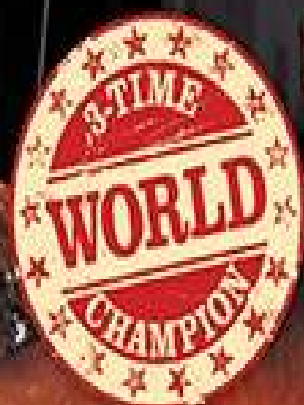


Melissa Cookston

SMOKIN' IN THE BOYS' ROOM



**Southern Recipes from the
Winningest Woman in Barbecue**

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INTRODUCTION

MY STORY

Smokin' in the Boys' Room grew out of my seventeen years of cooking on the male-dominated barbecue contest circuit. Going back even further, it's also the natural product of a childhood spent around pit-fired barbecue, combined with an innate ultra-competitive spirit. Traditionally, the home kitchen has been women's domain, while the grill has been male territory. Maybe it's the caveman effect—big pieces of meat and fire bringing out the chest-thumping. That didn't stop me from reveling in my Mississippi Delta upbringing, where eating pulled-pork sandwiches while talking with my grandfather for hours on end as a child gave me a love for good southern barbecue.

I have always wanted to win, no matter the game or the stakes involved. I'm too old to play basketball, and I don't bowl, so entering barbecue contests was a great release for me. In my career as a pitmaster, I have been very happy just to make something I'm proud of turning in to judges, but winning a big contest such as the Memphis in May World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest still makes me happier than a tornado in a trailer park.

In fact, I am the winningest woman in barbecue, and frankly, it's not even close. I was thrilled to reign as the Memphis in May Grand Champion in 2010 and 2012. I won the Whole Hog category both of those years and also managed to win Whole Hog in 2011 but lost the Grand Championship by 1 point (out of a possible 570!). In 2012, I won the Kingsford Invitational, where eight winners of the biggest contests in the barbecue world were invited to compete in the first true barbecue contest of champions. Not only did I win the Grand, but I also won first place in four out of five categories. (Those fellas were pretty surprised when a "Memphis pork" cook won the brisket category!)

Generally speaking, most men (cooks or judges) on the circuit are very cordial and nice to me. However, I have run into a few over the years

who think my husband, Pete, needs to stick me back in the house. The looks on their faces make winning that much sweeter.

I've been called the "Queen of Q" (among some other choice names—men don't like getting beaten), but I'd prefer to be known as the "best barbecue cook" instead of the "best woman cook." Even though I'm the winningest woman, very few men have the résumé I have. There are no women's tees on the barbecue contest circuit, and I don't get a head start because I'm a girl. At the end of the day, barbecue is the great equalizer. It doesn't matter whether you are a man or woman, rich or poor, black or white; good barbecue crosses all those lines.

As competitive as I am, I am very appreciative of and humbled by the awards and acclaim I've received, and I'm the first to admit I didn't do it all by myself. With Pete and my daughter, Lauren, our team has cooked at barbecue contests not just as a way to make a living but also as a family adventure. In 2010, for example, we were in Washington, D.C., cooking on Pennsylvania Avenue at the Safeway National Capital Barbecue Battle, and one week later, we were in California, cooking for the *BBQ Pitmasters* television show. Let me tell you—if you aren't pretty close to your family, a solid month of traveling and cooking will sure get you there!

I have always been in the restaurant business in one form or fashion. I had my first job at a local restaurant when I was thirteen years old and have remained in the food business ever since. In 2007, my husband and I decided we were going to enter the barbecue competition circuit full time—talk about a feast-or-famine existence! Luckily, we were smiled upon by the barbecue gods and did very well. However, with a child, running up and down the road every week going to contests is not an ideal way to make a living, so we looked for what would be the next step from the contest world. In 2011, we opened the Memphis Barbecue Company in Horn Lake, Mississippi. I wanted the restaurant to focus on barbecue and food from the Delta, and we made sure everything was made from scratch. We have had lines out the door every day since day one. We were so well received that we have opened locations in other cities to help spread the gospel of Memphis-style barbecue.

Smokin' in the Boys' Room comes from my heart. Here you'll find recipes I used to win world barbecue championships, recipes from my

restaurants, and recipes I use to cook dinner on a Tuesday night. They are all recipes from my soul and upbringing, and I hope you enjoy them.

MEMPHIS-STYLE BARBECUE AND FOODS FROM THE DELTA

We are all products of our childhood. That everyday meal you hated as a child is often the one that drives your cravings as an adult.

I grew up in the Delta region, an area spanning from Memphis to New Orleans along the mighty Mississippi River, and it truly shaped my thinking about cooking and recipes. I once watched an episode of *The Frugal Gourmet* as a child, back when we had only about four TV channels and no remote control. The host, Jeff Smith, kept talking about “peasant food”—dishes cooked by the poor using the ingredients that the upper class didn’t want, dishes that achieved the sublime from the mundane. I didn’t get it at the time and was pretty happy when someone changed the channel, but I remember that show because Smith’s point has become more and more important to me as I have matured. And as I’ve matured, I’ve become ever more infatuated with the flavorful food of the Delta.

Barbecue in general, and Delta cooking specifically, are all descended from the same mentality—turning tough ribs into world-championship cuisine, cooking a picnic shoulder full of fat and gristle for fifteen hours until the meat is succulent and dripping with flavor, using cheap masa flour and a couple of pounds of pork to make tamales that speak to you. Delta cuisine is not necessarily soul food, although it shares some dishes. It sure isn’t Cajun or Creole, although I’d call it a second cousin once removed. It is food focused on fresh ingredients, and it is intensely flavored. It is a food made by people, white and black, poor and wealthy, who know that everyday (cheaper) ingredients and meats cooked properly can be just as satisfying as the meals reserved for Sunday. It’s about food prepared with love, care, and passion.

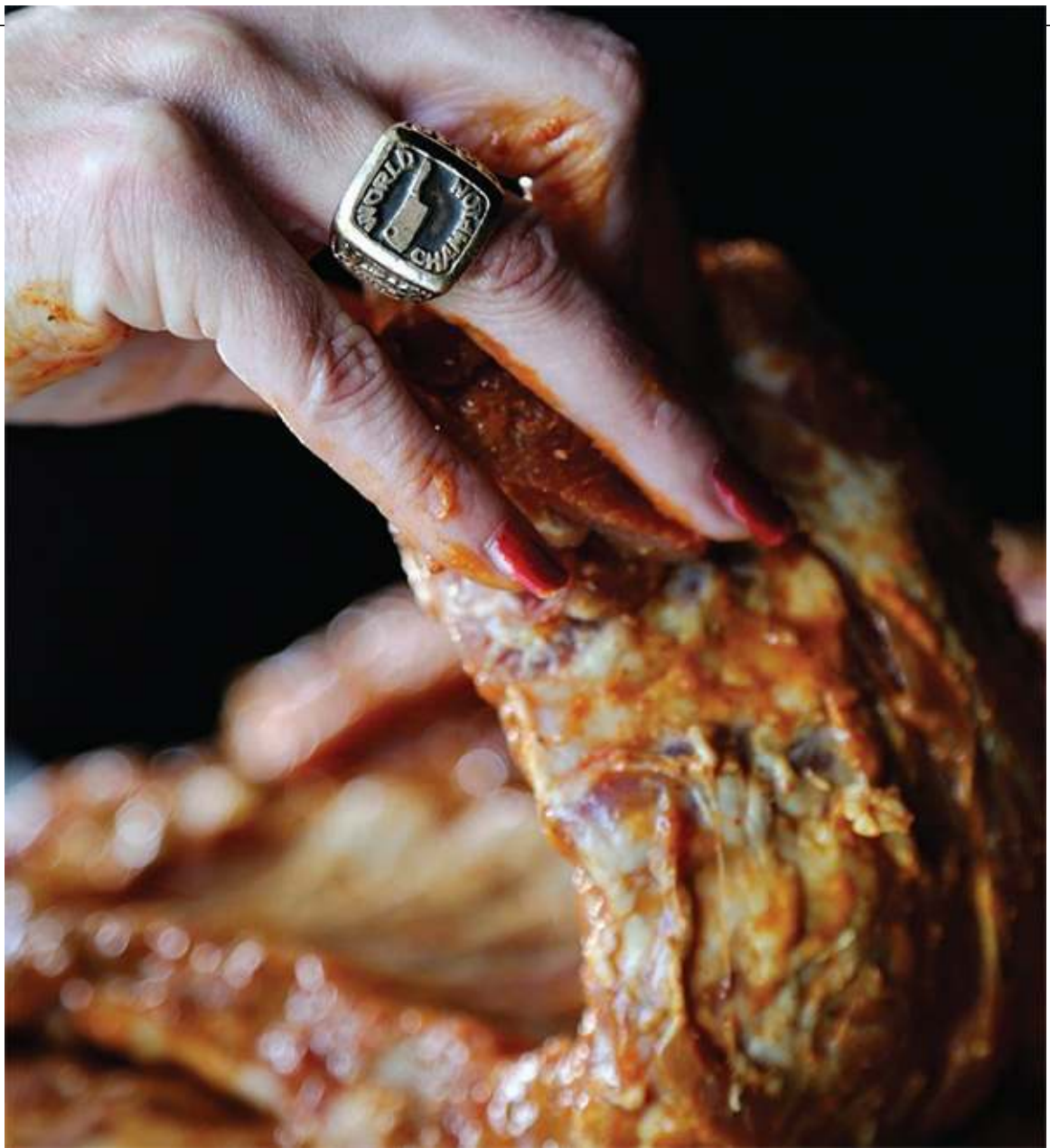
Memphis-style barbecue has been such a defining influence in my life. When I was younger, I remember my mother getting a craving for ribs, bundling us up in the car, and driving two hours to a famous Memphis

restaurant just to eat ribs. At the time, I thought it was absolutely crazy to drive hours each way just to eat ribs, but now I get it. One day, my mother, being a “can do” type of person, decided that she could do her own ribs just as well as that restaurant. She went to the meat market and purchased some beautiful ribs, got her seasonings together, and fired up the grill. The smell was heavenly—for a while. A few hours later, we were in the car heading to Memphis again, and “the great rib experiment” was never mentioned again. Memphis-style barbecue has that kind of effect on people.

Memphis barbecue is about meats cooked low and slow and seasoned with a soulful hand. It is about texture—pork butts and shoulders cooked to the exact moment where the meat can be pulled by hand into succulent pieces and never needs to be chopped. Ribs are cooked so the meat can come cleanly from the bone but still maintain integrity, body, and a wonderful mouthfeel. Cooking pork to those textures is really about flavor. Properly cooked pork allows the meat to express its own innate flavor, in addition to any seasonings and sauces, across your palate. Memphis barbecue has a full-flavored profile, with a sweet beginning note and a symphony of savory and spicy melodies that sing in your mouth the way B. B. King plays his guitar. The phrase “sweet with a little heat” pretty much sums up Memphis-style barbecue, and that well-rounded flavor profile is exactly what you’ll find in my recipes.

Finally, Memphis barbecue and Delta cooking are also about using fresh, local products. When I was growing up, my grandparents always had a large garden. Not only would we get fresh cucumbers, cabbage, corn, and tomatoes at the very peak of freshness, they would also “put up” plenty of peas and butterbeans to get through the long winter. I never really developed a green thumb to grow my own garden, but I do love to go to farmers’ markets to get the wonderful vegetables that I grew up enjoying. I am so glad to see the locavore movement grow. The large chain groceries have their place in everyday life, but it is so much more rewarding and enjoyable to me to be able to purchase heritage pork, locally grown produce, and farm-fresh milk, eggs, and other food that I used to take for granted but now yearn to have. Whenever possible, I try to buy fresh and local. This “movement” in the culinary world of today is really just a revisiting of the everyday life of people before the advent of “factory farms” and long-haul trucking. Whether you’re making my Smoked Tomato Bisque, Balsamic Grilled Vegetables

Corn Casserole, Blackberry Chutney, or Mississippi Caviar, fresh and local always taste better.





PANTRY

Every cook has a go-to list of pantry items. As a home cook and a contest cook, I typically keep two pantries, with a lot of ingredients stocked in both. Since we're focusing mostly on home cooking, the following represent what I consider must-haves for the home pantry and what you'll need to cook most of the recipes in this book. They'll still allow you to make succulent, championship-quality barbecue and give you a nice base for creating your own recipes.

Spices and Aromatics

- ★ Kosher, table, sea, and finishing salts. (I really have gotten addicted to some of these—they provide a wonderful texture without an overwhelming salt flavor.)
- ★ Black peppercorns and coarsely and finely ground black pepper
- ★ Granulated garlic and whole fresh garlic
- ★ Onion powder, dehydrated onions (dried onion flakes), and fresh onions (preferably Vidalia, if in season)
- ★ Whole cinnamon sticks
- ★ Coriander and cumin seeds
- ★ Dill seeds and celery seeds
- ★ Dried oregano, thyme, and basil
- ★ Dry mustard
- ★ Paprika
- ★ Light and dark chili powder
- ★ Ancho chile powder
- ★ Chipotle chile powder
- ★ Cayenne

- ★ Hot red pepper flakes
-

Oils, Vinegars, and Other Acids

- ★ Good-quality extra virgin olive oil
- ★ Canola oil
- ★ Balsamic vinegar (a very good one for dressings and one more suited for marinades and reductions)
- ★ Red wine vinegar
- ★ White vinegar
- ★ Cider vinegar
- ★ Lemon juice (bottled is fine)
- ★ Unsweetened lime juice (bottled is fine)

Sweeteners

- ★ Turbinado sugar (a must-have for my barbecue recipes)
- ★ Granulated (white) sugar
- ★ Blackstrap molasses
- ★ Light and dark brown sugar
- ★ Honey (preferably local, single source)
- ★ Agave syrup

Other Ingredients

- ★ Canned tomatoes (preferably San Marzano)
- ★ Yellow and white self-rising cornmeal
- ★ Baking powder and baking soda
- ★ Self-rising and all-purpose flours
- ★ Canned tomato sauce
- ★ Tomato paste
- ★ Evaporated milk

★ Sweetened condensed milk

★ Good-quality ketchup

★ Worcestershire sauce

★ Whole chipotles in adobo sauce

★ Yellow mustard

★ Hot sauce

★ Sugar cure (available online)

★ Chicken, beef, and bacon bases. (I prefer pastes, preferably Minor's brand.)

TIP

In general, I purchase my spices whole, if possible, and grind them myself. I keep a spare coffee grinder around just for this purpose. Spices lose their potency quickly, so try to keep them as fresh as possible. In addition to a good selection of dried staples, I try to keep several fresh herbs in the fridge. To keep them longer, store them stem down in a small cup of water in the fridge.★



BASIC, MUST-HAVE TOOLS

Mortar and Pestle ★ This tool is useful for mixing small amounts of pastes, slathers, and sauces, and it travels well without needing electricity.

Knives ★ Invest in a good set of knives and you will have them for years. My favorite knife series is Mac Knives (macknife.com). These combine the sharpness and durability of a Japanese blade with the extra heft of a European-style knife. These are really good knives. For my contest set, I have a 12-inch slicer with a dimpled edge (small indentions in the side of the knife to make it easier to slide through a product), 8-inch santoku (really my favorite knife ever—I don't know how I got along without it before!), two 6-inch utility knives, and two 6-inch curved boning knives.

Charcoal Chimney ★ A chimney helps you get your charcoal going without lighter fluid, which can give your final product a chemical taste. Just place an electric charcoal starter in it, fill it with briquettes, set it on a heatproof surface or in the bottom of your grill, and wait until the briquettes look ashy (about 20 minutes) before dumping them into the cooker. If you don't have an electric starter, you can put a few wads of paper or newsprint underneath and light the paper with a match or lighter.

Electric Charcoal Starter ★ A starter is easier to use than matches/paper to light your chimney, especially on a windy day.

“Hot Gloves” ★ This is what I call cotton gloves that are thin enough that you can put nitrile gloves on over them. They make a huge difference when pulling hot meat.

Pastry Brushes ★ My go-to brush for sauce is a 2-inch synthetic-bristle brush, which leaves the fewest brush strokes when glazing or saucing meats.

Tongs and Metal Pizza Peels ★ It's easy to burn yourself when you move food around on the grill. I keep some quality (strong) 12-inch tongs for moving ribs and to use while grilling, as well as some shorter (6-inch) tongs for more delicate maneuvers. A pizza peel is great for larger cuts of meat, such as butts or shoulders.



TOOLS I'D RATHER NOT DO WITHOUT

I am a firm believer in knowing the basics of barbecue cooking without fancy tools and gadgets. If you give me an old barrel grill with no thermometer, a few spices, some meat, and really nothing else, I'm confident that I will be able to produce a pretty tasty product that's fairly close to competition quality. However, since we live in an age when some pretty smart folks make all these cool toys for cooking, why not use them?

Meat Maximizer 45-Blade Meat Tenderizer ★ Made by Jaccard (and often called by that name), this is a spring-loaded contraption with forty-five very small knives that you press across meats to tenderize them. This is a great way to tenderize without mashing your steak, especially when cooking sirloins, strip steaks, pork chops, or flank steak.

Meat Injectors ★ I keep quite a few small needle injectors around, as well as a larger, pump-type injector. The larger injector is indispensable for multiple shoulders or hogs, but it too big for delicate cuts of meat. I don't inject as much liquid as some of my competitors do, so I avoid the brine pumps.

Meat Thermometers ★ I am always willing to spend money to have the best thermometers I can find. Always make sure they are calibrated by checking the temperature of boiling water (212°F at sea level)—even the good ones get bumped out of temp at times. Most decent thermometers have dials that you can use to adjust the gauge to bring it back to the right reading. I always have meat thermometers that I can leave in meat while it's cooking, as well as instant-read thermometers to test the meat. That being said, there is no better way to test tenderness than learning how to use your fingers. We cooked contests for many years without even a stick thermometer around—it was all about time, temperature, and texture and learning to check things by feel, typically by poking the meat with an index finger. Basically you are simply trying to determine the doneness of the meat by checking the texture. There is really no way to teach you by telling you what something should feel like when it's done perfectly. Simply practice every time you cook, taking note of how meat feels at various stages of doneness. If it feels moist and tender, it probably is!

Immersion Blender or Stick Blender ★ These are invaluable for mixing injections or sauces, emulsifying dressings, or pureeing soup.

Controlled Draft Systems ★ Many contest cooks use these to help control the temperature of their pits. Basically, these are fan-driven thermostats for smokers. I never have 100 percent faith in these tools, but they can make it possible for you to walk away from your cooker for an hour or so.

Insulated Coolers or Cambros ★ In the restaurant business, we use large insulated boxes (often called “Cambros” after the leading manufacturer) for transporting food to catering sites. Most of these have built-in slots for sliding in aluminum pans, which make them very convenient. They work great for the contest barbecue cook, too, as you may have multiple meats you need to hold or rest. You can just as easily use a regular cooler instead, especially for home use.

Electric Reciprocating Saw ★ If I had to pick my favorite thing to do in the barbecue world, it would be to start trimming a hog with a big, dangerous-looking saw—immensely satisfying. You’ll need this only for very large cuts of meat or getting through a lot of bone. A regular electric meat-cutting knife also comes in handy for general use.



SMOKERS

I learned to cook on old-fashioned barrel grills with no thermometers. I've burned down wood into charcoal and had to learn how to feed concrete pits to avoid hot spots and flame-ups. I've slept many a cold night underneath the hot box of a barrel grill, and when I finally made the move to insulated cookers, I was both relieved and saddened. (I managed to adapt to the modern world pretty quickly, and now I get a few cat naps in at night!) These insulated water cookers allow me to concentrate on my product rather than fighting the cooker. However, there are many other types of smokers that people use with great success—from custom smokers that cost thousands of dollars to a basic kettle-style grill. The main thing is to learn your own pit and then adapt your cooking times.

I am not a purist who believes only charcoal and wood can make true barbecue or grilled items. Yes, I think you get better flavor, but I've eaten many delicious items prepared on a gas grill, especially when used with a smoker box attachment.

CHARCOAL AND WOODS

A lot of people think that all barbecue is about is how much smoke flavor you can put on a piece of meat. If you go around and taste barbecue champions' products all over the country, however, you will notice that while smoke is an integral component of their flavor profile, it is subtle and works with the other aspects of their flavors. The lesson here is simple: Use smoke in moderation, just as you would with any other ingredient. It should complement, not overwhelm.

When using most smokers, it is most effective to keep a base fire of charcoal and use wood chunks to add smoke and flavor. Every smoker is different, and the amount of wood you need to use will vary by brands and types. I may use four to six chunks of wood on a charcoal fire. This will typically be enough for three hours of smoking. Another aspect that

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