

# Carnivorous curriculum

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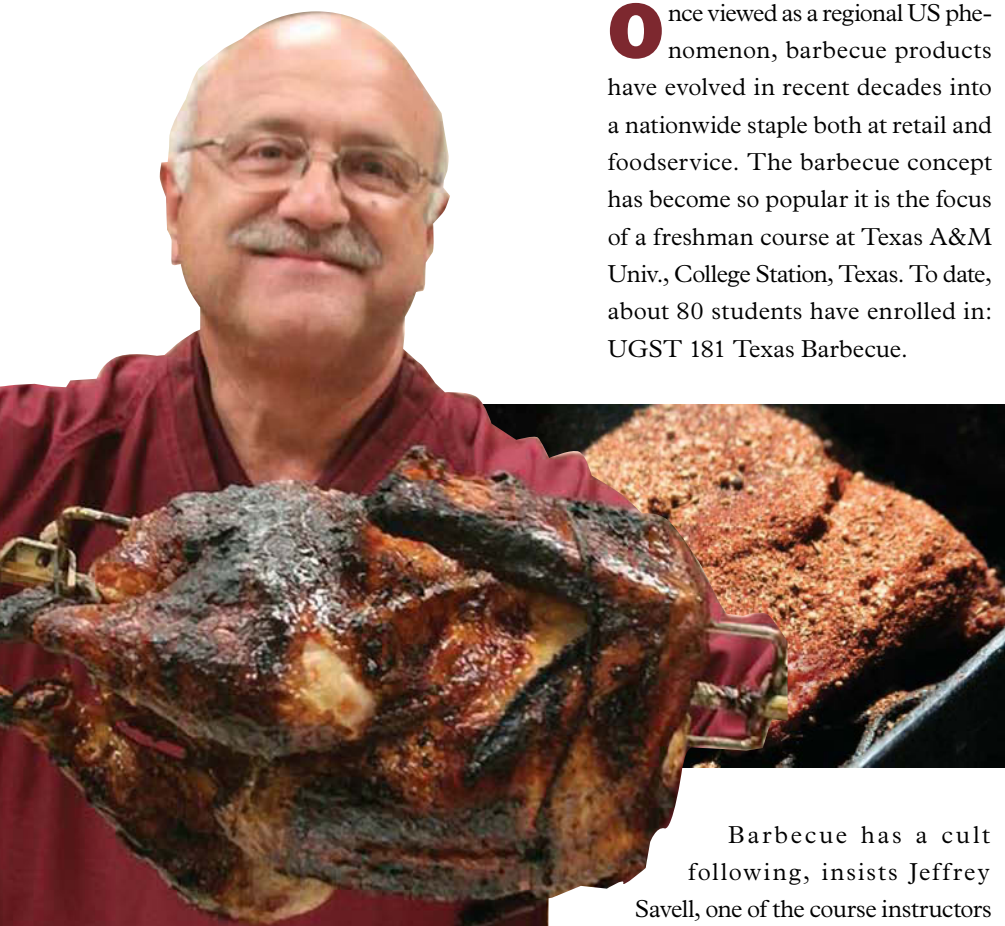
*Texas A&M puts an academic spin on the art of barbecue cooking*

Once viewed as a regional US phenomenon, barbecue products have evolved in recent decades into a nationwide staple both at retail and foodservice. The barbecue concept has become so popular it is the focus of a freshman course at Texas A&M Univ., College Station, Texas. To date, about 80 students have enrolled in: UGST 181 Texas Barbecue.

Teaching Excellence; and Leader, Meat Science Section, Department of Animal Science, Texas A&M Univ.

“Good barbecue is difficult to prepare and has a mystery to it. It is where great meat, seasonings and smoke come together,” Savell explains. “Barbecue is more art than science.”

How the UGST 181 Texas Barbecue course was developed is as unique as its



Barbecue has a cult following, insists Jeffrey Savell, one of the course instructors and Regents Professor; E.M. “Manny” Rosenthal Chairholder, holder of the Cintron Univ. Professorship in Undergraduate

syllabus. In 2009, Texas A&M’s faculty received an email request to teach first-year seminars to incoming freshmen to get them into small sections of students and provide an easier transition to college life, Savell explains. “We were told the stress incoming freshmen face

is similar to that faced if they lost a parent,” he adds.

The first seminars were taught in 2008 and included a variety of interesting courses, including one on baseball. “I thought at the time if you can teach a course on baseball, you should be able to teach one on barbecue,” Savell says. “I got together with Ray Riley, manager of the Rosenthal Meat Center, to see if he could help me. And that began our joint-teaching of Texas Barbecue.”

The UGST 181 Texas Barbecue course celebrates the rich heritage of Lone-Star-State barbecue. Preparation techniques cover various meats, seasonings and cooking methods with an emphasis on food safety, costs and availability. The most recent class met on Friday afternoons for 14 weeks during the fall semester. Students successfully completing the course receive one credit.

The biggest takeaway for students successfully completing the course, from a barbecue standpoint, is

## The nitty-gritty

The course covers various types of cooking equipment, including pits, kettles, barrel smokers and water pan cookers. All formats can produce authentic Texas barbecue, Savell insists. “Our philosophy from the beginning was we wanted to demonstrate barbecue on consumer-style, easy-to-purchase cookers and smokers, such as the Weber Smokey Mountain Smokers and the Weber Kettle Grills [for rotisserie and indirect cooking]. These cost from \$100 to \$300 or so and can be easily found. We also cook using cinder blocks and smokers on trailers, but we emphasize controlling the heat. Smoke can be done with a variety of equipment.”

Woods used in Texas barbecue are hickory, oak, pecan and mesquite. Wood preference is usually regionally based. “Students from South Texas, where mesquite is more prevalent, seem to prefer mesquite,” Savell says. “The greatest volume of Texas barbecue is cooked with post oak



**“The best barbecue is when people wait on the barbecue—and not when barbecue waits on people.”**



learning the history and types of barbecue and trying different foods. Savell’s wife, Jackie, teaches students about preparing side dishes.

“My motto is: ‘Teach someone to cook and they will always have friends,’” Savell says.

because Central Texas barbecue restaurants use it.”

Simple seasonings such as salt and pepper go miles in making barbecue products taste great. “We cover different seasonings, rubs and marinades, and spend a considerable time on proper

brining and its importance in pork and poultry cooking/smoking,” Savell says. “Foundational seasonings such as salt and pepper along with something flavorful such as paprika, plus more-earthly seasonings like garlic and onion, all work well. I love brown sugar on pork,



but cooking with sugar can be tricky because it burns quite easily.”

Southeastern-style pulled pork and Hawaiian-inspired pork loin are also covered. Boston butts (pork shoulder) are used to make pulled pork, which is one of the most basic forms of barbecue, especially in the Southeast. “This is one of the first hands-on activities we give students. They actually pull the pork for the meal,” Savell says. “We cook a lot of pork loins because they are easy to demonstrate and are great if you cook them just to 145° F – they take on great flavors from the seasonings. Brown sugar and pineapple make a great glaze for a Hawaiian-inspired pork loin.”

Regarding barbecuing ribs, the class covers baby-back vs. St. Louis-style; Memphis-style (dry) vs. Kansas City-style (wet); and Asian-inspired rubs and sauces. “There are so many combinations of cuts and dry vs. wet styles in cooking them,” Savell says. “The students learn the anatomical locations of these ribs.”

Another class is dedicated to

preparing chicken: smoking, cooking by rotisserie; whole or pieces of chicken. Demonstrations of brined vs. non-brined chicken always generates plenty of interest. “Proper endpoint temperature of 165° F and resting products demonstrate poultry can be tender and juicy if great care is taken,” Savell says.

Most students taking the course have never eaten lamb or goat. Lamb racks and lamb legs are prepared using simple seasonings along with incorporating rosemary. “Most students like it once they eat it,” Savell says. “This year, we cooked the goat on a rotisserie and served the meat with tortillas, pico de gallo and guacamole. It was wonderful.”

## Beef 101

If you want to start a fight, ask someone if they wrap or don’t wrap a brisket, Savell jests. “We call wrapping the ‘Texas Crutch’ because it is used to speed-up the process and to get the brisket tender and to fall apart quicker,” he adds. “Some purists believe

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you get steamed roast beef-type flavors using this process – and the only good brisket is not wrapped. The latest thought backing wrapping is it prevents ‘The Stall’ that occurs in cooking due to evaporative cooling.”

Briskets are hardest to successfully and consistently barbecue, Savell says. “If you can successfully cook a brisket, you have arrived,” he adds.

Cooking/barbecuing meat Brazilian and Argentinian style is also covered. Students benefit from the input of Dr. Flavio Ribeiro, a Brazilian native, who participates in teaching the course. “He teaches a little about Brazil and how they barbecue. This is a day-long event. We cook picanha, beef short ribs, lamb and other meat cuts. The only seasoning is coarse sea salt and it is amazing.”

Another class covers smoking



beef cuts such as sirloins, tenderloins, shoulder clods and ribeyes. “We smoke tri-tips, which are a California favorite, along with ribeyes, for prime rib roasts,” Savell says. “Some Texas barbecue restaurants use shoulder clods vs. briskets for their primary beef item. Cooking to a lower temperature [145° F] is more critical here compared to the higher internal temperatures [190 to 200° F] used for briskets. The flavor/tenderness combination on these cuts is remarkable and makes them very unique.”

One class covers Thanksgiving turkey – namely brining recipes, smoking, frying and cooking by rotisserie. “Last year, we prepared smoked [hickory], rotisserie and fried

turkey,” Savell says.

The second-to-the-last class covers cooking whole pigs Hawaiian-, Cuban- and Cajun-style. “We cook a whole pig in a cinder-block pit in my backyard,” Savell says.

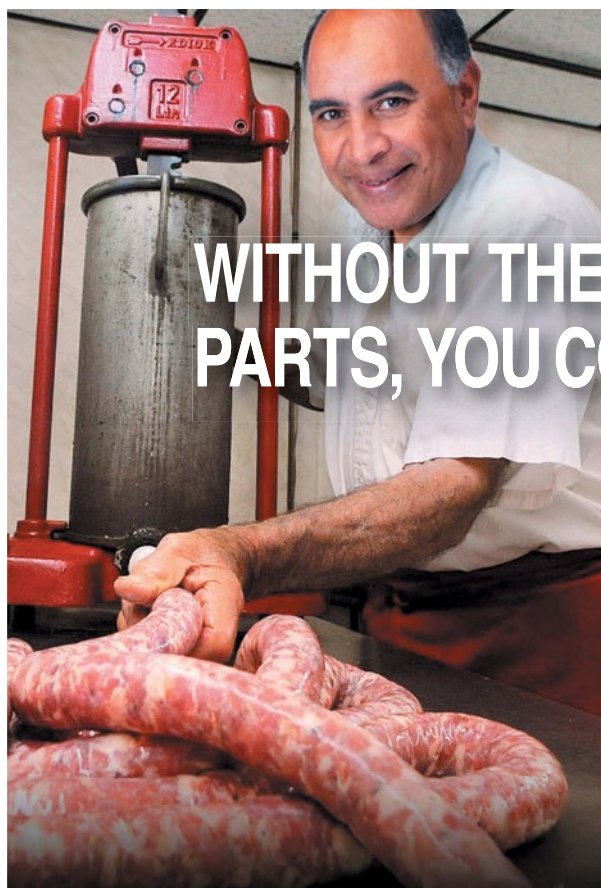
“It takes most of one day and the students get to hang out with Ray, me and the teaching assistants. When finished, the pig is more of a Luau-style – it pulls apart very easily. This last course event is the highlight of the semester.”

Since maintaining food safety is critical, the course also stresses proper hand washing; separation of raw vs. cooked foods (coolers, cutting boards and utensils); and proper cooking endpoints and cooling of leftovers.

## Making the grade

When it comes to handing down grades for the barbecue available commercially, the professor of ‘cue is not shy. Savell insists that the most successful barbecue restaurants cook product, serve product, run out of product and then close their doors until the next day – day in and day out, Savell. “Holding barbecue waiting on customers is the most difficult thing to do and that is why there is so much mediocre-to-bad barbecue,” he adds. “The best barbecue is when people wait on the barbecue – and not when barbecue waits on people.”

From a ranking standpoint, Savell isn’t sure there are any barbecue chains that routinely rank very high.



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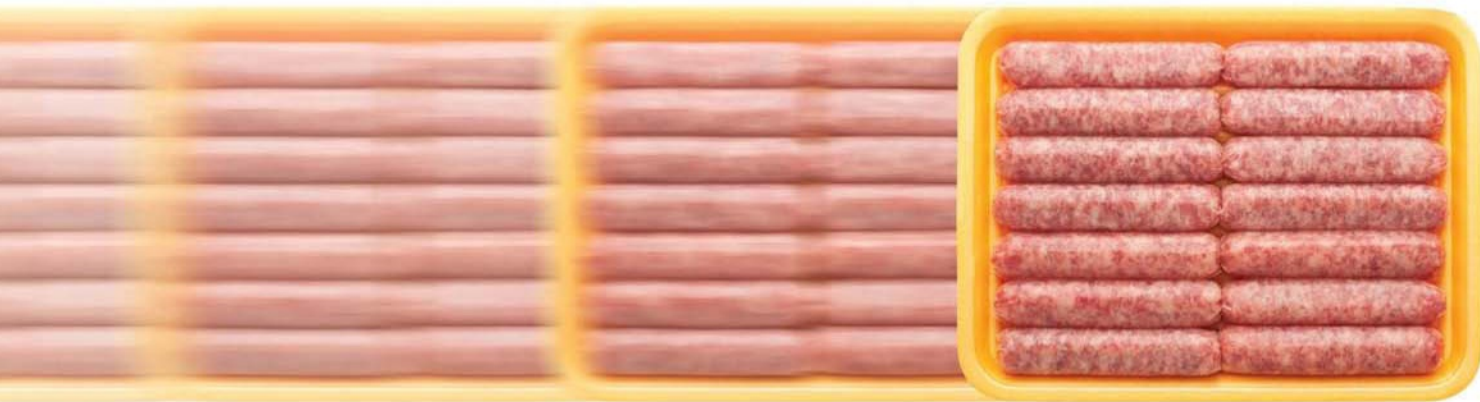


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Most of the top-ranked barbecue places are one-store operations, he says. “The dedication it takes to prepare great barbecue day in and day out is something that is quite difficult to franchise,” he adds.

### Market analysis

Several processors have made great pulled pork, spare ribs and even smoked briskets, Savell says. Attention paid to the right amount of smoke, proper temperatures of cooker and endpoint of products, and how the product is handled after it is cooked, results in good products.

“Cooking great barbecue is more of a marathon than sprint,” Savell adds. “Regardless of the size of the operation, there is nothing fast about barbecue so the traditional high-speed operations have to figure out the best ways to do this without sacrificing the quality of the barbecue.”

So, smaller meat and poultry processors are best able to produce authentic Texas barbecue, right? “Size does not matter, but having the heart of a craftsman is important,” he says.

### Other camps, classes

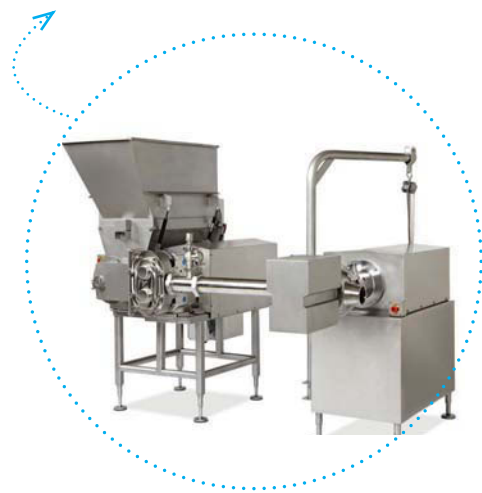
Although this course is only for freshmen enrolled at Texas A&M Univ., the

Barbecue Summer Camp and Camp Brisket are for foodies, food industry folks and barbecue enthusiasts, Savell says.

“We decided to do the Barbecue Summer Camp in 2011 and it was a smash hit,” Savell says. “Barbecue Summer Camp covers a broad approach to barbecue cookery and culture in Texas and beyond. *The Houston Chronicle* ran a huge story about it and the next camp in 2012 was sold out in just a few days. We since have added Camp Brisket, which we did in January 2013 and we will probably do that again next year.”

Camp Brisket addresses the perpetual debate over which grades or types of beef to use, the various types of smokers and the age-old discussion of whether or not to wrap the meat, among other things.

Texas A&M has also participated in the the *Texas Monthly* BBQ Festival. When the opportunity to participate in the festival first arose, the school wanted to highlight its program with the use of the BBQ Genius Counter – copied after the Apple Stores Genius Counter. “We have participated in two of these festivals and will be back there again in November 2013,” Savell says. ■



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