

# BARBECUE

## IS FOR LOVERS

*A revival in the heart of  
America's barbecue birthplace*

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**T**he United States' history is beautiful, problematic, fascinating, and ever changing. As we continue to uncover our past, we learn more about ourselves, our place in time, and how to honor and preserve the stories of the places where we live. The story of Virginia State has a unique place in American history. George Washington's Mount Vernon Distillery is in Jamestown, Virginia, established in 1607, and was the first permanent English settlement in North America. Virginia's nickname 'Old Dominion' reflects Virginia's status as one of the oldest and most influential colonies.

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We learn so much about ourselves when we uncover evidence of how people ate, drank, and lived throughout history. Unless you're Native American, you're an immigrant to this country and that fact has created a cultural melting pot unlike any other in the world. Evidence shows that humans have gathered around fires to eat, drink, and share stories since the beginning of time. We still do that today, whether it be the campfire or the backyard grill. We still long for outdoor cooked food and gathering around a meal, maybe with whiskey in our glasses, while sharing stories and camaraderie. Americans are known not only for their love of backyard grilling, but also for barbecue!







PREVIOUS PAGES: Pairing barbecue with Caiseal  
THESE PAGES: A range of barbecue preparation and whiskey selections: Ragged Branch Rye Whiskey and its home



Author Joe Hayes said in his book *Virginia Barbecue: A History*, “Few Americans argue against the fact that Southern barbecue is the most purely American food that exists. By some definitions of the word cuisine, the American passion for barbecue... qualifies it as an authentic American cuisine.”

The term “barbecue” evolved from the Spanish word “barbacoa,” which was used to describe a method of cooking meat over a wooden framework, likely originating from indigenous peoples in the Caribbean. In Mexico, the term barbacoa was applied by the Spaniards to the pit or earth oven used by the local indigenous people for cooking or roasting all kinds of foods. The word “barbacoa” evolved into “barbecue” in English, referring to a similar cooking method but eventually developing into the

modern concept of slow-cooking meat over a fire, often with specific regional styles and techniques.

Barbecue came to the American colonies from the Caribbean. Enslaved people brought from the Caribbean prepared this food, which was tied to the triangular trade: spices, sugar, and rice. According to culinary historian and author Ramin Ganeshram, there are many accounts of barbecue meals in the 17th century in the colonies. George Washington wrote about barbecue meals and preparation in his diaries. Ganeshram states, “So it is the smoking aspect that identifies barbecue, so that is how barbecue was being prepared in Virginia. It was most often a shoat, which is a small pig, and the seasoning was very close to the original indigenous preparation, lime, or some other

type of acid, chili peppers and probably garlic and other herbs. At that time, barbecue was an event. A pig feeds many people, so it was a planned social event.”

If you’re a barbecue fan today, you may think of Texas style or St Louis style for barbecue regions. Many people think of the South as one region in relation to barbecue. You often see terms like ‘Southern barbecue’. The American South is a big place with vastly different geography. So what is Virginia barbecue and what makes it unique? This is a question I pondered after visiting Richmond, Virginia as a judge for the First Landing Cup Spirits Competition this year where I met John Vest, founder and pit master of Redemption BBQ in Richmond, Virginia.

Preparing the judges’ final Richmond dinner, Vest spoke about his passion for

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reviving Virginia-style barbecue. Vest laid out an array of sauces with someone dedicated to explaining each sauce, which reminded me of a whiskey tasting. He claims that vinegar or acid-based sauces with smoked meats are what differentiates the style.

Vest says, “Redemption BBQ is part of a movement to recover and celebrate the barbecue heritage of Virginia, the true birthplace of Southern barbecue. Our

meats, our techniques, as many supporting ingredients as possible, and our core sauces are all rooted in the rich traditions of Virginia barbecue.”

This is Vest’s second career. He was a pastor before he launched his business. Four years in Richmond for a seminary job convinced him and his family to stay. He always had a passion for food and he can trace his roots to Virginia, so this moment in his life seemed meant to be. In researching

Virginia’s barbecue history, Vest found two books showing that Virginia had lost its historic American barbecue style. “Until I moved to Virginia, I had never heard of Virginia style of barbecue, you hear of Texas style, St Louis style, etc, but never Virginia. I wanted to understand its past in this region. I read a book called *From Barbary to Barbecue: The Untold History of an American Tradition* by Joseph R Haynes, where he puts forward that Southern American barbecue has its roots in Virginia, in the book the author does a great job explaining the origins and differentiating barbecue from grilling hamburgers and hot dogs and other barbecue regions that came later.”

Vest had a new quest: to put Virginia’s barbecue back on the map. So, he bought a food truck and went for it. Now, with >>



THESE PAGES, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:  
Virginia Distillery Co's Courage &  
Conviction American Single Malt  
Whisky; Catoctin Creek Hot  
Honey Rye



a brick-and-mortar business, he is still expanding and sees an open road ahead. One pillar of his business is his devotion to hyper regionality and true pasture-raised meat. Animals being raised humanely is critical. "Sometimes, I pay three times more for my meat than most people do. I built my business with ethical farming practices and humanely raised animals as a part of the core of our business," says Vest.

Another source of research for Vest was a book published in 1824 called *The Virginia House-Wife*, a housekeeping manual, and cookbook by Mary Randolph. In this book, Randolph presented a very Southern, very Virginian model for Southern women. In this book Vest discovered a recipe for 'Pepper Vinegar' which was used in barbecue and a mushroom ketchup which pre-dates Worcestershire Sauce and offers an umami flavor; a savory, brothy, or meaty taste sensation that enhances the overall flavor of food. So the acid-based sauces, smoking traditional meat like pork and chicken, became the foundation of Vest's offerings.

And there's another revival happening in Virginia: whiskey.

Upwards of 80 distilleries are now active in the state of Virginia. And what's a better companion to barbecue than whiskey? The synergy between the historic style of barbecue sauces that Vest creates and Virginia whiskey is a unique experience.

Caisel Beer & Spirits Co Peated American Single Malt Whiskey won Gold this spring in Virginia's 2025 First Landing Cup Spirits Competition. Paired with Vest's 'Commonwealth' sauce, a sweet and savory tomato vinegar sauce made with mushroom ketchup, together the tangy sweetness of the sauce with burnt ends and maple-drenched smoky whiskey makes for a mouthwatering match.

Virginia Distillery Company's Courage & Conviction Single Malt took home a gold medal in the Best in Class at the First Landing Cup Competition. This American single malt is made with 100 per cent malted barley and matured in former bourbon, sherry, and cuvée wine casks for a minimum of five years. Filled with flavors of sweet baked goods and ripe fruits like pears,

peaches, and nectarines, this whiskey is a perfect partner for the 'Unforbidden Fruit' barbecue sauce which is a tomato-based sauce sweetened with apples. Perfect on Vest's pork belly sandwich.

For those who love to bring the heat to the party, Virginia's beloved Catoctin Creek Distilling Company's Hot Honey Rye whiskey also took home a gold medal. The Catoctin Creek team infused their potstilled 100 per cent rye whiskey with three types of local Virginia honey (wildflower, clover, and buckwheat) and an infusion of chile peppers. The resulting flavors are delicious and pair well with Vest's Pepper Vinegar sauce, which is composed of hot peppers soaked in apple cider vinegar based on one of Virginia's oldest sauce traditions.

Another gold medalist was Ragged Branch out of Charlottesville, Virginia, a beautiful farm distillery which sits at the gateway of Shenandoah National Park. Ragged Branch made its mark at the First Landing Cup Competition this spring with its Bottled-In-Bond Rye whiskey. With grain grown on a neighboring farm, the distillery mills, mashes, ferments, distills, and matures on-site. This rye, with its touch of salinity, sweet tobacco notes, and dried fruit and raisin flavors, goes hand-in-hand with the 'Crossroads' sauce made with tangy vinegar, tomato, and mustard which is based on a traditional Southside Virginia sauce.

Individuals like John Vest not only reaffirm the significance of Virginia's barbecue heritage but also foster a sense of community around this time-honored tradition to remind us of what it is all about. His commitment to using local ingredients and age-old techniques is a testament to the vibrant tapestry of flavors that define Virginia barbecue.

As patrons gather to savor the smoke-infused meats and innovative sauces, they become part of a revival — not just of a cuisine, but of a cultural legacy that honors both the past and present. So, take a trip to Virginia and experience the taste of Virginia barbecue. Remember, you're not just enjoying a meal; you are partaking in a shared narrative that celebrates love, history, and community. ■

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