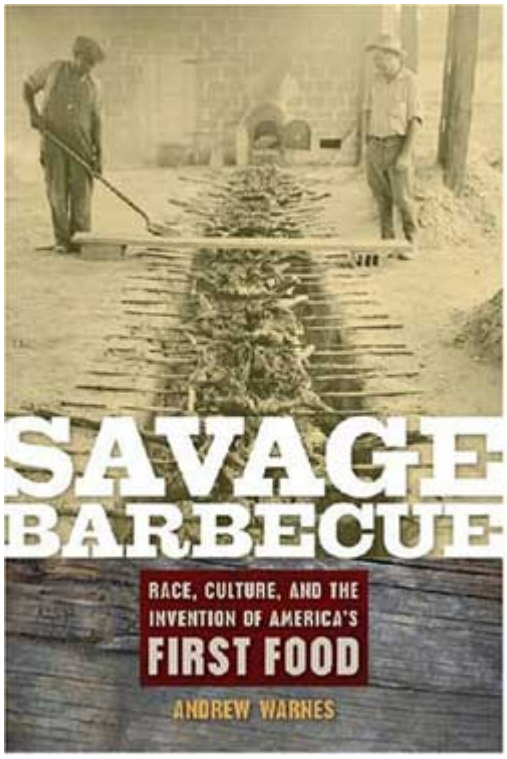
What does barbecue tell us about race?

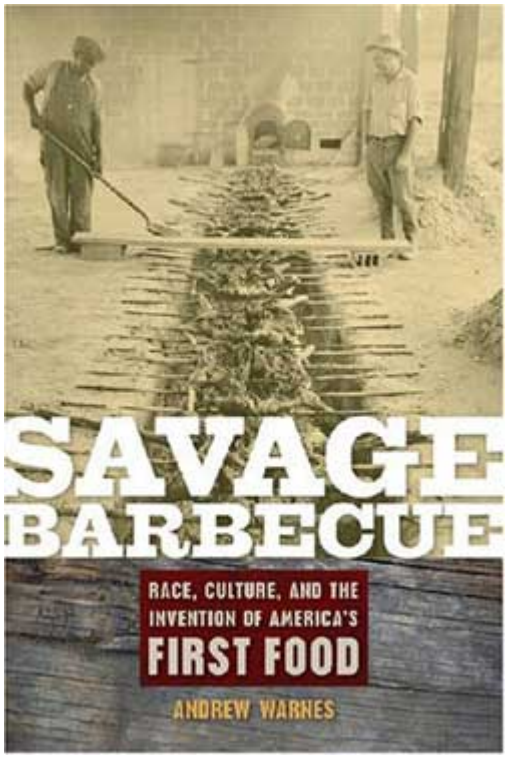


Ask a few Americans what they think about barbecue. The guy from Kansas City will tell you about his sauce, the one from South Carolina will disagree. The Texan with hold forth on beef brisket. Someone from Memphis, waving a charred smokey rib, will beg to differ. The Californian will be discussing his patio grill and tri tip. But no one will be indifferent. Soon you will discover what they all have in common: serious passion and strong feelings about the meaning of barbecue. For all Americans, this is manly outdoor cooking—messy food you eat with your hands. Freud understood the urge well. For every civilized meal, eaten inside politely with a knife and fork, cooked by women, served on china, there's the primal, even savage barbecue. Roasted meat gnawed from the bone is nothing new, nor are these associations. Think of Homer's warriors roasting whole oxen, or Charlemagne as described by his biographer Einhard, as a serious eater of meat. Americans just happen to have raised this form of cooking to High Art.

Andrew Warnes takes these macho associations one step further, though, arguing that the barbecue, from the initial encounter between Europeans and Native Americans, right down to the present, is really about race, violence, and exploitation. The idea of barbecue, he argues, even when alluring, is tainted by associations with the primitive, exotic other, the cannibal, and the assertion of white superiority.

But isn't barbecue one of the few foods prepared and enjoyed by all Americans regardless of color? A truly hybrid cuisine which all claim as their own and share equally? Blacks, whites, even Mongolians, stake a rightful claim to it.

Warnes could not possibly be further from the mark with his impression of “American culture’s low estimation of pit barbecue” (10). But perhaps this enthusiasm really does conceal, like a cloying thick sauce, an underlying truth that is vicious and racist.



Andrew Warnes, Savage Barbecue: Race, Culture, and the Invention of America’s First Food. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008. 208 pp., $19.95.

The evidence presented is unfortunately tough and hard to swallow. The first chapter tries to convince us that putting together the words barbecue and barbarian is not coincidental. Early conquistadors and their chroniclers who first described the crude cooking methods of the Native Americans unwittingly forged an association that would be used to justify the exploitation of natives who slow-cooked not only horrid beasts like iguanas, but even human flesh. Theodor de Bry’s popular images of freakish bald-headed cannibals chomping on arms and legs certainly would seem to suggest a “long tradition of conflating barbecue and cannibalism” (46).

But does the evidence really hold up? Do a handful of references denote a long-standing tradition of associating barbecue with racial discrimination? We are offered a Puritan divine, Edmund Hickeringill’s *Jamaica Viewed,* which appeared in 1661, who mentions that Caribs, or Cannibals, barbecue the flesh of captives and feed it to their wives and children. But does this really reflect a “new and emergent doctrine of white supremacy” (35) or merely a statement of what Hickeringill took to be fact? Every other early historic reference to barbecue is completely neutral: a wooden platform for cooking food. Or even any wooden grid raised off the ground. And would this technique really have been so

fundamentally strange to Europeans? They had been using iron grills since ancient times—just think of St. Lawrence, barbecued for the faith. The famed Bartholomew Pig is an English BBQ.

Then there is the little story upon which Warnes' whole argument hinges, Edward Ward's *The Barbacue Feast: or, the Three Pigs of Peckham*, which was published in 1707, supposedly heralding "barbecue's popularization in 1700s and '10s London" and "the ascent of new notions of racial exoticism and mastery. Even among those who ate it, as we will see, barbecue in these years seems to have retained its full complement of savage and cannibal meanings …" (53).

Really? It turns out this is a story about sailors meeting for a common meal not far from the docks south of London for something, it seems, that reminded them of the food they ate back in Jamaica. And the sailors do what sailors do: eat raucously, make bad music and dance, tell stories, drink way too much rum, smoke, and then stumble home. It is anything but a cannibal feast. In fact, the two clearly racist lines in the whole work—one in which the color of the roasting pig is compared to an Indian squaw's belly—goes no further than that.

A few lines further down comes another reference to barbecue. Warnes interprets this to mean that the sailors are comparing a pig to an African woman. What actually happens is that the sailors get impatient and start giving advice on the cooking, each one thinking himself an expert, and "every blundering Tarpaulin, that had but cross'd the Tropick of Cancer, and taken a Negro Wench by the short Wool, was ready to Wrest his Office out of his Hand"—that is out of the cook's hand. In other words, anyone who had been to Jamaica on the slave trade and grabbed African women by the hair considers himself an expert on barbecue. It is a horrid thing to picture, and of course enslaving and abusing another people, and especially the act here described, is monstrous. But does it really have anything to do with barbecue? Absolutely not. It means that those who had been to Jamaica think they know something about barbecue. Period.

Still, maybe there was a persistent connection between barbecue and racism. Poking around a bit in the eighteenth-century sources to see exactly how this word barbecue was used might offer some clues. Elizabeth Raffald in *The Experienced English Housekeeper*, of 1786, gives us directions "To barbecue a pig," which except for a half teaspoon of "Chyan pepper" in the stuffing is a thoroughly English roast whole pig. There is certainly nothing savage about the technique here. Samuel Johnson's dictionary defines barbecue as a term for dressing a whole hog—which is exactly how Raffald uses it. Nothing more. This at least points to the popularity of the technique.

Edward Long's *History of Jamaica* of 1774 explains barbecue in glowing terms: "the fame of our Jamaica barbecue is so well established, that it would answer to no purpose to reiterate their praises, except to tantalize the reader." A play called *The Patron,* written by one Mr. Foote and performed in Haymarket around 1764, seems to be getting closer. It featured Sir Peter Pepperpot, a West Indian of great fortune, who is about to eat a delicious barbecue and is

“rating [berating] a couple of negroes, by whom he is attended, for neglected to carry his bottle of Kian,” i.e. Cayenne pepper. I am surprised Warnes didn’t find this reference as easily as I did online. What exactly does it prove, though? Yes, white people who had black slaves did exploit them, and the owners did like barbecue a lot. But does their proximity here prove a direct association of the slaves with barbecue? What if they were bringing him tea or crumpets?

Perhaps there is just some fundamental methodological difference between the way historians and literary scholars interrogate sources. Random associations appear to be perfectly legitimate here. Even worse, sources are cited for what they do *not* say. Because Thomas Jefferson doesn’t mention barbecue in his notes on Virginia, this “suggests he finds its barbarity, its stark racial alterity, hard to stomach” (112). Maybe he just didn’t have anything to say about barbecue?

And what of the picture of the Big Chief Barbecue joint taken in 1940 in Georgia? The mere presence of a black servant (or perhaps slave) on the sign is proof of long standing savage associations? But he is holding beer. And what of Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima? Are rice and pancakes also violent? There is no doubt that there was racism in the United States, and these images do of course reveal a great deal about its legacy. There are also fascinating studies that explain that legacy, such as M.M. Manring’s *Slave in a Box*. But does the mere presence of a black servant in a beer sign on a BBQ joint really prove anything?

I would argue with John T. Edge that if there is any true common ground among blacks and whites in the South, if there is hope for harmony, it should be sought not only in food but specifically in barbecue (as he pointed out in an interview on ABC’s “Nightline” on Sept. 3, 2010). Of course, this is not to deny that racism and violence have been an integral part of American life, not merely in the South, but everywhere. Barbecue too has been a crucial element in this mix, but this book and the evidence it provides fail to convince that the two have anything to do with each other.

Ken Albala teaches history at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. He has authored 10 books including the award-winning *Beans: A History* and *The Lost Art of Real Cooking;* has edited three food series, and is co-editor of the journal *Food, Culture and Society.*