

ON THE GRILL

Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Ribs

By John Clarke

Let's explore one of nearly everyone's favorite pork cuts: ribs. When you go to the market or your favorite butcher, you may find that they sell several types of ribs including St. Louis style, rib tips, baby back ribs, pork loin ribs and spare ribs. You have probably tasted many of them at any of your favorite rib "shacks." Sadly, there are no such establishments here on the Crystal Coast.

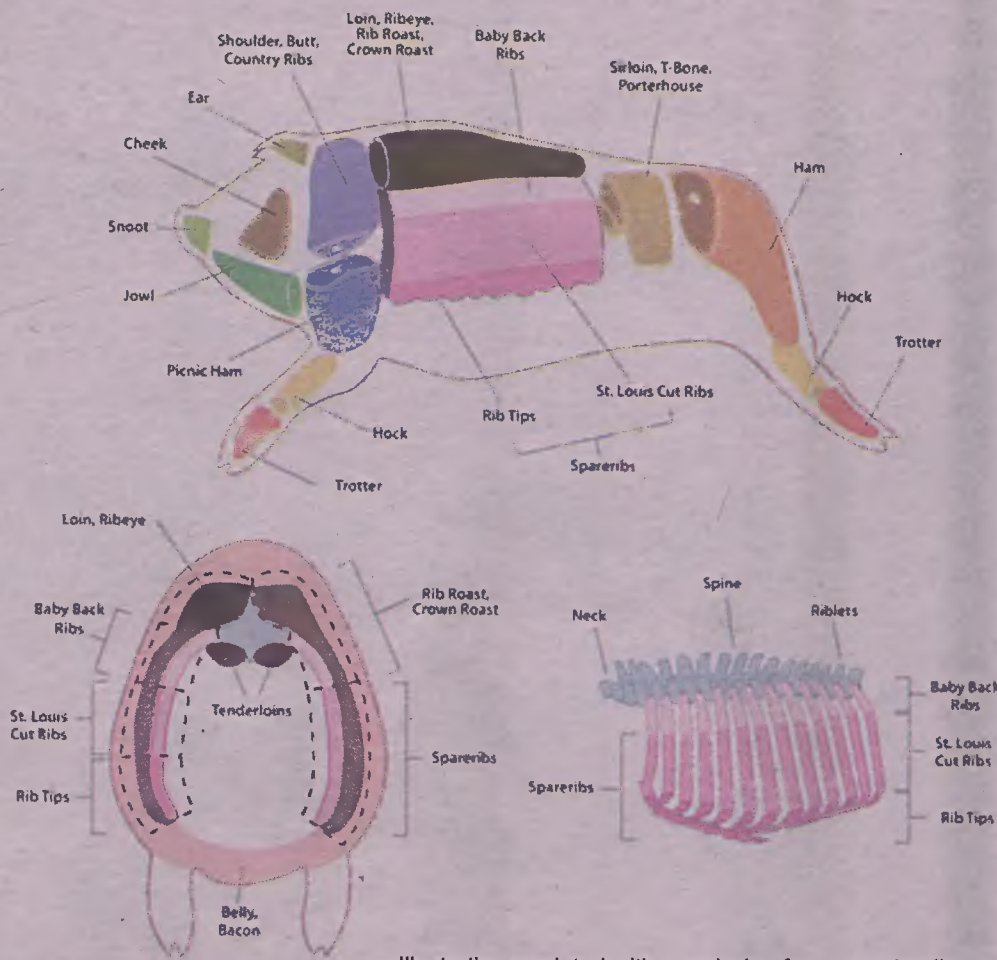
One of our all-time favorite places for ribs is Fat Matt's Rib Shack in Atlanta. Matt serves only spare ribs, which are a coarser and larger cut. Dreamland Restaurant in Atlanta, which, sadly, burned to the ground, also served spare ribs and baby back ribs. They have a classic restaurant in Alabama that serves only spare ribs and white bread, with nothing else on the menu. Baby back ribs are smaller and have less meat on them. St. Louis-style ribs are usually about the size of baby back ribs, but are cut from the pig closer to the side and belly. See the illustration accompanying this article, courtesy of Amazing Ribs, to learn more about the sections of these three types of ribs. (Permission was granted by amazingribs.com to use their copyrighted material for this article. Visit them online to learn even more than you can imagine about the world of grilling and cooking many products, complete with recipes).

You can get all of these cuts at any of our local grocery stores, and you can examine them to decide which you might like to cook. Since we are going to cook them low and slow, you can use the spare rib and get a section that contains all of the represented parts, St. Louis and baby back. Spare ribs, by appearance, have long straight bones, while the baby back ribs are the familiar curved bones. Often, especially from Smithfield Foods (sold at all stores), you will find yet another cut—a pork loin rib, which features the upper part of the rib with a healthy cut of pork loin attached. Frequently, these go on sale and if you see them under \$3 a pound, it is a good time to buy a few and freeze them.

As we have discussed, with a charcoal grill you will want to use a heat deflector or set the coals to be in a two-zone configuration so that you do not have a lot of heat directly under your food. Weber makes baskets that you can put the charcoal in and position them off to the side(s) of the grill if you are using a kettle type charcoal grill. Kamado style cookers (ceramic) such as the Big Green Egg (BGE) or Primo, offer ceramic shields or a plate setter to block the flames. If you have a gas grill, turn off one of the burners and place the meat there. If you have a way of putting a disposable pan under the ribs, fill it 1/3 full of water or beer and it will help keep the meat moist. The issue with too much heat is a simple one: you are dealing with thinner cuts of meat that can cook too fast and burn. We want lower heat, longer cooking time and good looking/tasting food.

The temperature zone we are looking to achieve is that magical climate of 225 to 250 degrees Fahrenheit. Once your coals are warmed up, toss in a few pieces of soaked wood chunks, such as apple or hickory, to allow for more smoking; align your plate setter; and place a disposable aluminum pan on the setter filled 1/3 with water or beer (or both). Often, your rib size will be longer than the width of the grill so you will want to cut them in half. There are other cooking devices you can purchase to hold the ribs upright as they cook or you can invert a rack that you use for chickens or turkeys and place the ribs parallel to each other. Set your vent dampers to be open about one inch on a BGE and, shortly, that beautiful smoke will be kissing the ribs. Be prepared to close or open the vents a bit to adjust the temperature.

Prior to placing your ribs on the grill, give them a good rubdown with mustard and sprinkle a good amount of rub on the meat, making sure you have covered both sides well. Some barbeque chefs insist on removing the silverskin (the thin film of skin that covers the bones). I am not sure it makes that big a difference, but it takes time to do and you will need something other than your fingers to grab and pull the skin. I have tried pliers and tweezers, but usually omit this step



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and just trim off any loose fat or skin to even up the rib cut. You can leave the ribs uncovered on a cookie sheet overnight in the fridge if you want to add some additional seasoning time.

Ready-made sauces are everywhere these days, but one thing is certain: if it contains sugar, it is going to burn your food. Most Eastern NC barbeque sauces do not contain any sugar, so you can mop these onto your ribs while they cook, but it is not necessary if you have that temperature under control (the fatty gristle in the meat is going to melt and tenderize the food).

After about two hours, take a look at your ribs. If the bone ends are all exposed, it is likely the food is largely done and you can keep on letting them cook by shutting down the heat and saucing the ribs. To get the best result from your sauce, place the ribs on an ample-sized piece of aluminum foil and pour your sauce over the ribs, wrap them up, and put them back on the grill at about 200 degrees or less. Some cooks will take a regular can of Coke or Pepsi (not diet) and pour it over the ribs. Either way, this part of the cooking is for the sauce of your choosing, be it with or without sugar. If you want a little additional flavor to your Eastern NC-style sauce, add one part Heinz 57 sauce to the mix. This doesn't contain too much sugar, but enough to give them some extra flavor that will cook into the meat.

Add your favorite side of coleslaw or a green of your choosing (summer squash, onions and zucchini are good, too). At this time of year, fresh corn is a great addition and can be cooked on the grill wrapped in foil about an hour before you pull the ribs. The prep and cook time for your ribs is about 3-4 hours.

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