

the tastes of summer

a guide to valley barbecue & grilling



by **Kathleen Pierce**

photos by **Kevin Harkins**

If the Merrimack Valley had a barbecue reality show, Matt Fitzgerald would be the pit master. On most summer days the co-owner of Mann Orchards in Methuen can be found in the back of his farm stand smoking copious slabs of meat — usually pork. “Pork makes people happy,” says the bearded and stocky 26-year-old.

Between his family’s fruit-growing heritage and his passion for baby back ribs, he has forged a new connection. “Barbecue is a real happy thing, like apple pie,” says Fitzgerald, who runs a smoke-off in May that attracts serious barbecue heads from across New England. He spends the week leading up to the two-day event smoking ribs around the clock on dueling pellet smokers.

Those of us who live on this side of the Mason-Dixon line may not know it, but there is a difference between barbecue and grilling. “Barbecue is low and slow,” Fitzgerald says.

That means as many as 12 hours of slow cooking over low heat for certain cuts of meat, including brisket. “If you’re throwing a steak on the grill at 6 and eating at 6:30 p.m., you’re grilling,” Fitzgerald says. “That’s not what we do.”

New England tends to breed more grill junkies, but as the smoke clears, barbecue zealots are catching up.

Andy MacDonald, owner of Fowles Gourmet Market in Newburyport, is skilled in both. But as a butcher who specializes in high-end meats, he prefers the thrill of the grill. “Grilling sings the outside quickly, leaving the inside medium rare. You can actually taste the meat,” he says.

MacDonald describes grilling as rapid-fire cooking over a hot flame. When purchasing rib-eyes or strip steaks, look for marbling, he says. “Most people don’t understand this, but you want to see the fat,” MacDonald says. “Without it, the meat is dry. You need fat to render back into the meat. Not off into the coals.”

Though partial to the flame, MacDonald says he will go whole hog if a customer asks: “Right now I have an 80-pound pig in my cooler for a guy who is holding a pig roast.”

Turning your lawn into a pig pit involves lots of digging, rocks, sauce and aluminum foil. MacDonald is happy to oblige. “We answer lots of questions,” he says. “When it comes to barbecuing, most people really don’t know what they are doing. We are here to help.”

The butcher shop makes up to 50 different kinds of sausage, from “jalapeño cheddar,” to “taco,” to the “steak bomb,” but the “kitchen sink” was built for the grill. This sweet Italian sausage, seasoned with peppers, onions, mushrooms, three kinds of aged cheese and secret spices, “is just like the best sausages and peppers on Yawkey Way,” MacDonald says. No toppings or condiments necessary.

Getting down and dirty under the hood is not for everyone. There are times when you want the ‘cue to come to you. Enter the caterer Two Chefs Are Better Than One in Lowell.

From corporate parties in New Bedford to family reunions out on Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire, this traveling team of talented chefs specializes in custom cookouts.



Opposite page: Images from the 2nd Annual Applewood Smoke Off held at Mann Orchards in May. Left to right: Jeff Oswalt of Methuen working his smoker and the crowd; a custom pig smoker; Ronn Colten ready to dig into a box of barbecue; chicken wings ready to serve; the crowd enjoys a great day of food.

This page: Top: Matt Fitzgerald of Mann Orchards smoking ribs in the back of the farm stand. Middle: A bottle of Johnny Black, the barbecue sauce Matt created. Bottom left: Adam Bazenas, Andy MacDonald (owner), Nick Duquette and Adrien Bazenas of Fowles Gourmet Market. Bottom right: Mike Danzinger (owner) and Billy Burns of Mike's Red Barn.





“It’s more fun doing an outing. It’s a different atmosphere,” says Steven Beauvais, a co-owner at Two Chefs and a Haverhill native.

Amid their sea of gas grills, a 6-foot charcoal vessel is Beauvais’ favorite. He uses hardwood lump hickory wood to coax natural and earthy flavors from pork loins, ribs and steaks. “Gas grills are easier, but charcoal is more fun,” says The Culinary Institute of America graduate.

Grilled meats, chicken and vegetables are all part of his summer sizzle, but when forced to play favorites, salmon is his main flame. “It holds moisture very nicely, retains other flavors well, and picks up sauces and marinades,” Beauvais says.

Two Chefs prepares salmon two ways: grilled naked and served with avocado and corn relish, or slathered with a decadent sauce like macadamia pesto or maple and whole grain mustard. Be sure to add the sauce two minutes before the fish comes off the grill. “If you put sauce on earlier, it will peel and burn,” says Glenn Trulson co-owner of Two Chefs.

Sauce is also the *pièce de résistance* when barbecuing. “If you don’t have a good sauce, the barbecue can go to waste,” says Jimmie Rucker, a barbecue fanatic who lives in North Andover.

Born in Georgia, he fell for this primal style of cooking at family outings where a galvanized tub was used to smoke meat. “We put it up on bricks, threw coal on there and let it rip.”



This page: Top: Steve Beauvais of Two Chefs Are Better Than One tosses just about anything onto the grill this time of year – meat, chicken, fish and vegetables. Bottom right: Dick LeBlond, owner of The Chicken Connection with a plate of pulled pork and classic sides. Opposite page: Dillion Deziel of Smokie D’s with some brisket at Mann’s 2nd Annual Applewood Smoke Off.

Rucker, who owns The Boneyard Catering Service, can't underscore enough the role sauce plays when smoking tough meats, like brisket and pork butt. "Even if you have bad barbecue but good sauce, they will stick with it," he says.

This truism is what compelled Fitzgerald of Mann Orchards to travel down South, dipping a wing into as many barbecue sauces as he could find. From the sweet sting of Memphis, to the Texas thick-style, to the vinegar versions of the Carolinas, sauce became his passion. Two years ago he created Johnny Black, a sweet, smoky, peppery barbecue sauce with caramel undertones. It has become a staple in Mann's pulled pork sandwiches, barbecue chicken and smoked fish lunches.

"Every generation comes in with something and changes things," says Fitzgerald, a fifth generation owner of this 1877 family farm.

One thing that will never change is the blissful feeling conjured up by steak tips sizzling on an old Weber on a perfect summer day.

When you're ready to capture this dream, put Mike's Red Barn in Salem, N.H., into your GPS. This Italian market specializes in chunks of fresh sirloin marinated in fiery concoctions like "cannonball" and "apricot ginger teriyaki." It's like the month of July in one bite.

"We go crazy in the summer. All we need is the nice weather," says owner Mike Danzinger, who also makes lamb tips, hot and sassy chicken wings and a handful of zesty sausages in his Italian specialty market.

At Mike's, steaks seem to stretch on for miles. There's porterhouse, tenderloin, New York sirloin, T-bone and Delmonico. In the kitchen, butcher Billy Burns is their secret weapon. "Our only gimmick is quality," says Burns, who has been a Merrimack Valley butcher for 50 years. To see him trim 1,500 pounds of sirloin on a busy summer weekend is to know you are in good hands.

You can grab a vat of creamy red bliss potato salad, but there's a healthier and taster alternative to the summer side perennial — grilled vegetables.

Beauvais of Two Chefs tosses just about anything that sprouts from the earth onto the grill this time of year. Asparagus, carrots, Bermuda onions, peppers, zucchini and summer squash all taste better under fire. "Broccolini is fantastic grilled. It brings out a soy flavor," he says.

To health up your next cookout, brush vegetables with a touch of canola oil, and add kosher salt and black pepper. Place on the

flames and wait for grill marks. Don't wrap them in aluminum foil, Beauvais warns: "that's steaming."

If you invest in one accoutrement to improve your grilling and barbecue game this summer, make it a pocket thermometer. "A lot of people don't know when their food is done. It can be overcooked, tough and dry. Don't guess," Beauvais says. Salmon is done at 130 degrees; ditto steak if you like it medium rare. When in doubt, do what every chef does. "Go by instinct and flavor," Beauvais says.

Barbecue as a dining option is no longer relegated to the shotgun shacks deep in the heart of Texas. Every afternoon around 4 p.m., the sweet smell of hickory in downtown Lowell can be traced to The Village Smokehouse.

Owner Alan Kaplan introduced Southern comfort to Brookline 23 years ago and to Lowell a year and a half ago. In a rehabbed 1891 brick building with high ceilings and a friendly vibe, baby back ribs are smoked until the meat is ready to fall off the bone. Brisket and boneless pork butts spend 12 to 14 hours in an industrial-size smoker and are served with corn bread and baked beans. "Lots of restaurants say they do ribs. But they parboil them in an hour and finish them off on the grill," Kaplan says.

Lately, it seems America's appetite for pork is starting to eclipse the other white meat. At The Chicken Connection in Haverhill, pulled pork now shares the limelight with their famous fried chicken.

Starting in an apple wood smoker, pork is slathered with a ketchup-based, brown sugar and maple syrup sauce before being finished off in the oven. "This helps caramelize the meat. It thickens up and becomes one with

the sauce," says owner Dick LeBlond.

In the summer, LeBlond takes his charcoal smoker on the road with Rucker. These Boneyard Catering Service partners make a formidable pair. "I love feeding people for some reason. It is my passion," LeBlond says.

Remember when New England clambakes were all the rage? At Lenzi's Catering in Dracut, Caribbean-style barbecue with Jamaican jerk chicken, Creole fish and on-site pig roasts are now the order du jour. As high-end as a catered affair can get, it's reassuring to know that hot dogs and hamburgers are still offered for parties and anniversaries.

After eating my way around the Valley, I had one burning question. Can all this meat be good for you?

"I've been eating barbecue seven days a week for 23 years," Kaplan says, "and I'm as healthy as a horse."



guide to barbecue & grilling

restaurants

The Village Smokehouse

98 Middle Street, Lowell
(978) 441-2278
Monday – Sunday, 4 – 10 p.m.
www.VillageSmokeHouse.com

The Chicken Connection

242 Broadway, Rt. 97, Haverhill
(978) 373-4300
Monday – Saturday, 11 a.m. – 8 p.m.
Sunday 11 a.m. – 6 p.m.
www.TheChickenConnection.com

markets

Mike's Red Barn

301 Main Street
Salem, New Hampshire
(603) 898-2812
Monday – Friday, 8 a.m. – 8 p.m.
Saturday 8 a.m. – 7 p.m.
Sunday 8 a.m. – 6 p.m.

Fowles Gourmet Market

341 High Street, Newburyport
(978) 465-9028
Monday 11 a.m. – 10 p.m.
Tuesday – Friday, 9 a.m. – 10 p.m.
Saturday, 9 a.m. – 8 p.m.
Sunday, 9 a.m. – 7 p.m.
www.FowlesMarket.com

catering

The Boneyard Catering Service

Boston Hill Farm, North Andover
(978) 725-6034
www.BoneyardCatering.com

Two Chefs Are Better Than One

97 Central Street, Suite #206, Lowell
(978) 970-0212
www.TwoChefsFood.com

Lenzis Catering

810 Merrimack Avenue, Dracut
(978) 458-2323
www.LenziCatering.com

barbeque 101

Getting started.

You will need:

- 1.) Grill brush
- 2.) Pellet smoker
- 3.) Time
- 4.) Good set of tongs
- 5.) Mop brush, to slather on sauce evenly
- 6.) Sharp knife to trim meat
- 7.) Paper towels



How to barbecue baby back ribs:

- 1.) Take a slab of ribs and pull the silver skin off the back with a butter knife.
- 2.) Rub yellow mustard on top (meat side).
- 3.) Pat on a dry rub.
- 4.) Place ribs in smoker at 220 degrees.
- 5.) Fill sprinkler bottle with half apple cider and half Johnny Black BBQ Sauce and mist over the rack once an hour.
- 6.) Cook for 6 hours.
- 7.) When 6 hours are up, brush on barbecue sauce and cook for 15 more minutes.
- 8.) Serve with a cold beer.

— From **Matt Fitzgerald**, co-owner of **Mann Orchards** in Methuen and creator of Johnny Black BBQ Sauce

grilling 101

- 1.) Coat grill with canola oil before you begin.
- 2.) Make sure grill is hot when grilling fish, chicken or meat.
- 3.) Beware of hot and cold spots when using charcoal.
- 4.) Use a meat thermometer to assure meat is done (130 degrees for medium rare steak and salmon).
- 5.) Once removed from the grill, let meat rest to seal in the juices.

To grill corn:

- 1.) Peel husk back and leave attached.
- 2.) Remove silks.
- 3.) Rub corn with melted butter, and sprinkle with black pepper.
- 4.) Fold husks back around the corn so kernels are covered.
- 5.) Put corn on the grill over moderately high heat.
- 6.) Roll around a bit and grill for 2 minutes on each side.
- 7.) Try a squeeze test to determine if it is done. Kernels should give.

— From **Steven Beauvais** of **Two Chefs Are Better Than One** in Lowell, MA.

