



It's All in the Wood

What's barbecue without smoke?

When it comes to barbecue, low and slow cooking is important. So is the flavor of the rub and the sauce. The key element to good barbecue, however, is wood smoke. Seriously, without the smoke, it's just well-cooked meat.

In Texas, mesquite wood is big. In the Northeast, apple is popular. Hickory is king just about everywhere. What about Kansas?

Frank Schloegel III's family has sold wood for almost 65 years. Over half the business at his Woodyard Bar-B-Que in Kansas City is to barbecue people. According to Schloegel, the big five Kansas barbecue woods are oak, hickory, pecan, apple and cherry.

"People will smoke with whatever wood they can get their hands on," Schloegel says. While hickory is a favorite barbecue wood in Kansas, most pit masters like to mix it with other varieties to get just the right flavor. "Hickory is the most significant wood for barbecue, but pure hickory is too bitter," he says. "Mixing it with oak is the best blend."

Eddie Moege, owner of HHB BBQ in downtown Topeka, is a fan of using just oak. "It has a nice soft, mellow smoke that doesn't add flavor," Moege says. "I grew up around hickory. I didn't want that flavor. I like my meats to have a nice, smoky flavor, not a wood flavor."

When Schloegel's dad sold wood, he gave customers samples of meats he smoked in his backyard so they could taste the difference between the woods. This inspired Schloegel and co-owner, Ciaran Molloy, to open a restaurant at the Woodyard to sell a variety of smoked meats made in an outside wood-fired pit barbecue.

The Woodyard's pit master, Mark O'Bryan, likes to mix up his wood selection.

"My perfect combo is pecan, white oak, a bit of hickory and a bit of apple when I can get it," O'Bryan says. "I can have 15 different meats going at a time, so I came up with a basic wood blend that works for all of them."

While some barbecue masters get wood from places like the Woodyard, many scrounge up wood for themselves. "There aren't many people in the organized wood business," Schloegel says. "Most people get wood by making a deal with a local farmer."

For many barbecue aficionados, picking wood is a lot like selecting a wine. "They'll say things like, 'I have to have cherry or it's not right,'" Schloegel says. He admits, however, that "for most people, once you have on the rubs and sauces, it is hard for them to taste the difference in the smoke."

- Linda A. Ditch

The Woodyard's pit
master, Mark O'Bryan