

Bryan Schaaf: We're bringing you this special episode of Meat Speak, recorded in Asheville, North Carolina at the Certified Angus Beef Annual Conference. Our guest this week, Pitmaster Yoni Levin from The Best Barbecue Show podcast located in Austin, Texas.

Back here on the Meat Speak podcast, Brian Schaaf here with Yoni Levin from The Best Barbecue Show. So, if you're in the podcasting... What do you call it? Say you're searching for a new podcast, right? I've got a few favorites right there. Best Barbecue Podcast.

Yoni Levin: Yeah, it's been a long, fun process and it started as an idea that was going to be 10 to 20 episodes. Then it was going to be 50, and now I don't know if I'll ever stop making episodes. I've been making an episode a week for almost 130 weeks straight now.

Bryan Schaaf: So, before we proceed, right, I want to make sure we establish your street cred to the listeners, right? It's a barbecue podcast and Yoni is in Austin, Texas. And if you're from Texas, you know more about barbecue than everybody else on the planet, correct?

Yoni Levin: Pretty much. I say we talk taste and even tried to cook the best barbecue in the world, which is Texas barbecue.

Bryan Schaaf: Yeah. So, okay, we've talked about it. We've got a lot of friends in Texas. Actually. There's a... We'll do a little shameless self plug. There's another podcast uploaded that's... It's all about Texas barbecue, and what it is, it's actually with our friend Barrett Black from Black's Barbecue down in, what, Austin, Lockhart, San Marcos, New Braunfels. They're icons, right?

Yoni Levin: Yeah.

Bryan Schaaf: But what I've learned is even in the realm of Texas barbecue, Texans even have a different idea of what constitutes Texas barbecue. What does Texas barbecue mean to you?

Yoni Levin: Texas barbecue, to me, is simplicity. It's salt, it's pepper. There are a few secrets that go into it, but I've been sworn to secrecy, so I can't share those little things, but- [crosstalk 00:02:00].

Bryan Schaaf: You're in the barbecue Illuminati.

Yoni Levin: Well, I can tell you that if you start with salt and pepper after you cook 20, 30 briskets, you'll start to figure out maybe some things you want to change, some things you want to add. But it really is smoke, salt and pepper. That's the major things. It's taking the time. Like all the people at the Certified Angus Beef Conference, it's taking great care. Chef Tony likes to talk about you spend two years raising a cow and you can ruin it in two minutes. These guys, they take

what everyone's raising here and they make it even better over 12, 14, 16 hours.

Bryan Schaaf: Yeah. Yeah. So, you're in Austin, Texas, which, I mean, it's kind of the epicenter of barbecue. Even within Texas, if you look around with... Obviously, we'd mentioned Black's. Franklins is there. I mean, a lot of the icons are in and around Austin. I won't do it to you. I won't say who's the best, but I will say, what are some of your favorite barbecue joints that... There's a lot of tourists going to Austin. Where do they need to go to really experience true Texas barbecue?

Yoni Levin: Well, to give you a little background from the show, I purposely named it The Best Barbecue Show and refused to make any lists because I think that... And it's natural to want to know the list. It's natural to say, "I want to know what the number one is," but who's making that list? And who's palette... We could both go to 10 places, and you might have a totally different ranking than than I am. And Franklin, Aaron Gets, he should have a lot of credit because he has taken what Lockhart and what these old school places have done and brought it to a new level, and he... I mean, he's already won awards. So, I should say he should win award for it, but he's taken that to another level. But that inspired so many people now that there's Terry Black's Barbecue, which is in relation to Black's. There's Micklethwait, there's Kerlin barbecue, there's la Barbecue, which is the female-owned, Ali and LeAnn, amazing pair that have trained some of the best barbecue people in Texas that they're... People who have cooked there have cooked all over the state now.

Let me think there. You can go to a dozen places in Austin, style switch, the switch that they're as good or better than something you would get at Franklin or the places that everyone knows of, and there's really no way to quantify how good they are because they will all give you an amazing slice of brisket. They will give you perfectly cooked moist turkey. I mean, that's not something easy to do is keep turkey moist over 12 hours.

Bryan Schaaf: Yeah. You make turkey jerky after 12 hours, right?

Yoni Levin: Yeah. Not in Texas. And the beef ribs. If you want to try something that everyone's looking at pictures of brisket but the beef ribs, you go up to Louis Miller. Franklin does it on Saturdays. A lot of places will do it during the week, but the beef rib, you're committed to a whole bone, so you have to get a pound and a half to two pounds. But bring some friends, and that is one of the best bites in Texas barbecue right now is just everyone chasing that perfect beef rib.

Bryan Schaaf: Yeah. One of my favorite things I've ever got to do in my career is I got to stand in the Texas sun in Fort Worth and actually season plate short ribs with Barrett Black.

Yoni Levin: Amazing.

Bryan Schaaf: And I didn't realize until 12 hours later when they were coming out of the smoker and we were... For me, the mark of a really good beef rib is it should jiggle like jello, you know? I mean, it's got so much beautiful fat inside of it that, holy moly. I mean, I believe there is a huge percentage of the population just in America who has no idea how good a plate short rib cooked like that can be.

Yoni Levin: And it's much more attainable than a beef brisket.

Bryan Schaaf: Yeah.

Yoni Levin: It's much more attainable than a lot of these. Maybe if you're cooking some pork ribs, it's similar, but you can cook... The short rib can handle a little more heat. It can handle a little over, under seasoning. And so you can play with that. It's a little bit more of an expensive buy on the front end, but you can get away with a six or eight hour cook instead of a 12 hour cook, and I'll even give you Wayne Mueller, who is the descendant of Louie Mueller and Bobby Mueller, a very important person in Texas barbecue. We call him the Pope of Barbecue. He runs the Cathedral of Smoke, AKA Louie Mueller barbecue. And he has happily shown people that what he actually does is he cooks the ribs until that jiggly... Maybe you use a thermometer or a poker to feel. When you put some sort of skewer into it, you want it to be soft.

You don't want to really catch anything. You want it to just slide in and out real smooth. Let it cool off, off the smoker, maybe an hour or two. You want it down to maybe like 140 to 160. Then you wrap it. Whether you wrap it in paper or not, you wrap it in saran wrap, and the saran wrap actually gives it this steamy render at the end. You let that rest for a few hours. When you break off in that saran wrap, when you cut that first rib, it's this amazing finish that he's happy to share, and I'm happy to pass it on because I think every home cook should be able to serve beautiful plate ribs to their friends.

Bryan Schaaf: Yeah. You touch on an interesting point. It's kind of the next thing I wanted to ask you about is the fact that you have this podcast all dedicated to Texas barbecue. How did you get into this? And there's such a boom in barbecue, and specifically Texas barbecue out there. How much of that is... Because Texas barbecue has undergone this huge makeover in the last 10 years. Now, people are finally [inaudible 00:08:10]. How much of it is just the fact that people like yourself are out there with a larger megaphone saying, "Hey, y'all got to come try this?"

Yoni Levin: I think I can take a small amount of credit for it, but I think the credit goes to the cooks. It goes to the people that I'm chasing down every day because they work so hard. I've said this a few times on my show and I'm trying to work as hard covering barbecue as the people who cook it, and that's why I'm forcing myself to learn how to edit video, to create a YouTube, to create all these things so that I can cover what they're doing righteously. I've just been learning about slow motion video, and I started as an enthusiast. I started in 2009 when I moved to Texas. I just loved barbecue and I thought I was barbecuing in upstate New York

and I had no idea what I was... I was soaking wood chips. I was doing the things that I roll my eyes at now, that I'm terrified to share, but I do it because I want those people out there to realize there's a Shangrila, there's somewhere you're going to, and that's, I think, Texas barbecue.

And I got there. The first bite I ever had was la Barbecue. Ali herself handed me my first bite. And from the first bite, I knew, "Oh, this is what I've been chasing." This is the thing that some of the places in upstate New York are trying to do, but they're, they're not really doing it in the loving, slow way the Texans are doing it. And I started off, I was like, "Well, I'm going to make a show." I had some friends who had a media company. We were working together on a bunch of ideas. I was the barbecue guy. And since then, that media company's kind of dissolved itself, but I still have my show in my own company. But I have been chasing the story and even I'm all the way here in North Carolina and I'm still chasing the quality of the beef, the beauty of just the ranchers who some of them have probably never even tasted a Texas brisket, and I think they should all have the chance to come out and see the way that people are honoring the years they spend raising this beef by slow cooking it.

And there's really nothing... I was laughing, I was at Snows right before I came here. It's a place that's only open on Saturdays. And they serve the brisket right off the pit, so it's hot, and they actually use an electric knife because it's too hot to use a regular knife on. And if you use a regular knife, it would just fall apart.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah.

Yoni Levin:

And so that's one of the tricks they use, but there's nothing like a fresh slice of brisket. Even if you have brisket from the best place in the world in your fridge and you reheat it, there's nothing like when that initial jiggly perfect brisket get sliced and you get that first bite where the fats pouring off of it and it's ready to be devoured.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. My favorite thing is when you're slicing into a brisket and it's ready. You start at the flat and you start working your way back to the point end. It's right about when the flat starts to transition to the point, and you can press down on it and you just see this waterfall of goodness. There's a part of me that dies a little inside because you're squeezing beauty out of this thing, but it's like it's still kind of cool, right?

Yoni Levin:

If you're on my Instagram, I have a very popular hashtag. It's hashtag don't squeeze your meat, and it's a beautiful thing, but at the same time, if you're going to eat it right away, maybe that's okay, but it terrifies me sometimes because I don't want that. I want every little molecule of juice to stick to every molecule of meat it can because you don't want to... I know it's beautiful for Instagram, like do it for the gram, but it's this perfect integrity. And some of the places now... I'll give away another Texas secret that it's not really a secret anymore, but some of these places, they will cook the brisket the day before

and they will hold it at 150, 160 degrees, whatever their warmers are set out for 12 hours.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah.

Yoni Levin:

And what they're doing is they're allowing the brisket to reconstitute itself for all that juice that pours out to actually soak back into the meat, and that's what allows for that jiggly delicious slice.

Bryan Schaaf:

Yeah. And actually, I've heard that... And for the record, we're not sponsored by Yeti in any way, shape or form, but I know a lot- [crosstalk 00:12:28].

Yoni Levin:

I wish I was.

Bryan Schaaf:

Right. A lot of our friends in Texas, they will actually hold for, I mean, 12 to 24 hours just in a Yeti cooler. They'll just put them in, close the lid, see ya. So, everything is cooked a full 24 hours in advance and it's just beautiful. Texas is known for all of these iconic, iconic barbecue joints, Kreuz and Smitty's and Snows and Black's, but then you've got these folks. The two that stick out to me, although I know there are more like them, the folks in Fort Worth at Heim Barbecue, Travis and Emma. If you go out to Lubbock, Evie Mae's with Arnis and Mallory. [crosstalk 00:13:04]

Yoni Levin:

I love Arnis and Mallory.

Bryan Schaaf:

Both of them have been around for five years. They followed similar paths, started with the food truck, opened the brick and mortar, and their barbecue is exceptional. But what I notice about them is they don't necessarily just stick to tried and true Texas barbecue. They can go off menu a little bit. Is a little bit about that because they don't have all that history that they have to hold onto because it's what's expected of them? And is that something that you think you'll see more of as a lot of these young, I guess, newcomers continue to open up places?

Yoni Levin:

Well, I love the tradition, but I have said before that I feel like Aaron Franklin is... I wouldn't call it a curse, but it's whatever the step below a curse is, which is he can't really go outside of what he creates because that's what people expect. Now, we have places in Austin like LeRoy and Lewis. They only cook traditional barbecue on Saturdays. If you go there on a Tuesday or Wednesday... Or not a Tuesday. They're closed on Tuesdays. A Wednesday through Friday, you're going to get a double pork chop, you're going to get a stuffed quail, you're going to get a smoked burger. You're going to get these really unique things.

Now, Arnis and Mallory, they're super interesting because Arnis uses a reverse smoker. So, it's almost like a Texas offset, except the smokestack's on the wrong side. And he took an idea, which is the reverse smoker, and he brought it to a whole nother level. He changed the heights, the little pieces of metal that

deflect the heat. He has created something that these monstrosities, these giant pits that cook as good or better than any Texas offset pit, but they're his design and they're his way of cooking. I think it's beautiful that they have this freedom to throw whatever they want. Maybe they put a quarter, a hindquarter, a front quarter. Maybe they cook half a steer. I think that the fun is just getting started, and the Texas style, the slow cook works for everything.

We've been doing a lot of beef cheek. Barbacoa is what it's called in Texas, and that's a beautiful thing because you can actually take... Let's say you cooked a bunch of briskets. You save all that fat, you grind it up, you turn it into tallow. Then you cook barbacoa, you smoke it for three, four hours. Then you put it into the tallow and you almost braise it in the smoker for another three or four hours, and you have falling apart, juicy... It's not really too irony. It's not really too beefy. It's just this perfect shredded whether it's tacos or whatever. The innovation is just getting started. So, we- [crosstalk 00:15:53].

Bryan Schaaf: Yeah. Almost like confit beef cheeks.

Yoni Levin: Exactly. It's a confit.

Bryan Schaaf: That's fantastic. You know, Yoni, before we have to wrap up, can you tell us... Give us the places that our listeners can find you on either across the search platforms on the web, on... Do it for the gram, right? Can you tell us where we can find you?

Yoni Levin: Hashtag do it for the gram. You can definitely find me on hashtag don't squeeze your meat. That's kind of one I use, myself. Hashtag meat man is a big one, but BestBarbecueShow.com. Also, on most social media, I'm BestBarbecue. So, spelled out, B-A-R-B-E-C-U-E on Twitter, on Instagram. I'm actually BestBarbecueShow on TikTok, for all of you who are getting into the new media. It's super fun and it's super cool to see.

Bryan Schaaf: I'm still on Myspace.

Yoni Levin: Yeah, there you go. But I'm having fun. It's beautiful to connect. Just today, I asked people... I'm at this beautiful Certified Angus Beef Conference, that it was so well thought out, so executed like... I mean, I feel like I'm at some Boeing or some big event because these guys, they put so much work into this. I've run events for years, so I've seen how hard it is. And the fact that they find the attention to detail, they find a way to bring style to just everything we do. I mean, you got to speak on that stage today with giant screens, with a blue angel, with a live band. I mean, it was like you had your own late night show.

Bryan Schaaf: Although, maybe it's to our detriment that they allowed me to speak on stage today.

Yoni Levin: Absolutely not. I'm really happy. I'm happy for this podcast. I'm happy for people to hear the story of Certified Angus Beef, because I think people don't realize the quality and the hard work that goes into it, and that's all I'm about is quality and hard work. But feel free to find me, feel to reach out. I literally respond to... I was taking questions from Australia to the Philippines to a couple guys in the UK today, and I really... If my DMs are blowing up, I'm having a great day. So, I'm happy to help. I'm happy to communicate until I have to hire someone to help me.

Bryan Schaaf: Excellent. Well, Yoni Levin, Best Barbecue Show, the pride of Austin, Texas. Thanks for spending time with us, my friend.

Yoni Levin: Thank you, sir.