

Bryan Schaaf: Welcome back to the Meat Speak podcast powered by the Certified Angus Beef brand and brought to you from the inner sanctum of the world headquarters of premium beef located about 40 miles South of Cleveland, Ohio. We're here for the second week in a row talking about this topic just because I love me some barbecue.

Chef Tony is taking a break and we have gone ahead and made the call to our resident barbecue aficionado. Chef Michael Ollier. Chef, how are you doing?

Michael Ollier: Fantastic. This comfy chair it where it's at. Thank you Tony. I appreciate the comfortable chair, you know, provided.

Bryan Schaaf: You know with Tony Biggs, we make sure it's nothing but the finest. So you know, Chef, two weeks ago we talked about barbecue and to talk about barbecue in 30 minutes. I mean it's doable but there's always going to be some things that I wish that we had more time to talk about this and in this instance, this is barbecue centric to Texas, right?

Barbecue for a lot of people begins and ends with Texas. Especially if you ask a Texan.

Michael Ollier: Especially if you ask Texan. So true.

Bryan Schaaf: And you had said a couple of weeks ago that your foray into barbecue and you know, barbecue and regionality and understanding how all these different pieces and flavors and styles of cooking and is it pork, is it beef, is it chicken? And what constitutes that for you? It all started in Texas though, right?

Michael Ollier: It all started in Central Texas. So with the brand, I was at a conference in I want to say 2011, I believe. So it was a conference for IACP, International Association of Culinary Professionals. So it's a bunch of writers and pretend chefs and bloggers and myself included on the pretend chefs, by the way, I'm not trying to throw anyone else under the bus but myself.

And really it's a way to get together and talk all things foodie centric. And an optional tour the day before was a Central Texas barbecue tour. And I took advantage of that and we went to Taylor, Texas, and Lockhart, Texas. So was in some of the most iconic Central Texas locations, tasting beef sausage and brisket. And really that was the epiphany. That's where things changed. And from that point forward, I had, I think, a calling to dive in deeper on this world of barbecue.

Bryan Schaaf: You know when you think about Texas barbecue, you know the idea of no sauce, right? I mean there are certain things that you just don't do in Texas.

Michael Ollier: There are a lot of things you don't do in Texas.

Bryan Schaaf: Try to not eat a salad. But can you talk about it in your mind, like what is it that, and of course everybody has their own variation, their own way of doing things, even within Texas. But what is it to the lay person who is not in Texas? Like, what is Texas barbecue to you?

Michael Ollier: Product itself and culture. So the product itself is brisket centric or it's plate short ribs. Those are the two cuts most commonly used. And if you ask any of these pit masters what their recipe is, they'll all just chime in that it's salt, pepper, Post Oak. So, simple seasoning and low and slow over, oftentimes, old school open pits. That's the product itself, that's where it's at. So sauce, you're absolutely right is something that's I think developed from the tourists who've come around. Who just can't live to understand that you can eat without. So to me, that with something pickled is all I really need.

But sometimes a vinegar style sauce I really like too. So I'll squirt some sauce but don't put it on top. Have it on the side and then dip. If that's how you do it, oftentimes they'll say like there's no cutlery either. So don't expect there to be a fork and knife around. This is eat with your hands food.

Bryan Schaaf: The idea of Texas barbecue, it's something that has transcended the borders of the state itself. You know, we look at a lot of people that we know even. You know, the Gaardbo's at Chicago Culinary Kitchen outside of appropriately named Chicago, they pride themselves, they do a lot of different things, but they really pride themselves on their Texas style barbecue. Lots of examples like that around the country of people who are trying to replicate what happens in Texas outside of its borders.

Do you think as somebody who puts a lot of frequent flyer miles on doing various things, honestly, a lot of things that have nothing to do with barbecue, do you think the general population around the country, outside of Texas really understands what that Texas barbecue is? I mean, what is that to understand? When you got a plate short rib, it just kind of jiggles on your plate. People just don't see this sort of thing, right?

Michael Ollier: Right. And I think that that circle that you take like rings of when you throw a stone in the pond, those rings get wider, right? From central Texas, the understanding of what that is like, it varies and it becomes something a little more out of touch as you get further away. And also you're held to a different standard further away from that point.

I think that's the greatest point here is that in central Texas there's a different level of what's acceptable.

Bryan Schaaf: Yeah.

Michael Ollier: Further out there's pretty wide variance of what's acceptable. Also, I think that not enough respect for what happens at the epicenter. We need to truly honor

what has been created from that Central Texas location. We need to respect that and it's done well and it's not done well. So how do we balance that as a culture? How do we balance respecting both the tradition and the location and just enjoying barbecue? All right. Don't overthink it. Let's just enjoy barbecue and "Hey, don't fault me. I'm in New York. What's the problem? I just want to have some Texas style barbecue." So how do we balance that I think is the discussion.

Bryan Schaaf: Yeah. Our guest coming up here in a few minutes is the fourth generation pit master of Black's barbecue. In, I'll say Lockhart, Texas, but they've expanded. I think they have four locations between Lockhart all the way down to New Braunfels outside of San Antonio over the years. And Barrett Black will touch a little bit about what that means to be expected to hold to a lot of those Texas standards and I would imagine that there's an element to that that is as much reverence that comes along with Edison. It can also kind of be a little stifling can't it? In terms of, you're in Texas, your great grandparents started the business. You're not really allowed to change, are you?

Michael Ollier: Well, I think it's got both sides of that coin and there's something comforting about that history and generational. That's what you know and that's what you do well and you get to wake up and do that again each day.

And then there's the other side is it's repetitive, it's not something I want to keep doing every day, I like to have new flavors or whatever that is that you want to expand, but more importantly be relevant. So if you continue to doing the same thing, just because your generations before you have and have succeeded on that and you're not looking up to see if it's appropriate to the climate you're in, you might be in trouble.

And I think the Blacks have done well to be both relevant and historically accurate. And so Barrett's got great perspective on that.

Bryan Schaaf: Yeah, I'd say it's really incredible to look at. You look at a lot of the generational families of barbecue in Texas. Of course, we mentioned the Blacks, but you look at Snows and Croix and Smitty's and of course our good friend down outside of Houston, Joey Saladino at Joe's who, you know, his father started start the business a long time ago.

But you look at a lot of those classic standards we are seeing, I would say a young generation of barbecue people different from the fact that they didn't necessarily come from barbecue families popping up in Texas. Can you talk a little bit about that? The two that really spring to mind are the Heim's and Arnis and Mallory Robbins.

Michael Ollier: I would say the same folks. Evie Mae's barbecue outside of Lubbock and Wolforth and what Heim is doing in Fort Worth, those two. And you're right, they're young and they've got a lot of energy and it' energy directed toward

how can I make this both authentic, speak to the heritage of this, and just do it extremely well. Every detail. And a lot of times we'll talk about eating the sides of a barbecue joints place, like going through their sides to really know whether they are in it and they care about every detail.

If they're just opening up a can and dumping beans, that ain't going to fly anymore. That's just not going to fly anymore. So really taking slaws and beans and forward thinking sides to a new level is another way to look at great barbecues and it's future and balancing.

Bryan Schaaf: And to an extent, I would imagine they kind of have that liberty to take things beyond where they've been because this is their show. They are first generation in these businesses. Heim's, as much as I love the brisket, I love brisket. The one that always jumps out to me is they have this burger, I mean this is a, I think it was a top Texas monthly, top 50 barbecue joint and the burger is just... I would put the Heim burger up against any burger from any shitty restaurant, non-barbecue in the country.

Michael Ollier: Delicious. So true.

Bryan Schaaf: It's incredible. It's a burger topped with prime brisket topped with like a bacon onion jam, I think topped with like their house made sausage even. And you know, it's a challenge to fit your entire mouth around this burger. I readily accepted that challenge.

Michael Ollier: Of course.

Bryan Schaaf: Yes. But to me that speaks to where this is headed. It's the fact that there are young couples like, like the Robbins and the Heims who are in a way kind of rewriting what you can do because they have started a brand. They haven't started a new chapter. They've started a new book in Texas barbecue as far as I'm concerned.

Michael Ollier: I think all of them are welcome. That's the great thing is we need those people on our team, right.

We need the young, energetic, forward-thinking, haven't been bound to that historical. Plus we need the people that have that historical perspective just so we can be both honorable and move forward.

Bryan Schaaf: One big happy family, Jeff. We're going to take a break. We will be back with Barrett Black, fourth generation pit master from Black's Barbecue based in Lockhart, Texas. But you know one of the true Texas iconic barbecue families that we talk about. Barrett's going to talk about the history of Black's and probably to a much deeper extent what it means to know that that's your last name on the front of this establishment and sort of the pressure that comes with upholding what's now the fourth generation of this iconic Texas barbecue

establishment. So we will be back in a moment with Barrett Black, thanks for listening.

Barrett Black. Black's barbecue, a fourth-generation Pitmaster Lockhart, I'll say Lockhart, Texas. But now you guys have obviously multiple locations but man, when you think about barbecue, you know everybody who is in barbecue obviously knows about Black's barbecue. I mean you're kind of an icon but for those folks who maybe don't live in that barbecue realm can you tell us a little bit about [inaudible] blacks and its rich history and kind of what it means in terms of defining Texas barbecue?

Barrett Black:

Yeah, for sure. I mean first off being fourth-generation, I see it as a major responsibility and sometimes I feel that weight on my shoulders some days trying to carry on the tradition. But it started by my great-grandfather back in 1932. Started it out of necessity cause that was right in the middle of the Great Depression and it started as a meat market.

And so he had some cattle, a friend of his had a building and they shook hands and had a business partnership just to try to find a way to sell the cattle that they had and not have to kill them off or anything like that for no reason. So that's the humble beginnings of how it started and slowly grew into a grocery store as well. Then it was passed on to my grandfather. He bought it from his dad and he and his wife, my grandmother, Edgar junior and Norma Jean, they worked there for over 60 years and really grew it into what it is today. We owe all that we have to them and their hard work and slugging it out way before barbecue was cool because barbecue was blue collar. It was not something that was considered what it is today, which I'm grateful for what it is today, but very thankful for them not just committing themselves to keeping a business open but committing themselves to quality.

That's where I get a lot of that from that when it didn't really matter, they decided that, "If we're going to do this, we're going to do this right." And so they standardized their sausage recipe. I still have memories as a kid sitting on a stool watching my grandfather trim and season every single brisket. There wasn't a single brisket that got sold that he didn't touch. Still the smell of black pepper... So if I'm at my house or something, I'll just take a little whiff of just black pepper. Because that brings back all these memories of just watching my grandfather trim and season all these briskets. So it's because of them we have the brand that we have today and my dad has now bought it from his parents. He's the third generation pit master.

I work with him and my brother and a staff of over a hundred employees now to carry on that tradition, stay true to our roots, who we are. And then as fourth-generation, you know, every generation kind of puts its own spin on it, but it's a challenge. Because now, the fourth generation, I like to get creative with different things and I cook a lot of different stuff at home. But in the restaurant it's always trying to tow that line of staying true to who we are. The old school

Texas tradition, which I love and our customers love, but also staying relevant and having some fun with it in different ways.

So that's something that I've gotten to bring as a generation. A fourth generation is make some new sausage recipes or special events. We do different things with maybe donuts or something like that, but still use the smoking meats, but just having fun with it. Because food is fun. You know, why not?

Bryan Schaaf: There's a regionality to barbecue and whether that's kind of been fabricated and just people bought into it after the fact. People like to draw these really distinct lines and sometimes, like Chris Lily in Alabama. It's really hard to put something like that into a box. But y'all pride yourself on tried and true Texas style barbecue. Right? Which can you talk about what that means? Is asking for sauce fighting words in your heart, you know?

Barrett Black: I think it's great and it's amazing. Even within Texas you have different Texas styles. It depends on what part of Texas you're in. When we first started, I know my grandparents or my great-grandfather weren't thinking like, "Oh well I'm going to do it in this style." They're the ones who pioneered it and made it the way that they did, not because they were thinking it would become this new genre of food. But because what defines Central Texas barbecue, mainly it's the wood and then also, we're beef country. I think just because those were the two major things that were around there. We're surrounded by Post Oak wood. So that's what we smoke with and we're surrounded by beef, you know, not pool, there's some pork but beef.

That's kind of what has defined it. As far as the sauce thing, I'm not sure why there was no sauce. I'm grateful that there wasn't because it caused my grandparents and stuff to really focus on the quality, buy the best beef. You know, because there was nothing to hide behind. It was the meat, the smoke, and salt and pepper. That's really all it is.

So we have sauce on the menu now. We don't cook with it, but we were open for over 40 years before we had it. And the only reason it was because my grandma just got annoyed by what she called the snowbirds, people from up North that were escaping the snow and ice and traveling through and kept asking and asking and asking for it. And so finally she's like, "Okay, fine, I'll come up with something, but it's just going to be on the side. We're not changing everything we do."

I mean that's one of those things I was talking about earlier that she was still staying true to who she was and who Black's barbecue is, but staying relevant by offering something without changing completely who we were.

Bryan Schaaf: Yourself, you wear it on your jacket. Fourth-generation Black's barbecue. Is there a weight, is there a pressure? Are there moments where you appreciate the gravity of the fact that you're in Texas, your last name is Black, you're in the

family business. And now you and your wife have a son. Do you ever take a moment to stop and think like, "This is really freaking cool to be in the middle of this."

Barrett Black: Yeah. It hits me all the time, especially when I'm walking into one of our restaurants and I always look up at the sign that says Blacks and it just mentally reminds me like that's my name on a building or if there's a piece of trash, I'm walking into the restaurant and I'll pick up that paper towel or something like that that's just sitting on the ground because it's my name on the building. My family's name and it represents who we are and it is a responsibility, I think it's an honor, but also a responsibility.

Every day we've got to be on the top of our game. And so a lot of people ask me like, "who's your competition around here?" And honestly, my answer is ourselves because we have been in business for so long, people have come in for decades. They expect the same quality and top-notch service, everything. And so I'm always just trying to make sure that we live up to that expectation and trying to do better every single day. So always pushing the envelope on that.

Bryan Schaaf: Right on. Your son, do you foresee him following a similar path? Was there ever just an expectation that like yes, this is naturally what you're going to do? Or do you have to hit that point where you, sort of like a family farm almost, where you have to fall in love with it?

Barrett Black: Right. I think you do have to fall in love with it. Restaurant business is hard. It's not made for everybody. My dad and my uncle, they grew up knowing that, it was ingrained in them. You're going to go to college, you're going to have a different career, and maybe if you're crazy enough to come back, maybe we'll let you work in the restaurant. That was partly because that was their parents loving them and wanting better for them because barbecue wasn't cool. There were many years where they were barely making payroll and barely scraping by. So they wanted better for them. When I came into the business, that was kind of when my grandparents were about to retire and get out of it. I had just graduated from college and I thought, I'm not sure what I want to do longterm. Restaurant business was nowhere on my mind, but I thought they're still alive. They're still working in the restaurant. I want to learn straight from my grandparents how to cook a brisket and just make sure I have that knowledge and that experience and then go have my quote real job.

But I thought it'd be six or eight months. But you know, now I've been there 10 years and part of it is because I have fallen in love with it. That smoke smell is addicting and the the beef and just being able to produce something that immediately you can see the payoff. Of cooking up brisket or that sausage or ribs and you know, making people happy. I mean that's addicting as well and I've been so fortunate as well because of all the hard work of my grandparents and everything that we're now positioned to ride this beautiful wave of barbecue that's hitting the entire world now.

We get hit up all the time from people in Korea, Australia, Paris. My dad was cooking in Paris with a barbecue restaurant there a few weeks ago and we're able to take advantage of that in order to support, you know, of course my dad and my family and my brother's family and almost 150 staff. To get to travel and do a lot of cool stuff and share this great thing that we have with as many people as we can.

Bryan Schaaf: Awesome. One last thing just because we're approaching the end here. Can you walk us through the Black's Barbecue way of preparing brisket. I know the thing about barbecue is that everybody's got their own way and especially when you're talking about the folks who do it in the backyard, everybody's got the best way, right?

But can you talk us through the tried and true, I know you guys are opposed to the crutch or you don't crutch at least.

Barrett Black: Right.

Bryan Schaaf: Can you just talk to us about the process?

Barrett Black: Yeah. The process, a lot of it depends on what you're cooking with and the type of wood and thank God we use Post Oak wood and I think the more the better. And that's one of the main reasons we don't wrap, but it starts with buying the best kind of beef that you can because my dad always says, you know, "We're barbecue guys, we're not magicians." And so he can't take the cheapest cut of beef and turn it into something totally amazing. We can do better than most but then we trim the brisket to get any parts that are too thin or any hard corners.

We trim that off to make it nice and rounded, even shaped. So that way it cooks evenly, otherwise it's going to get wasted anyways. In the restaurant, we use all those trimmings to make our sausage. People at home, they can use those little pieces if it's big enough. Sometimes I just use it as a mini brisket, if I want a little snack. So I'll just put it on the smoker for like an hour while the other one's cooking as well or it's great in stew or whatever.

But then just rub it with our simple salt and pepper rub and smoke it with the Post Oak wood. We do a multi-day process where we do two smokes on it. So that's one of the reasons why we never sell out because of that process and but also my grandfather, he was right in that it honestly tastes better. Because you know, grandma's lasagna or whatever always tastes better the next day. So he took that to heart and thought that to be true and I still believe it. That has the opportunity for all that smoke and salt to really get absorbed into the meat. So it's a multi day multi step process. Low and slow. And holding it right and slicing it right. There you go.

Bryan Schaaf: Amen. Barrett Black. Black's Barbecue. Thanks for taking time, sir.

Barrett Black: Yeah. My pleasure.

Bryan Schaaf: Back here on the Meat Speak podcast powered by the Certified Angus Beef Brand with Chef Michael Ollier and Chef Barret Black. He's an interesting barbecue personality from the standpoint of, he's pretty young and innovative but at the same time because his last name is Black, he has certain traditions that he has to hold true.

To have somebody like that who really isn't just walking that fine line between old and new but really seems to be relishing that opportunity. We see Barrett coming up with a lot of dishes that aren't necessarily classic barbecue. We see them doing a lot of stuff with beef shanks and whatnot. What does that say to you about I guess where Texas barbecue with these next generation pit masters is heading versus where it's been for the last decades?

Michael Ollier: Well that's a great question. I think that Barrett's a great example of someone who's taken that burden on his shoulders very well and has taken it upon himself to be a great ambassador for quality beef for one and Central Texas barbecue too.

So two things I think he's a great champion for. What a great ambassador for our brand, right?

Bryan Schaaf: Yeah.

Michael Ollier: What a great person for an ambassador for barbecue also. You could probably flip that and say what a great ambassador for barbecue and what a great ambassador for quality beef.

Bryan Schaaf: Yeah. If you get the chance to get down to Central Texas, of course. I mean there's so many places that you can stop into, make sure Black's is on that list. One of these times I'm going to go down and just explode from eating that much brisket and just know that when I go know that I went happy. I went the way that I wanted to go. So we appreciate you Chef for taking time out of your schedule and if you are listening in, we also appreciate you for giving us 30 or so minutes of your time. If this is your first time tuning into the Meat Speak Podcast, powered by the Certified Angus Beef Brand, please know that it is available across most major podcasting platforms and we have an entire library of episodes there for you to search and we'll be back in two weeks. Chef, thank you again.

Michael Ollier: My pleasure.