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ON THE GRILL

Short Ribs

By John Clarke

The meat sits on top of the bone

When someone says ribs, the first thing that probably comes to mind is pork ribs, and usually in the form of the St. Louis-style rib cut. St. Louis-style pork ribs are very good and so are beef ribs, which normally come in the form of a short rib. Sometimes these are labeled as boneless short ribs, but this article will focus on the ones with a bone.

These beef short ribs derive their name not from their length, but from the short plate, which sits directly in front of another favorite cut, the flank steak. Beef short ribs are not normally associated with the word barbecue in eastern NC, as that term is reserved for pork shoulders and Boston butts, which are cooked low and slow.

You may have visited a churrascaria, or a Brazilian steak house, which often features a full rack of short ribs that are brought to the table on a skewer. The server uses a long knife to cut the meat away from the bone and drop it onto your plate. These restaurants also use open fire pits with the meat suspended to cook it to the point of tenderness, but not overly done. Since we do not have such a restaurant nearby, this is a job for the home grill.

These ribs are usually sold in a package of four rib bones with a length of about eight inches and are about three to four inches wide. You will want to choose ribs that have had most of the fat cap trimmed away by the butcher (revealing the marbled meat underneath). Our local Food Lion often stocks boneless short ribs, which are great on the grill or in the slow cooker. Harris Teeter seems to routinely stock short ribs in a vacuum-sealed package. You can find good cuts of short ribs at Piggly Wiggly (my preference is the one in Beaufort) as well, and they are often on sale. Again, watch your cut. If the fat cap is on, you are paying for the fat that needs to be trimmed before cooking. Also, you should look for USDA Choice, Prime or simply Certified Angus Beef.

The silver skin covering the meat should be removed. You can do this by lifting the edge with a dull pointed knife and then gripping it with a paper towel and pulling it down and away. Pulling it off allows the smoke and heat to penetrate well through, melting the fat and gristle. On pork ribs, the bottom of the ribs is where you would normally see this silver skin, but if you remove this skin on a beef rib, the bones fall away.

Reading a recipe in full before starting will often tell you how far in advance of the meal you need to start. You will want to salt the ribs, preferably 24 hours in advance of cooking them, using 1/2 to 1 teaspoon of salt per pound of ribs. I usually take a small ramekin and fill it about 1/2 full with Kosher salt and sprinkle it evenly on the meat. The absorption of the salt begins almost immediately, and this dry brining technique results in beef that is even more tender. While a brine of 24 hours is best, a shorter period of two to four hours will tenderize the meat somewhat and will give a good result.

Following the dry brine, wipe down the meat with a wet paper towel. You can then use a rub of your choice or you can find one on the internet. Standard rubs usually include salt and pepper and some sort of chili powder, but it's hard to beat commercially prepared Montreal Steak Seasoning.

On to the grilling. I use a Big Green Egg (a kamado-style ceramic cooker). This type of grill is renowned for its ability to hold heat and maintain a steady cooking temperature. Any type of grill can be used, but it must be set to 225 degrees and set up for indirect cooking. With a ceramic grill, you want to start closing down the vents when it reaches 190 degrees, or the temperature will rise higher than your goal and be difficult to reduce. You can add oak or cherry wood chunks that have been soaked in water (but you need to do the soaking ahead of time).

I have researched the cooking times for ribs, and they go by the thickness of the rib cut you have. Some are only about an inch thick, and some are double that. Remember that you cook by the temperature of the meat and by time. For thinner ribs, the grill should be at 225 degrees, and the experts say the temperature of the ribs should be 203 degrees for perfectly tender ribs. Now that number, for me, can vary a bit, but according to several Texas rib cooks, this temperature has allowed the meat to tenderize nicely—and you won't end up with chewy ribs. For the thicker cut (and keeping the grill at 225 degrees), you should budget seven-plus hours or longer. I have cooked them for about eight hours and they come out super tender. If your grill creeps up on temperature, you are going to

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