

Barbecue sauces evolving from store-brand bland

By Jim Shahin, Washington Post

For some time now, commercial barbecue sauce has been progressing from its Dark Ages, when slow-smoked meats were tortured with bland, sweet, corporate slathers, to a more enlightened era of complex boutique sauces flavored with everything from habaneros to peaches. The homemade sauces in our second annual Smoke Signals barbecue sauce recipe contest reflect that evolution.

We received sauces that contained a pantry full of ingredients: cocoa powder, cider jelly, fresh plums, mangoes, apricots, chipotle peppers, tamarind paste, smoked beer, Asian pear, Mexican chocolate and more.

Such enlightenment – better than the bad old days, to be sure – has its own problems. It was tough sometimes to determine whether something could be considered a barbecue sauce, *per se*, or a different kind of sauce entirely.

The sauces seem to exemplify a paradoxical trend in contemporary barbecue. On the one hand, the craft sauce makers create flavors for niche tastes. On the other, taken as a whole, the anything-goes sauces speak to the homogenizing of this once fiercely regional cuisine.

This year, we changed up things. Rather than awarding the top three vote-getters from among all entries, we selected a tomato-based sauce winner, a mustard-based sauce winner and an alternative sauce winner.

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