

Corned Beef Brisket

By John Clarke

Since the advent of COVID-19, the subsequent variants—and who knows what may be on the horizon—we have had an interesting time going food shopping. Some tense hoarders have taken every single piece of chicken and package of hamburger out of our local Food Lion, and with the uncertainty of their supply chain, we are often left with no options other than to wait for “the next truck.” One way to check in is to call ahead and place an order for pickup or just to clarify inventory. If there is something you want to cook, your best bet is to call ahead or be prepared to call around to each store as inventory levels are going to vary. Now we are seeing that it is not necessarily hoarding, but simply there is no inventory at the warehouse level, and the supply chain is in a constant state of disruption. The Atlantic Beach Food Lion had no chicken when I was there in late January—but they did have cuts of other meats that require more planning and cooking skill than simply setting the grill or oven to 375 degrees and baking for 45 minutes.

It may be helpful to consider an out-of-the-way meat market that might just have what you need, such as the much smaller IGA Store on Highway 24 in Newport or Riggs Pork Market in Maysville. Riggs raises its own heritage pigs and slaughters them, and they are a great resource for pig pickings. Heritage hogs are a better product than what you get at the grocery stores. The problems with traditional grocery store suppliers may continue with many employees out sick with COVID. That may leave us with shopping online or driving two-plus hours to other butcher outlets.

Everyone has heard of Omaha Steaks for gift giving, but a simple Google search will turn up many more suppliers that might have (often in bulk) exactly what is missing from your local grocer. The cuts from Omaha are on the small side, but other shops offer bigger and higher-end prime cuts. America's Choice Gourmet in Wilmington is a great option, and their butcher, John, will give you a nice array of meats to choose from, including exotic cuts such as camel. His cuts are vacuum sealed and frozen for easy transportation home. Let him know your trip involves four hours of travel, and he will toss in a few extras. I like to take a cooler for the return trip home, but John insists the meat will safely make the trip back to Pine Knoll Shores.

The local Food Lion has an inventory of smaller cuts of brisket that are just right for a smaller meal when you don't plan to cook for several guests. We are probably going to continue to limit our grilling to less than 10 people for a longer period of time, so this cut from Food Lion will be just right. Harris Teeter often has the larger cut, or packer, which weights 12-14 pounds or more.

Normally when I think of beef brisket, Texas barbecue comes to mind—but this is early March and St. Patrick's Day is just around the corner. And, of course, St. Patrick's Day calls for corned beef brisket.

If you are truly interested in making a corned beef brisket, you really need 8-10 days beforehand to brine and prepare the meat to cook on your grill. Lots of brine recipes on the internet recommend using pink curing/pickling salt, which is also called Prague or Insta Cure salt. I have not been able to purchase this stuff locally, and the smallest size I have found anywhere is an eight-ounce bag. Most of the recipes for brisket brining only call for a tablespoon. Still, it will keep

forever if you store it in a dry location, and Amazon has a vender that sells an eight-ounce bag for under \$7. This salt gives the meat its red color as it is sodium nitrate and not sodium chloride like table salt. Himalayan sea salt is pink but is not a substitute for curing salt.

Brine ingredients include:

- 1 gallon cold water
- 1¼ cups coarse salt (kosher or sea)
- ½ cup brown sugar
- ¼ cup Irish whiskey or bourbon
- 4 tablespoons prepared pickling spice
- 1 tablespoon pink curing salt
- 1 3- to 4-pound beef brisket flat

Heat all ingredients (except the brisket) until the salt and sugar are dissolved, and then cool down before beginning the corning process.

Place the brisket flat in two-gallon food-safe bag, cover with the brining liquid, and place it in a covered container in your refrigerator. You will want to carefully flip the storage bag every day or so to be sure the salt concentration remains evenly distributed. If space in your refrigerator is limited, you can use an appropriately sized cooler and keep the brining bag covered with ice the entire time (which will be 8-10 days). At the end of the brining process, rinse as described below and proceed to the grill.

If you want to skip the home brining process, I recommend buying a corned beef brisket at the market and putting that on the grill. You should thoroughly rinse the meat and let it sit in the fridge, covered in water, in a non-reactive pot overnight. Pour off the water and rinse one last time and pat dry. You can make a simple rub of salt, pepper, garlic powder, and paprika to coat the exterior of the meat before you take it to the grill.

If you use a Big Green Egg or a ceramic cooker, set your unit up with your plate setter to help keep the flames off the meat but ample for cooking, and use a water tray on the plate setter. Do your best to get the grill temperature to 200-225°F and add a few nice chunks of apple wood for some smoky goodness.

Place the rinsed and dried brisket on the grill rack over the water tray and insert your temperature probe if you have one. If you don't have one, make the investment for a good one. You will want to aim for a final product in the 195° to 205° range. At around 150° you can pull the brisket and wrap it in aluminum foil to help it reach the final temperature and help to push through the stall.

A technique that I am going to try on the next cook is to cook the meat for about three hours at 200-225 degrees and then wrap the meat in three-four layers of plastic wrap. Then wrap this package in aluminum foil. If you keep the temperature at 200-225 and make sure the plastic wrap is well covered with aluminum foil, it will not melt into your meat. After wrapping, return the meat to the grill for an additional cook of about 8-10 hours. According to a chef I follow, this technique makes the meat super juicy.

Bring the meat inside, still wrapped in the aluminum foil and wrap it in a few towels and place it in a small cooler to rest. Once you are ready to slice and serve, start with the smaller section, or flat, and cut across the grain (if you are unsure how to identify the grain, a YouTube search will yield many videos). Technically, smoked corned beef brisket is actually pastrami, and it is now ready to be enjoyed sliced or made up into a nice Reuben sandwich.

An idea for a different side dish is barbecued cabbage. Cut out the core on the bottom of the cabbage to about three inches deep (but keep the core). Pack the

(Continued on page 13)