

Chicago Tribune
FOOD & DINING

Brisket, the Texas crutch way

Wrapping meat in foil overcomes 'Stall' in cooking

STORY AND PHOTO
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 Chicago Tribune

Outside of competition barbecue circles, try telling people that you're going to crutch brisket, and then look at their faces. Blank stares. Even folks at the near-frantic heights of food obsession don't know about this. But the assault on barbecue, implied by the name, turns out to be practiced by 90 percent of pitmasters in competition.

"The name itself surfaced in the competition circuit," said Daniel Vaughn, barbecue editor for Texas Monthly and author of "The Prophets of Smoked Meat: A Journey Through Texas Barbecue." In this gospel of Texas barbecue, Vaughn is chief taster and barbecue oracle, taking you along on his epic road trip in search of the wood-smoking traditions in the Lone Star State. "My guess is that it's called the Texas crutch because it generally refers to a way of cooking brisket, and brisket itself is so well identified with Texas barbecue."

What's with crutching brisket?

Roughly two-thirds of the way through smoking brisket, cooks eyeball the appearance — the crust turns a deep red or nearly black color — or they watch for the internal temp to hit 160 degrees. They pull the brisket out, double wrap it in foil and put it back in the smoker to finish cooking. While the meat bathes in a moist, saunalike atmosphere, it's not getting any more smoke, but "there is a more rapid internal temperature rise," said Vaughn, "that gets things done quicker, at the same time allowing less moisture loss." He calls the crutch "training wheels for smoking a brisket." It helps move the cooking along.

There is a mystery about smoke and large cuts of meat and fire and what happens when the internal temperature reaches 150-160 degrees. Depending on a lot of variables, the internal temp of beef brisket hits a plateau — in barbecue circles, "The Stall."

Enter Greg Blonder, Ph.D., a physicist with degrees from MIT and Harvard, who conducts food science research for Meathead Goldwyn's website AmazingRibs.com. He figured out what causes the stall. The simple answer? It's evaporative cooling. Goldwyn, who posted Blonder's comprehensive studies on AmazingRibs, said, "The meat is sweating, and the moisture evaporates and cools the meat just like sweat cools you after cutting the lawn."

Brisket starts to cook and has a consistent, gradual rise in internal temperature. But when it hits the 160-165 mark, it starts to plateau. Evaporation is a cooling process. The interior temperature stops rising. Depending on variables, like airflow through the cooker, the meat could stall for four hours, even six, before the temperature begins to rise again. In competition, you need to speed up your cooking. Not to



Wrapping a whole brisket in aluminum foil or butcher paper during the cooking process helps power through the stall in internal temperature.

Baby back ribs

Prep: 15 minutes **Cook:** 3-4 hours **Makes:** 2-4 servings

This recipe was developed by Barry Sorkin, owner/operator of Smoque BBQ in Chicago, to simulate the Texas crutch method for home cooks who don't own a smoker. If you start ribs in the oven and finish them on the grill, the meat will be tender and juicy — even sticky and gooey — but, according to Sorkin, the flavor may be a bit washed out. This is a two-step process, first using a rub before wrapping them and cooking in the oven, and then basting with a sauce during the finishing on the grill. (Sorkin points out that he doesn't cook this way at Smoque.)

- 1 slab baby back ribs, 1 1/4 to 2 1/4 pounds
- 4 tablespoons dry rub or 2 tablespoons per pound (If the first ingredient in the rub is salt, use half the amount.)
- Apple juice
- 1 cup barbecue sauce, your choice

1 Heat the oven to 275 degrees. Generously sprinkle ribs with the rub. Double wrap ribs with aluminum foil; place them in a foil pan or a roaster. Pour in apple juice to reach 1/2-inch deep. It'll create some steam and add sweetness and moisture.

2 Slide pan into the oven. Depending on the thickness of the meat and other variables, this first stage of cooking could take 3 to 4-plus hours. Using an instant read digital thermometer, start checking after 3 hours for an internal temperature of 175-180 degrees. At that temperature, remove ribs from the oven.

3 To finish the ribs, heat a gas grill to a low temp, 275-300 degrees. For a charcoal grill, light a charcoal fire and let the coals burn down to a medium-hot fire. It's too hot if you can't keep your hand over the coals for more than a few seconds. Place ribs bone side down on the grill. After the first couple of minutes, begin basting with barbecue sauce. The meat is already cooked; you are looking for the sauce to caramelize and char the ribs. It should take 5-10 minutes.

"If you wrap the meat in foil," Goldwyn summarized, "the humidity in the foil is close to 100 percent, but there is no evaporative cooling, so this method, called the Texas crutch, allows you to power through the stall."

It's worth mentioning that a modified version of the crutch has cropped up in Texas. Instead of wrapping in foil, Vaughn says, cooks are using pink butcher paper or barbecue paper, sometimes called peach paper. "A lot more restaurants are latching on to this, mainly because Franklin Barbecue in Austin, with its massive popularity, cooks that way."

The effect is similar to foil but allows a bit more moisture to be expelled. "The paper itself can

not," Vaughn says.

While Vaughn was logging thousands of miles on back roads, past charming towns with storied pasts, past riverbanks of spent shotgun shells, even Cadillacs half-buried in cow pastures, one of his stops was at Franklin Barbecue in Austin.

"There are very few things in life for which it's worth waiting in a two-hour line. I can tell you, without hesitation, that the brisket at Franklin Barbecue is one of those things. In short: Get in line." (The smoked brisket recipe below is adapted from Franklin Barbecue.)

And go with someone who doesn't frown upon eating with your hands.

Whole smoked brisket

Prep: 1 hour **Cook:** 7-10 hours **Makes:** 20-24 servings

This recipe originated with Aaron Franklin of Franklin Barbecue, Austin, Texas; the method has been adapted for the Tribune by Daniel Vaughn. There are many variables in the timing. Be prepared for 7-10 hours, depending on weight of brisket, how much oxygen the fan blows into the smoker (if any) and if other meats are in the smoker. The recipe was tested for us at Kendall College, supervised by chef Thomas Meyer and assisted by teaching assistant Garrett Guenther and student Nikhil Bendre. Choose a brisket with flat and point intact and with full fat cap remaining on the top side of the brisket.

- 1 whole brisket, 10 to 12 pounds
- 1/3 cup kosher salt
- 1/3 cup cracked black pepper, not finely ground

1 For the rub, mix salt and pepper together in a small container.

2 One hour before beginning, place the brisket on butcher paper or parchment paper on a rimmed baking sheet. Trim off the excess fat, leaving 1/8 to 1/4 inch of the fat cap. You'll be trimming off thick layers of hard fat until it feels soft over the whole surface. You can ask your butcher to do this.

3 Sprinkle rub over entire surface of meat, patting it down. No need to rub it in. Let the seasoned brisket sit at room temperature, uncovered, about 1 hour.

4 Thirty minutes before beginning, light a wood fire or a chimney of charcoal for your smoker. Heat the smoker to 250 degrees. If using charcoal to start the fire, add wood chunks. If using wood, add some more wood.

5 Once the smoke is thin and white, instead of thick and gray, place the brisket in the smoker. If using a probe thermometer, insert it in the meat now. Close the lid. Maintain a smoker temperature of about 250 degrees. Most wood smokers aren't perfect, and the temp fluctuates, so a range between 225 and 275 degrees is fine.

6 After about 4 hours, begin to monitor the internal temperature of the meat. When it reaches 160-170 degrees and has a deep reddish brown or nearly black crust on the exterior, it's time to wrap the brisket.

7 The crutch: To wrap the brisket, fold a 6-foot long piece of foil in half lengthwise; tightly wrap the meat in the foil (or use fresh butcher paper). Increase the smoker temperature to 300 degrees. Place the wrapped brisket back into the smoker, insert the probe into the thickest part and cook until the internal temperature of the meat goes slightly over 200 degrees.

8 Oven option: If using an inexpensive smoker that is challenging to heat evenly, it is acceptable to crutch meat by placing the wrapped brisket in a preheated 300 degree oven for about 2 hours. When it's wrapped — smoker or oven — it's not getting additional smoke anyway.

9 Remove the brisket from the smoker (or oven); unwrap it and let it rest at room temperature, 1 hour. If you're eating later, you can let it rest at room temperature for 2 hours before the internal temperature decreases too much. There's plenty of heat in there. If it gets done (an internal temp of 200 degrees) even earlier, place the wrapped brisket into a covered beer cooler (without ice). Let it sit there until 1 hour before serving time.

10 After resting for an hour, slice the cooked meat against the grain