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THE ABCs of BBQ

*By Caren Weiner Campbell*

Summer calls for simple cooking and outdoor eating – with your hands, if possible. In other words, 'tis the season for barbecue. But while cooking a hunk of meat over fire may be one of the most basic forms of food prep known to man, the question of what constitutes bona fide authentic barbecue is no cinch to answer. Indeed, it's given rise to countless debates, books, cook-offs, symposia and no doubt a fistfight or two.

In an effort to clear away some of the smoke surrounding the subject, we've put together a mini-barbecue primer, below, outlining the major regional styles of barbecue and what characterizes them. We've also compiled a list of some [Barbecue Best Bets](#) as rated by Zagat surveyors.

Before attempting to define what real barbecue is, it's helpful to rule out one thing that purists agree it isn't: slapping a steak on the rack of a Weber and sizzling it directly over a very hot flame, as legions of backyard meat flippers are doing at this time of year. That's known as "grilling" and is considered a different technique.

In contrast, true barbecue – a noun, not a verb, as any Southerner would tell you – lives up to the old Mae West saying, "Anything worth doing is worth doing slowly." According to experts such as Paul Kirk, a renowned Kansas City–based pitmaster (and self-styled "Baron of BBQ"), it's a large, tough cut of meat daubed with sauces or spices and cooked over indirect, low heat (230°–250° F) for many hours at a stretch. Coals – not charcoal, but incompletely burned bits of woods such as hickory, pecan, apple and mesquite – are usually used as fuel, with their smoke imparting a subtle flavoring even without seasoning. Other aspects to consider include the amount of smoke, along with the angle and speed at which it wafts over the meat. "The heat, the seasoning and the smoke all work together," explains Kirk, a 'cue consultant/connoisseur and the co-owner of NYC's RUB BBQ.

Barbecue Best Bets

Tuck into 'cue at these top spots.

[▶ Barbecue Best Bets](#)