

Bryan Schaaf: Welcome to Meat Speak, powered by the Certified Angus Beef brand. With me in the studio today is not Chef Tony Biggs. Instead we've actually reached into the reserves. We made the call to the bullpen for the dulcet tones of the right hander from Cincinnati, Ohio, Chef Michael Ollier. Chef, how you doing?

Michael Ollier: I'm fantastic. Hello everyone.

Bryan Schaaf: You know, chef, when we mapped out what we wanted to talk about specifically today, we just knew we needed to make sure Michael Ollier is standing here with us from the inner sanctum of the world's headquarters of premium beef. Because you followed a path, and I shouldn't even say you followed a path. You were doing something that a lot of chefs are now following along, and that is chefs from a classically trained, I guess more conventional background in the kitchen are finding themselves more and more enamored with the world of barbecue.

Michael Ollier: Yes.

Bryan Schaaf: Can you talk about that? I mean your background, I mean you cut your teeth in one of the preeminent farm to table restaurants in Cleveland. You've obviously been at Certified Angus Beef for almost a decade. At what point did that really trip your mind to say, "You know what, this barbecue thing, I should probably pay a little bit more attention to"?

Michael Ollier: Well, let's back it up even to childhood and maybe a childhood that most Americans have had, where their experience of barbecue is probably a lot like mine was. My grandpa was a butcher so that means we had grill outs all the time. Barbecue doesn't mean throw things on the grill, and I know that now, but I didn't then. What I understood barbecue to mean was you put some, whatever, open pit barbecue sauce on a piece of meat, and oftentimes it was chicken, and you'd char the heck out of it. That crispy carbony sugar, that was barbecue to me just because I put barbecue sauce on it.

In the chef world I've come to learn what low and slow means, and then what cooking over direct fire means. It really was a trip to central Texas that was the epiphany. That's where I tasted true central Texas barbecue. For those of you that know what I'm talking about, it's that salt, pepper, post oak on exceptional beef. That experience where it's the fall-apart brisket that just simple, beautiful, and I don't know how else to describe it, except for the epiphany and palate craziness that I experience.

It was at that point. That was my turning point. It was like where has this been all my life. As a chef then, how can this be, and I think that's where the culture is what real ... The product is one, but the culture was what really has made it something sustainable.

Bryan Schaaf: I'm glad you mentioned the culture in barbecue, because it very much is a case where everybody kind of knows everybody in the barbecue world. It's funny, because barbecue is defined by at least arbitrarily by its regionality. You know Texas barbecue tastes like this. You know Carolina barbecue tastes like this. Memphis barbecue tastes like this. At the end of the day, it's not like the barbecue people themselves see them as on different teams.

Michael Ollier: Completely agree, not different teams at all. They may come from different backgrounds as you mention and the different regionalities of barbecue. They might hold themselves true to some traditions because of that, but the culture itself is what I think makes barbecue even more unique than its product. The culture of giving. The culture of welcoming. The culture of surrounding yourselves and feeding a lot of people and making a lot of people happy. Chefs know what that feels like.

Chefs know how to feed a large amount of people and make them happy. The best chefs are the ones that got into it because they like to please others. It's not something they got in because of self-interest. Because it was more I'm a giver and this gives me that most pleasure from that, is feeding a lot of people and they're happy because of something I created. Barbecue is so intrinsically that. That I think is the nugget and that's why people, they kneel at the altar of great smoke. If that's sacrilege, I'm sorry, but that's the feeling that they get. It's such an epiphany.

Bryan Schaaf: You talk about smoke. That does seem to be one of those components that despite the regionality of barbecue, smoke is fairly consistent, whether you're in various parts of the country. Can you draw some of those lines about what is it that constitutes barbecue in these different areas? We know lots of the people. We know lots of the personalities and we're actually going to have a very distinct, well-known one coming up here in a little bit. Can you talk about what are those dividing lines between Texas barbecue and Carolina barbecue and whatnot?

Michael Ollier: I think we can generally speaking, and this'll be from someone who's, I wouldn't say I'm the greatest historical expert on barbecue by no means. Let's start with Texas barbecue. Texas barbecue is pure in that it is generally salt, pepper and post oak. When you talk to Texans, that's what they'll talk about, and that's central Texas. I'm sure that we can talk about regionalities all around Texas, but there's no sauce is the point. Sauce will be served on the side if any.

Utensils are not even welcome in some areas. It's just eating with your hands, and that's general in barbecue too. No sauce. It's pure in Texas. Carolina's really about whole hog cooking more than anything, and also Tennessee. Tennessee so much so, that we know some barbecue people that say, "If you want brisket, go to Texas." Meaning they don't carry beef. It's all about hog, which is fine.

Kansas City is about the sauce and oftentimes a sweeter sauce. Those are generally the regionalities and then there's morphing all in between. You can talk about Georgia and you can talk about Alabama and all in between. Our guest is from Alabama, right?

Bryan Schaaf: Yeah.

Michael Ollier: The guy from Alabama.

Bryan Schaaf: That's right. If you do pay attention to barbecue circuits or just happen to be somebody who watches a lot of Food Network, or, honestly, he's been on the Today Show quite often cooking, chef, I say chef, pit master Chris Lilly.

Michael Ollier: Don't call them chefs.

Bryan Schaaf: I know. Sorry.

Michael Ollier: I know that.

Bryan Schaaf: I'm sorry.

Michael Ollier: Don't call them chefs.

Bryan Schaaf: Chris Lilly from Big Bob Gibson's in Decatur, Alabama, is going to be coming up here. Chef, you already touched on it, and Chris is one of the folks who embodies this as much as any, and it is the idea of when you look at barbecue people, I mean what they do is they make food that tastes delicious. It's the people behind the scenes that really make that barbecue family what it is in terms of being so welcoming. What did you experience as somebody who came from that more fine dining, more traditional culinary background, when you started this foray into barbecue, and you begin meeting the different personalities across? Did they hold you at arms length because you're not in the barbecue family?

Michael Ollier: That's a good question. Absolutely not. Anyone that's interested, and you can see it in their eyes. Like, "How did you do this?" It's so simple. I just salt and pepper and just 18 hours in this, or whatever their descriptors were. The inquisitive people that are interested in what they're talking about, starts the dialogue. This brand has afforded me opportunities to meet and interact with some of the icons in barbecue, the legend, Mike Mills, from Murphysboro, Illinois, the Fox Brothers in Atlanta, Wayne from Louie Mueller Barbecue in Taylor, Texas.

Heck, I've been in so many iconic places. Sam Jones, the whole hog king, that cooks barbecue, and interacting with these people. It is a small network and completely welcoming.

Bryan Schaaf: Since you mentioned it, I have to ask. Sam Jones, in addition to being a whole hog master, does a mean karaoke I understand.

Michael Ollier: He can karaoke. Guy can sing.

Bryan Schaaf: How about that?

Michael Ollier: Yeah. Makes you like him even more, doesn't it?

Bryan Schaaf: It makes me want to, yeah. I'm a beef guy, but I always make room for the hogs as well. In addition to the variances in the regions is the idea of the different sauce components. Obviously in Texas, Barrett Black has always said the only reason that Black's Barbecue offers sauce on the side isn't because of the Texans. It's all the snowbirds who would come down in the wintertime. His grandmother finally got tired of hearing complaints about not having sauce. That's why they offer sauce.

Michael Ollier: That's right.

Bryan Schaaf: When you look at you'd mentioned open pit and barbecue sauces like that. Can you talk about that? Carolina's a very different style.

Michael Ollier: Well, whole hog cooking in Carolina is based on getting a good amount of vinegar to balance, and so a lot of it's vinegar-based, and then there's the mustard-based also. That's what's unique about it. Some of those translate super-well to beef and what historically has been used on pork has been modified and been working great with beef. We've even done recipe testing in our test kitchen to mimic some of those different regionalities, and then try them on certain cuts and have great success with.

I guess my palate, really I gravitate to the vinegar with a little heat. I like the ones that have a lot of vinegar that would traditionally have been used on hog. I'm using that on especially the fattier cuts like brisket, because you need a way to balance that fat. High acid content balances that. Look for something very vinegary to balance out a brisket.

Bryan Schaaf: Well put. Well put. One of the best known barbecue style sauces that's out there is one that we're going to talk to the master of here coming up next, one of the things Big Bob Gibson's Chris Lilly is known for. It was actually invented by Chris' wife's grandfather who was the Big Bob Gibson, not to be confused with the Hall of Fame pitcher for the Saint Louis Cardinals from the 1960s. He in addition to making fantastic barbecue in Decatur, Alabama, was also the one credited with creating Alabama white sauce. White barbecue sauce.

If you haven't experienced white barbecue sauce, you're going to hear all about how it's made. Now it's to the point, honestly, in popularity where it's pretty readily available. You can certainly find a recipe and make your own. Big Bob

Gibson's did it based around chicken. They would actually dunk whole smoked chickens in Alabama white sauce and serve it that way. We're going to hear a bit more from the great Chris Lilly as soon as we come back. Chef, we're going to take a little break. We'll be right back.

Chris Lilly, Big Bob Gibson's, Decatur, Alabama. If you run in barbecue circles everybody knows Big Bob Gibson and what you all do. For those folks who maybe aren't living in the barbecue world, can you tell us a little bit about the restaurant, about the history and all that comes with it?

Chris Lilly: Sure. Absolutely. I guess the reason they do know about it is we've been around for so long. My wife's great-grandfather started Big Bob Gibson's. He was Big Bob Gibson. Started back in 1925 in Decatur, Alabama. He had five kids, all five kids went into the barbecue business. He started this barbecue thing. He was a L&N railroad worker, and then in his free time on the weekends he'd cook for family and friends in his backyard.

People got to eating his barbecue and thought, "Man, you're pretty good at this." He hated the railroad, so he basically decided to open up a restaurant with a friend. They opened it up and the rest is history. Big Bob Gibson and five kids all went in the business, and spread out and really started barbecue in north Alabama. We've been around almost 100 years, five generations. I've got two sons in the business now that are doing day-to-day operations at both the restaurants. It's a huge history for barbecue in north Alabama.

Bryan Schaaf: That's fantastic. The original location is that still in operation? Is it one of the Decatur locations?

Chris Lilly: It is not the original brick and mortar. Big Bob basically popped his restaurant up and down all over Decatur until he found a spot back in the 50s. He built the spot and it actually burned halfway up in the 80s, so we had to build another restaurant, but right across the parking lot. The building's still nextdoor though after we refurbished it in the 80s. You can still see the old brick smokestacks coming out of the back of the coffee shop next door.

Bryan Schaaf: That's awesome.

Chris Lilly: We've got two restaurants in Decatur total, but the oldest restaurant is now a coffee shop beside our largest location.

Bryan Schaaf: Is that like a rite of passage in barbecue where everybody has to endure one fire?

Chris Lilly: Yeah. You got to burn down at least one time to be considered a real barbecue restaurant.

Bryan Schaaf: Tell me about barbecue it's such a regional thing. There's Texas barbecue. There's Carolina barbecue. I go to Tennessee, I see barbecue and there's no brisket to be found, which breaks my heart a little bit. Talk to me a little bit about your barbecue or north Alabama barbecue, or however you'd niche yourself out.

Chris Lilly: Sure. Really years ago writers around the country were thinking of a good way to, they basically created barbecue regions. They say there's four regions of barbecue, your Texas, and your Kansas City and your Memphis, and the Carolinas. You can't really shoehorn all barbecue into those four regions. There so much other great barbecue all across the country. I say that Alabama has some of the best barbecue in the country. Especially north Alabama, around Big Bob Gibson's.

Alabama barbecue, think about it, it's located between the Carolinas and Memphis. You get a lot of vinegar-based barbecue sauces in Alabama. You get a lot of Memphis-style dry rubs. You get dry rubs. You get the vinegar-based sop, mops and things like that. You also have the white barbecue sauce. That was original sauce that Big Bob Gibson started back about when he started his restaurant in 1925 and used it on chicken. He cooked whole chicken and whole pork shoulders.

The white barbecue sauce is a poultry sauce. More than that, I think Alabama barbecue is the meat. It's the pork. It's the beef. It's the chicken. We've got a variety of meats in Alabama, but it's coming straight off the pit, and it's allowing the customer to decide what sauce to put on it. I like to think in Alabama, barbecue doesn't need a whole lot of sauce.

Also, there's a specific style coming out of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, from Dreamland Barbecue. They've been around since the 50s. They cook their ribs directly over hot coals. You almost get a quick charred rib that'll take hour, hour and 10 minutes to cook. It's almost a grilled rib, and that's a particular style that Alabama can hang their hat on. Years ago the State of Alabama recognized 28 barbecue restaurants in Alabama that have been open for over 50 years. Also, Alabama has the highest number of barbecue restaurants per capita than any other state in the union.

Bryan Schaaf: Does Texas know this?

Chris Lilly: Well, I doubt they'll admit it. Yes. With that, I mean knowing that and know the traditions of barbecue comes Alabama, I say Alabama is the fifth region of barbecue. How about that?

Bryan Schaaf: Amen. Amen. When you talk about barbecue, it's almost been like you all have been doing barbecue 100 years. There's so many barbecue restaurants that have been around for a long, long, long time. Everybody knows each other, but it's almost like the rest of the culinary world is finally starting to notice, "This has

been going on forever guys." I guess when we look at that sort of crossover effect that takes place, I mean we see you cooking at South Beach Food and Wine. I think you were cooking was it Maui.

You're doing stuff on the Today Show or Food Network or who knows. What does it mean to you to be one of the folks, I guess, carrying that barbecue flag into the mainstream?

Chris Lilly:

It's really neat. I've been in the business a long time. I've been full-time in barbecue since 1991 at Big Bob Gibson's. I've been doing this a long time. I've seen the changes. I've seen this barbecue excitement, this wave that washed over the country and everything. It goes back to the history of the country.

Barbecue didn't necessarily come from one person or one place. It's almost a melting pot from cooking traditions from Africa, from spices coming up from Mexico, from the Spanish and the French explorers bringing in our livestock and things like that. It's from the Native American Indians. It's a little bit from everybody that came together to create this whole cooking style, this low and slow sort of American barbecue style.

I think barbecue is a true American food. I think with the whole push of people getting the whole idea of food being and cooking being artisanal and getting back to the land and things like that, barbecue is real. I think people all across the country whether you're from the South and grew up on barbecue, or you're a chef in New York City or California or Miami, you can appreciate that. It's real food. It's real fire. It's the cooking techniques. There's sort of a rawness to it.

What I absolutely love is when I go to the finest restaurants, white table cloth restaurants in the country, and there's always some aspect of barbecuing or smoked meats on that. Years ago I saw it when chefs would call me, cold call me out of the blue and want to come down and spend a little bit of time at Big Bob Gibson's talking about barbecue and learning about barbecue. To me it's just the opposite. I want to go to their restaurant and learn their cooking techniques, and things like that.

It's a good trade. It's a good trade. They're interested in barbecue and I'm interested in what they do. This culinary world is a small world. Barbecue, yeah, you know everybody. You know everybody that does it all across the country, but even beyond that. I think the realness of barbecue and the authenticity of barbecue has brought us closer to chefs from all over the world.

Bryan Schaaf:

Awesome. One last question, you mentioned it was your wife's grandfather who was Big Bob Gibson. How did you get into-

Chris Lilly:

Great-grandfather.

Bryan Schaaf: Great. Okay, great. I guess were you doing barbecue before you met your wife? Is this joining the family? How did you come about to all this?

Chris Lilly: Yes. When I was a kid, without a doubt, some of my first memories are in my backyard with my father on his charcoal grill cooking barbecue, grilling away. Yes, he loved barbecue. As a matter of fact, he was a builder in Florence, Alabama, and he built some of the barbecue restaurants in Florence, so some of the older barbecue restaurants. He built the pits. He built the buildings themselves. There was a love for barbecue there.

As far as me with experience in barbecue, I married into it. I met my wife in college, and after college her father wanted me to come learn the business, and do the Big Bob Gibson thing. It's worked out great. I didn't know how much I would have loved it at the time or did love it at the time. It felt right. It feels right in the pit room. That's still my favorite place to be, in the pit room in the back of Big Bob Gibson Barbecue. There's something about the serenity and the calmness of being back there and just with peace and quiet, and all you can hear is the fat rendering and the coals popping. It's really, really awesome place.

Bryan Schaaf: What do you guys cook over?

Chris Lilly: We do-

Bryan Schaaf: Is there a specific type of wood that you use in Alabama?

Chris Lilly: Hickory.

Bryan Schaaf: It is hickory, okay.

Chris Lilly: It is hickory. It's one of those choices, and I tell people use what's available to you. Use what you can get. There's no sense in us trying to import post oak or alder wood. We're going to use what's in our region, and then learn to cook barbecue with that wood and to build your flavors around that specific flavor profile. Yes, we use hickory.

Bryan Schaaf: Awesome. One last question before we have to close here, because I have to ask it of everybody from Alabama. Roll Tide or War Eagle?

Chris Lilly: Well, I've spent so much money at the University of Alabama with all three of my kids going and graduating, I can't get out of here without saying Roll Tide.

Bryan Schaaf: Amen. Thank you Chris Lilly. Thanks for taking time, sir.

Chris Lilly: Thank you Bryan. My pleasure.

Bryan Schaaf: Take care. Back here in the studio for the Meat Speak Podcast powered by the Certified Angus Beef brand is not Chef Tony Biggs. Michael Ollier, our resident



barbecue aficionado. Chef, Chris Lilly, I don't know that they make human beings more salt of the earth, more solidly put together than that fine individual from Alabama.

Michael Ollier: It's so true.

Bryan Schaaf: You have known Chris for a while, because you've run the circuit, not necessarily going around cooking and competing, but you've experienced things like The Jack. You've experienced the American Royal. You've experienced Memphis in May. Chris is one of those personalities who's always there. Can you talk about your interactions with Chris at a lot of these over the years?

Michael Ollier: Sure. Chris comes with a large entourage, like the Chris Lilly contingent is always around, the Big Bob Gibson crew. Just the kindest people you could ever meet. You can just hear it in his voice there. At The Jack we'd be interacting on the hill the night before with our judges and the competitors meet before the actual event. Then, Memphis in May most recently. He's the most welcoming, just consummate barbecue guy. Come into our space, enjoy. Let's chat, let's have a drink. Then it's cool to see someone like that end up on stage too, because he's got a few trophies under his belt too from a lot of competition barbecue. He's just salt of the earth. Great guy.

Bryan Schaaf: The last two years I've had the good fortune of attending The Jack down in Lynchburg, Tennessee.

Michael Ollier: The world championships.

Bryan Schaaf: That's right. If you hang around the Big Bob Gibson cooking apparatus and tent, by the time their last dish goes in for judging and they can finally kick back and relax, all those burnt ends that didn't make the final cut for judging.

Michael Ollier: There's like six perfect burnt ends and they might cook a couple of hundred to get the perfect one out.

Bryan Schaaf: Well, all those we'll call them rejects that didn't make the final are just hanging out there.

Michael Ollier: Looking for someone like you. I know. I know where you're going with this.

Bryan Schaaf: Some of the best burnt ends you'll ever have in your life were what didn't make the final cut at The Jack. Chef, that's about all the time that we've got. I appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule to join us here in studio. You know what, why don't you come back in two weeks? Because we touched on it earlier. We talk about the various regions of barbecue and what constitutes barbecue and the people behind it. Texas itself is probably one of those things, it kind of requires its own segment. Because there's so much that

goes into Texas. Texas people will certainly tell you that. Texas barbecue, don't mess with Texas.

Michael Ollier: Don't mess.

Bryan Schaaf: We're going to dedicate an entire 30 minutes here in two weeks all around Texas barbecue and the personalities and the regionalities even within Texas, and the people that make that happen. We appreciate you taking time to join us on the Meat Speak Podcast, powered by the Certified Angus Beef brand. If you happen to stumble onto us by some other chance, know that you can search for us. We are available across just about every major podcasting platform. I've been told you can also just search for Certified Angus Beef Podcast. Until next time, thank you chef.