

By JULIA MOSKIN

**T**HE smoky romance of the barbecue pit, with its dry rubs and wet mops, its fruit woods and burnt ends, has long been a New York fantasy. But real barbecue has proved harder to produce locally than baguettes, baba ghanouj and banh mi put together.

Food-obsessed New Yorkers harp on the diversity of the city's kitchens and the excellence of their offerings, but most are unhappily conscious of barbecue as a magnificent native dish that is perpetually out of reach. Would-be pit masters have tried to please them but have had to contend with emission-control laws, strict fire codes and a general lack of faith that real barbecue could exist in these parts. Local fans have been reduced to mail-order ribs and the occasional binge weekend in Memphis.

## Far from the South, the makings of a barbecue war.

But this fall, the stars have aligned for real New York barbecue.

Whether it's the arrival of newly efficient smoke-scrubbing technologies, a growing outdoor-cooking industry fueling national interest in barbecue, or a local economy that makes a \$10 entree almost irresistible, the number of places making pit barbecue in Manhattan — and making it well — has suddenly tripled, and a good, old-fashioned barbecue war may be in the offing. There will be no unhappy victims.

Daisy May's BBQ USA opened in mid-August to instant success; the pit master there, Adam Perry Lang, is already planning an expansion. The Queens barbecue legend Robert Pearson, after a decade of false starts, has entered into a partnership with the restaurateur Ken Aretsky to smoke his signature Texas-style beef briskets on the Upper East Side, in the space that formerly housed Mr. Aretsky's Butterfield 81. And at Blue Smoke, after tantalizing Manhattan with two years of up-and-down results, Danny Meyer, the owner, and his pit master, Kenny Callaghan, seem to have finally wrestled their technical problems to the mat.

Will smoke-sensitive neighbors, the ever-critical barbecue crowd and New York's famously demanding customers (who generally expect restaurants to keep regular hours, provide plates and serve vegetables, all

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in direct conflict with barbecue tradition) give them all a chance at success? We'd better hope so; this has been a long time coming.

The city has no shortage of so-called barbecue and chicken-and-ribs joints, but aficionados know: that's not real barbecue. What is?

According to the mission statement of the Kansas City Barbecue Society, the closest thing the quarrelsome barbecue world has to a governing body, barbecue is meat cooked by indirect heat and smoke.

But each expert interviewed last week found something to disagree with even in

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that bare statement. The world of American barbecue, whose members come together at thousands of team competitions each year (and on countless Internet forums each day), includes professionals, amateurs and, seemingly, every resident of Memphis, Kansas City, Texas and the Carolinas. Each of those regions is fiercely committed to its own barbecue style, with completely different ways of seasoning and spicing the meat both before and after it is cooked.

Herewith the short list of what is universally agreed:

Grilling is not barbecue.

Smoking is not barbecue, although it is a close relative.

Barbecue sauce, while it has a place at the table, does not make barbecue barbecue.

Mr. Callaghan, who has been the pit master at Blue Smoke since it opened in 2001, offered a test: "How about this," he said. "Once you've been to your 50th or 60th barbecue joint, then you just know what

barbecue is."

In Manhattan, only Daisy May's and Blue Smoke cook their meat exclusively with wood, making them the sole local claimants to the real barbecue throne. (Pearson's Texas BBQ on the Upper East Side will join their ranks soon.)

Shortcuts practiced by the others — including Virgil's in Times Square and Tennessee Mountain in SoHo — include parboiling meat before cooking it over charcoal or gas, supplementing wood heat with gas and, some say, the occasional drizzle of liquid smoke. These can sometimes result in passingly good barbecue, at least by New York's former standards.

But according to Bobby Richter, a native of Rego Park, Queens, and pit master of the Queens-based barbecue team Big Island Barbecue, "Once you've had real barbecue, you can't enjoy yourself at those places any more." (In another sign of life for New York barbecue, Big Island just became the first New York City team ever to qualify for barbecue's most prestigious competition, the annual Jack Daniel's Invitational Championships, to be held in Lynchburg, Tenn., on Oct. 25.) In short, the path to barbecue greatness cannot run through a gas oven.

Mr. Pearson is the only New York pit master whose product is respected throughout the city, on the Web and even in Texas, and his second coming to Manhattan is eagerly anticipated. Mr. Pearson's previous, brief foray into Manhattan involved trucking precooked briskets from Queens to the Upper West Side; needless to say, this did not do much for the flavor of the barbecue, which should be eaten as soon as possible once it comes off the pit.

A profoundly unlikely barbecue legend, Mr. Pearson was brought to New York from his native England by Vogue magazine as a hot London hairstylist in 1966. As an avatar of chic, he was often invited to Texas to teach new techniques to stylists there. From them, he said, he received a crash course in Texas barbecue. "Those girls would take me from cow palace to cow palace all night long," he recalled.

From Texas, Mr. Pearson embarked on a barbecue education that included posing as a journalist at Arthur Bryant's in Kansas