

Interview with Gary Kerce  
Interview by Dylan Mitchell and Michael Wagner, April 17, 2013

Gary Kerce is captain of a competitive barbecue team from Jackson, Georgia. His team won world rib championship in 2007.

Dylan Mitchell: You have been barbecuing for 15 years. When did you start?

Gary Kerce: 1996 or so, somewhere around there.

Dylan Mitchell: What made you want to start barbecuing?

Gary Kerce: I built a smoker and just got some ideas from people on how to build one. I thought I knew how to cook barbecue, and then we got into my first contest up at Stone Mountain. And I didn't win nothing. And the next year come around, and I didn't win nothing. Finally it come around, and we won a trophy on sauce and that tickled us to death. But then we found out about another contest over in Augusta. Well, when we got over there we met Memphis in May reps, and they told us about the world championship trophy. We drove up and looked at that and see the contest, and it was humongous. I wanted to be a part of that so bad and then we found out about it being sanctioned, and we bought a magazine with the national barbecue news. We started learning what contests were, and we started getting into 'em and cooking and cooking. I met Myron [Mixon] back then, and you know kept on and just started winning and winning. We was on a long roll. Then people were scared for us to come in their contest because we were gonna beat 'em. But anyway that how we got started right there.

Michael Wagner: So for most of your events would you rather cook a whole hog or a shoulder?

Gary Kerce: I like cooking a whole hog or shoulder, either one. A whole hog is easier to do but better because you can start mixing all those flavors together. From the shoulder with a lot of fat in it, to your hams with no fat in it, then you got your belly with a lot of fat in it. Then you got your ribs and your loins and tender loins and all that in there. You mix all that together with all the flavor you do to it, it's gonna come out some good eating.

Dylan Mitchell: So you'd say, out of all of the things you cook, the whole hog would be the best?

Gary Kerce: I don't know if it would be the best. I'd have to say that the ribs would be the best. Like I said, we are 2007 world rib champions, and we have gotten close up there with the whole hog, only second place with the whole hog.

Dylan Mitchell: Ok, so what type of sauce do you use?

Gary Kerce: Well, that was the basting. I make my own barbecue sauce. I don't know if you have tasted it or not. It's a tomato based sauce. And it has different vinegars and flavors and stuff like that. It's kind of a sweet tangy flavor.

Dylan Mitchell: Do you put any peppers in it?

Gary Kerce: A little bit, not much.

Dylan Mitchell: Have you ever included the skin in your barbecue?

Gary Kerce: Umm No. Well a lot of judges wont eat it. A few people from time to time come around and ask for the skin. And I, sure all give it to 'em. I've seen people eat 'em. When I do my shoulders, there is no skin and butt there is no skin. And the ribs we got to pull the membrane off. It's like a piece of plastic. But on a whole hog, he cooks on his back, so the skin is like a bowl that holds all the juices in.

Dylan Mitchell: So you said you used Hickory wood?

Gary Kerce: Yeah, I use Hickory wood. Other good woods we use is fruit tree woods.

Michael Wagner: What kind of adaptations have you made to your barbecue?

Gary Kerce: Well, I have done that many of time to upgrade her and make her a little better. When a woman cooks, she like to follow a recipe, but when a man cooks, he like to mess around with it and play around with it.

Dylan Mitchell: How many events have you been in barbecuing?

Gary Kerce: I don't know. I ain't got no clue. One year we cooked like 40 something events that year. 2002, when we was rib team of the year, we were out every weekend of the year somewhere. That's from south Florida, to Washington DC, to Kansas City, and back down to Texas and Alabama and all around through there. We have cooked all over the place.

Dylan Mitchell: What would you say the hardest event, with the hardest competition in it?

Gary Kerce: I would say the Big Pig Jig. Its here in Georgia it's sanctioned by the NBA. It used to be Memphis in May. But you cook in all there categories down there. It's a big event, 300 400 teams down there. You got to have three times many judges for that many people. You know its tough cooking against all that many people. We won that like twice, yea twice, I think.

Michael Wagner: Can you explain the atmosphere at a barbecue competition?

Gary Kerce: Well, it's a fun thing to do. If you are in a contest, it's fun. I have never seen any trouble. Well, I did one time at a contest that had a fair at it, and later on that night when the fair shut down, they had some of the carnival guys running around trying to steal stuff. But I haven't seen any problems nowhere else. There is a lot of beer drinking going on. If you are going to be cooking barbecue, then you got to have a beer.

Dylan Mitchell: Are there specific rules where people come around and watch y'all?

Gary Kerce: Well, when you get checked in you can't do nothing to your meat without it being inspected. And they want to inspect it to make sure the whole hog has a federal stamp on it. Or you have to have a hog with that state stamp on it once you are cooking it. I only get my meat from Holyfield Farms here in Covington, which they all got a federal stamp. They want to check that stamp to make sure everything is legal about it to make sure there has been no injections, not cooked or anything. After that, then you are set to go on to do anything you want too. Then you can start to put your injections and flavor and all that, and you can start cooking whatever you need too. Everything got to be done right on time. You don't want no cold meat or too hot meat. It's got to be perfect. It can't be too hot heat wise with flavors like pepper because if you burn the judge's pallet, then he can't judge the next person. Then they knock you down.

There is a time limit. It all starts at 10 o'clock. I got to get that vine box built, and I cant mess around with it. So I have to sit with ice and gloves on so I stick my hands in ice and build it while its hot. My brother shoots off to the tent. While that Rickey is getting the hog ready, my wife sets the table on up. What I have to do is take the judge and explain to him how my grill works. I tell him we have a water cooker. They have a water pan which runs from wall to wall. Across the front and the back is open. And the fire runs underneath it. So the smoke and heat comes up around the water pans up around the meat and out the stack. And that our cooking method of how we do it. Then we explain to him about the type of woods we use. They want to know that. I try to go through everything where he don't even have a question. I tell him about my injections I put in there. With the white rice vinegar, the sweet vinegar, the other vinegars, the apple juice and all that stuff the salt. Then I tell him about the basting and sauce the balsamic vinegar, the soy sauce, hot sauce, vegetable oil, and w sauce. There is a lot of teams that use my seasoning. I sell my barbeque seasoning all over the country.

Michael Wagner: Is apple juice common to put on barbecue?

Gary Kerce: It is a common thing. You probably don't realize it fruit goes with meat perfectly. It's the perfect marriage. In South Georgia they like to use peaches and peach wood. I grew up eating pork chops and applesauce. But fruit is even in our sauces. I like when everything comes together. It's a perfect marriage in barbecue.

Michael Wagner: Can you explain the injection process?

Gary Kerce: The injection part of it. I use a white rice vinegar. Have you ever tried a white rice vinegar? I'll let you try some. I'll make you a salad dressing with it that will knock your socks off. I use white vinegar, I use apple vinegar, and I use a lot of apple juice. I use all of that mixed together with a little salt, and I inject it. A lot of injection with it, and it turns out real yummy. Then you put your rubs down on it. I don't ever baste on the ribs or the butt, but I baste when I do the whole hog. It's a lot of fun maybe some time you guys can come up and cook some with me.

Are you the one that put a hole in the door at your momma's place?

Dylan Mitchell: Yes, that was me.

Gary Kerce: What sauce you got on there, Pat? It's our original sauce. See I worked on it, then my brother started to work on it. Then I helped him to develop it, which made it even better. It's my brother's sauce.

Michael Wagner: How is the Fresh Air Barbecue down the road?

Gary Kerce: It's real very vinegary. It used to be years and years ago back when I was a kid a pretty good place. But that was back when the old timers had it then and that's everybody's favorite place and everyone around the country was going there. They died and past on and their family members took it over, but it's not the same as it used to be.

Dylan Mitchell: Do you eat at different barbecue restaurants you come across?

Gary Kerce: I eat at every barbecue restaurant I want too. All over. To me there is no bad barbecue. It's just different flavors and taste different. I like meat cooked over wood.

Dylan Mitchell: What would be your favorite barbeque restaurant?

Gary Kerce: I used to be Harold's., but he died a while back. There is Dean's barbecue in Jonesboro. But Harold's barbecue used to be by the state penitentiary, it used to be real good. It closed down, and people took it over, but it wasn't the same. It didn't even taste the same. I built this rig for some guy up in Marietta, and sold it to him, and now he cooks some real good barbecue.

Michael Wagner: Where do you get your pigs from?

Gary Kerce: Holyfield Farms in Covington, Georgia. I try to get the pigs as close to 200 pounds as I possibly can. Then I take the head off of them. The head weighs about 50 pounds. So about a 250 pound hog then you take the head off of it. Then we butterfly it and take a road zip. Then I take the membrane off the ribs. Then I take the ribs and cut 'em in half and that leaves my baby back here and my spare up here. Then once the ribs have opened up, it lays the hog out real pretty. A lot of people used to cook it with the skin side up but we started cooking it skin down. I have a video out on how to cook a whole hog. And a lot of people have been buying that video and people have started to do theirs that way. I came out with that video ten years ago.

Dylan Mitchell: What kind of seasoning do you use?

Gary Kerce: It's got 17 different seasonings in it, and I'm not going to tell you. You got to hold back a little secret. If everybody knew what you put in it, then everybody's barbecue would taste the same. Then they would be as smart as you are.

Try this on your sandwich. I use this one on my ribs; it's a little sweeter. Reason I do that, judges have been eating barbecue all day. They judge the ribs last, so I try to make a little candy stick for them. It's kind of sweet heat a little bit. When the judges come around especially on my ribs, I tell them a little secret. I tell them to try to taste the meat first without any sauce to see how the meat taste, then I tell them to put the sauce on to get the sweet. That way they see how the sauce complements it. I make sure they do that. When I glaze this on the ribs in the smoker it has married that rib. It has become one with the rib. When I put that sauce on it again, it has become a clear brighter tastier flavor that really wakes it up. I'll tell the judges that.

Michael Wagner: Do the judges taste the bacon at all?

Gary Kerce: No, but I like to pull the bacon out and give it to the judges. The reason why is they can't judge it. They love it, but if that bacon is cooked perfect, they know that whole hog is cooked perfect. And what that does is makes the judges know the whole hog is perfect. I also do this with rib meat. They can't judge rib meat, but they know when they get a perfect rib meat. The only meat they are supposed to judge is the ham, the loin, and the tender loin, and the shoulders. You can give them these other meats, but they are not to be judged. But when you do give them these meats, you are sending the judges the message that you know how to cook. Now, when he goes and judges the next one and they don't give them that meat, then that tells them that they don't know how to cook.

Dylan Mitchell: What's in this rib sauce, if you can tell me that?

Gary Kerce: Well, I start with the same base as my other sauce, and my brother added some pepper stuff to it to heat up to it. Then we added some sweetener stuff to it. But he was like I don't want too but we kept pushing him and pushing him to do it and he finally did it, and admitted it tasted better. I have another seasoning that I just came out with. It's not for barbecue; it's for steaks. My friend wanted me to make him something up for his deer meat. It's pretty tasty on steaks. You can smell it or taste it whatever you want.

Michael Wagner: Is it something you have to have a passion for?

Gary Kerce: Oh yep. I have spent a lot of money trying to learn how to do this stuff. I would make somebody pay a couple thousand dollars if they came out and said, hey teach me how to make barbecue. Then I wouldn't have lost so much money. We got so good at cooking, we would win enough money to get us to the next one. Anywhere from \$2000 to \$3000 dollars a semester. But we would always spend it on something. It cost about \$5000 dollars a contest with your motel bill and stuff and gas to haul the trailer around.

You guys should start up a team. I'll guide you. You would probably like the NBA. They will let you do what you want, get drunk all you want. Memphis in May, I see people get way too damn drunk at night. I see one team get way too drunk at night and cook up them ribs and have nothing to give the judges. Its fun, but somebody's got to watch that fire the whole time to

make sure it doesn't get too hot. I like to cook my hog at about 250 degrees, sometimes jump up to 275. 250 is the ideal temperature because you want to get the internal temperature as close to 200 without going over. If you go over 200 degrees the meat becomes mushy. If you stop it right about 195, you will have carryover heat that will make you the perfect meat. Just like the stuff you are eating right there. Well, that basically all there is to know about barbecuing.

Dylan and Michael Wagner: Thank you for your time and the barbecue. You have been a great help to our research.