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Out of the Attic

Virginia barbecue: a slice of history

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Image: How they cook their fish, Theodore de Bry, ca. 1590. Library of Congress..

Barbecue, a signature American dish, has played a starring role in community life since colonial times. George Washington enjoyed this outdoor culinary pursuit: in 1769 the Colonel “went in to Alexandria to a Barbicue and stayed all Night,” winning eight shillings at cards during the course of the event which lasted three days. A journal entry dated Sep. 18, 1773 records Colonel Washington hosting his own barbecue, complete with bread or biscuits, having bought “45 weight” of flour “for barbecue.”



The colonial tradition of the barbecue remained with Washington into his presidency; after laying the cornerstone of the Capitol Building in 1793, he and his fellow statesmen dined on a five hundred-pound barbecued ox in the newly-founded city of Washington, D.C.

While tucking into French cuisine during his tenure as ambassador to France from 1784 to 1789, Thomas Jefferson took the time to write to James Madison about what meat best suited Virginia barbecue; Jefferson preferred venison while Madison insisted that smaller creatures were better complemented by the smoky sauce.

Barbecues and outdoor gatherings were widely popular among early Americans of African descent, both free and enslaved. As banjos and other African instruments played during such get-togethers, the barbecue took on a multicultural flavor among enslaved communities.

By the 1800s, barbecued meat was often served with a hefty side of civics: attendees at these formal community gatherings engaged in a parade, prayer, reading of the Declaration of Independence and a long series of toasts on patriotic subjects, according to a 2017 article in *The New Yorker*. Political candidates took note and were on hand when the crowds assembled. “Democrats/They eat rats!/But Whigs/Eat pigs!” was a barbecue-related slogan chosen by supporters of William Henry Harrison to promote their presidential candidate in 1840.

Since the discovery of fire as a cooking method, many cultures have prepared meat over an open fire. The first recorded instance of barbecues was made in the 1490s by early Spanish explorers led by Christopher Columbus who observed outdoor cooking called “barbacoa” by natives of what is now Haiti. Fish and game were laid on a framework of wooden racks built over slow-roasting fires to preserve the meat for later consumption.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

English explorers looking for the “Lost Colony” in North Carolina in the 1580s also noted the slow-roasting fires used by the natives to smoke food. In the early 1600s, Virginia colonists adopted this method by copying the Powhatan Indian use of wooden roasting platforms. The colonists switched it up by basting the meat with a vinegar, butter, salt and pepper sauce, and ate this fusion cuisine as soon as it was cooked.

Few barbecue aficionados have stuck with Florida’s Timucuan Indian practice of grilling fish, lizards and alligators, as reported by French explorer Jacques Lemoyne in the 1560s. Southern colonists committed the hog – an animal they could raise easily and cheaply – to the dish. Differences in meat choice, sauce ingredients and fire material – e.g., charcoal, or hickory, oak or mesquite wood – make barbecue a customizable regional specialty. Northern Virginia’s preferred sauce has changed from the colonial vinegar and butter-based concoction to a tomato-based sauce with pork.

Popular before the American Revolution throughout the colonies, barbecues remained widespread only in the south after independence and were enjoyed by all levels of society, from the enslaved to the planter class, bringing family and friends together the same way our gatherings over a grill or fire pit do today. Alexandria restaurants today continue the long tradition of barbecue in this city.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.