restaurants around the valley. Doug Arango's, now that it has moved to Los Angeles, still uses the barbecue sauce, so it now has a whole Hollywood fan base as well.

LaRoche is cautious about expanding further. Given the sauce's well-known cheerleaders there could certainly be a market nationally, but that is rather more than he is ready to take on for the moment.

The sauce is made and packed in Fullerton, and the Indio office handles distribution. Stater Brothers sells it locally, as well as Jensen's, and since the sauce is a certified vegan product it is also used at Native Foods and at Nature RX.

Now that is unexpected: vegetarian barbecue. What would the cowboys think of that?