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# TALL TALES & REAL RECIPES FROM BBQ INSIDERS

# Falling In Love With The PIG

*Memphis in May, like infatuation,  
is a total-immersion experience*

BY ELIZABETH KARMEL

Close your eyes, and imagine you are on the banks of the Mississippi. The air is sultry, and a drop of sweat trickles down the side of your face as the breeze embraces you with the sweet aroma of hickory and hot pork. You sigh and lick your lips, anticipating your next bite, when suddenly your private fantasy is interrupted. You are surrounded by thousands of BBQ fanatics shrieking in delight as 10 men who look like linebackers gone to seed sashay onto the stage dressed as porcine beauty contestants. They are surprisingly light on their feet as they sing witty lyrics professing their love of the 'cue, Memphis, and the enormous "Elvis" pig that shares the stage. At Memphis in May, the fatter you



Mary Pat Wachter

are, the hairier you are, the drunker you are, the more revered you are. This, I think, is true love.

For 13 years, I have been an enthusiastic participant in the Memphis in May World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest. In my regular life during the rest of the year, I teach people how to barbecue, I write about open-flame cooking, and I develop grilling tools and recipes. Outdoor cooking is my career, and it's also a huge part of my life. I've come a long way, but each time I step into Tom Lee Park on the banks of the mighty and muddy Mississippi River, my first impressions come flooding back and I am a first-timer all over again.



The Miss Piggy contest doesn't discriminate on the basis of gender, fashion sense or porkiness.

Left to right: Gary Wilkin, Mary Pantlik, Elizabeth Lynne Wilkinson, Gary F.

It was May of 1993, and the hot Memphis spring felt like the dead of summer. The lack of rain had turned the grassless park into a dust bowl. Between the smoke and the dust, I could hardly see in front of me, but no one else seemed bothered by it.

"Hello, my name is Jimbo Billy Bob. Welcome to Memphis in May!" said a larger-than-life, muscled and mustached man dressed in a tank top and blue jeans, sporting a white cowboy hat that glittered with hundreds of enameled barbecue pins. A volunteer charged with visitor greeting and all-around good-time-having, this barbecue cowboy sat me down, propped his boots on a bench and gamely tried to educate me on the inner workings of the event that is called simply "Barbecue" by insiders.

Now, having grown up in North Carolina, I wasn't foreign to barbecue, which is what we called pulled pork doused with a tangy vinegar sauce. What was foreign was seeing 90,000 folks gathered to barbecue. I took in the pure wood smoke, sun and 30 tons of pig. And I liked it.

As I walked the mile-long park, I was in awe of the hundreds of structures called "booths," which were more like elaborate camps. Even the small booths of the patio division were decorated to the hilt, with generators humming. The tricked-out two-story booths housed thousands of revelers and were freshly painted, styled to a common theme, and landscaped to rival Asheville, NC's Biltmore Gardens. Most of the rigs came with their own trailers and were the size of a typical New York City apartment. They held so many racks of ribs, shoulders, pork butts and yes, even fat logs of bologna, that you could feed a small country.

I guessed that over the course of the four-day hog-a-thon, each barbecue lover probably consumed 24 racks of ribs, two pork shoulders, 18 sausages, three pounds of bologna, one pig's ear and 2.7 cases of beer—all chased down with roughly 36 jello shots! As for me, I ate my first (quickly followed by my second and third) competition rib, mopped a whole hog under the watchful eye of barbecue guru John Willingham, and experienced the revelry of the Miss Piggie contest. I was

**Memphis in May World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest**  
 Tom Lee Park in  
 Downtown Memphis  
 May 18-20, 2006  
[memphisinmay.org](http://memphisinmay.org)

hooked—no, I was in love. And the love affair gets stronger every year.

After my initiation, I felt it was my duty to spread the gospel. The Patio Porkers division of Memphis in May is the smallest division of the competition, a feeder for the rest of the competition. Only ribs can be entered, and if you win, you have to move on to the higher divisions, so it's a great place to start. I joined forces with my good friend Lynne Wilkinson and we merged our love of swine and wine to create the Patio Porker team Bubba Meets Bacchus.

Being the head cook was the thrill of a lifetime, but it was short-lived, as I realized that it takes a village (and a big bank account) to make up a well-organized competition barbecue team. I had always wanted to be a member of Swine and Dine, one of the original Memphis in May teams. One of the bigger teams, they occupy prime real estate on the river, compete in the shoulder category, give the best parties (they match the year with the number of jello shots they make; this year team members will spend three days making 2006 shots); win trophies for best

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Cheddar-Stuffed  
Pepper-Crusted Burgers



T-shirt and always have one of the top Miss Piggie entries. After making friends in the right places, my dream came true in 2002, when I was voted onto the team!

It is here that my good friend and Swine and Dine cook Gary Pantlik taught me the secret to his “cooks’ ribs.” The recipe is way too time-intensive for a competition where teams often cook 40 racks just to get one perfect specimen. These are the ribs that the cooks (Gary and James Prescott) make for themselves—a good reason to hang out by the pits. What makes these ribs unique is that they have an hourly “bath” instead of a “mop.” The basting sauce is kept warm in a foil pan next to the racks and every hour the ribs are submerged in the bath.

This bath keeps them moist as they smoke, and when they’ve been cooked to a deeply burnished red color, they are finished with a dusting of rub, a generous drizzle of honey, then tightly wrapped and put back on the grill for a few hours. When they are finally done, your patience is rewarded with succulent meat that is falling off the bone and a crust on every bone that is the best burnt end you have ever put into your mouth. They were too good to keep just for the cooks, so I shared them in my cookbook, *Taming the Flame*, and I am sharing them here.

That first year, I also fell in love with BBQ cabbage, one of the few vegetables seen in the park. It becomes unexpectedly delicious when you smoke it until the

leaves can be plucked like the leaves of an artichoke. Seasoned simply with a little butter and rub, it is so good that you might just forget it’s a vegetable.

Finally, I can’t go to Barbecue without celebrating the first night with my Memphis friends eating Lynne Wilkinson’s Beer-Soaked, Gorgonzola-Stuffed, Bacon-Wrapped Filet Mignon. It’s how we eat “light” before the pork-fest moves into high gear. How else do you think all of us Miss Piggies keep our girlish figures?

As I prepare to head down to Memphis for another year of hamming it up, it occurs to me that Barbecue is just like any other reunion—we are all a little older, a little fatter, a little hairier and a whole lot more fun!



Elizabeth Karmel, author of *Taming the Flame: Secrets for Hot-and-Quick Grilling and Low-and-Slow BBQ*, is the creator of *Girls at the Grill*, a company that includes consulting, writing and designing her *Grill Friends* line of outdoor cooking and kitchen tools; [girlsatthegrill.com](http://girlsatthegrill.com). She is also an instructor at New York's Institute of Culinary Education (ICE) and is frequently featured on "Today" and the Food Network.



### "Low and Slow" Cabbage

Yield: 4 servings • Zest Factor: Mild

Everyone on the circuit has a version of this recipe, but I like this simple, pared-down version. I often add barbecue sauce during the last hour, some add cream cheese, and one team's secret is grape jelly!

- 1 medium-sized head green cabbage
- 4 tablespoons butter, cut into small pieces
- 1 tablespoon barbecue spice rub

With a sharp paring knife, remove the core of the cabbage, creating a hole about three inches deep. Gently loosen cabbage leaves. Slice a

small piece off the opposite (non-stem) end of the cabbage to level it. Turn cabbage over, sprinkle the cavity with the barbecue spice rub, and spread butter in the cavity and between leaves of cabbage. With the cavity pointing up, wrap the cabbage in heavy-duty aluminum foil so that all but the top is covered.

Prepare a grill to 325°. Place the cabbage on the center of the cooking grate, and allow to cook over medium indirect heat for 2 to 3 hours or until very tender and leaves can be pulled from the core with little resistance. Baste occasionally with the melted butter from the core of the cabbage. Eat by pulling the leaves from the center, or cut into wedges and serve.



### The Cooks' Ribs

Yield: 8 racks of ribs • Zest Factor: Medium  
You'll need to start this recipe the day before serving, and will need rib racks, a smoker box, hickory or oak chips or pellets, and a large aluminum loaf pan. You can purchase WHAM at [willinghams.com](http://willinghams.com).

- 8 racks of back loin or baby back ribs
- 1½ cups Willingham's WHAM dry rub or favorite rub, divided

- 4 recipes of Lexington-Style Vinegar Sauce (see recipe, this page)
- 4 cups bottled Italian dressing
- 1 (8-ounce) squeeze bottle of honey

Prepare the ribs: Remove the membrane from the back of each rack, and generously rub racks down with dry rub. Once rubbed, cut each rack in half. Bag the ribs, and refrigerate overnight.

Cook the ribs: Allow ribs to reach room temperature. Light the grill, and bring the temperature to 250°. In a large disposable aluminum pan, mix the Lexington-Style Vinegar Sauce and Italian dressing with ¼ cup of rub. Place the pan on the grill to keep warm.

Place all the ribs on the grill. Maintain a temperature of 225°. After an hour has passed, ribs will be ready for their first bath. Using a sturdy pair of tongs, submerge each slab in the bath pan, and return them to the heat. Repeat this process each hour until ribs have been on the grill for 3 to 4 hours.

At this point, take each half-slab, and give it one last bath. Place on aluminum foil for wrapping. Drizzle honey on slabs, and finish off with one last dash of dry rub. Stack 2 slabs on top of each other in each foil package, and wrap tightly. After all the ribs have been wrapped, place them back on the grill for 1½ hours more. Let them cook slowly in the foil packages on indirect low heat, about 225°. The ribs will take a total of 4 to 5 hours to cook. Remove foil packages from grill, and serve.



### Lexington-Style Vinegar Sauce

Yield: 2½ cups • Zest Factor: Medium to Hot  
This sauce is traditionally used to dress pulled pork from Lexington, NC, and west to the Mountains. When multiplying this recipe times 4, use only 3 times the spices, sugar and seasonings.

- 2 cups cider vinegar
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- 1 tablespoon ground white pepper
- ½ to 1 tablespoon hot red pepper flakes
- 2 tablespoons white sugar
- ¼ cup brown sugar
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- ½ cup ketchup

Mix all ingredients together, and let sit at least 10 minutes. The longer the sauce sits, the hotter it gets since the heat from the red pepper flakes is brought out by the vinegar.



## Cheddar-Stuffed Pepper-Crusted Burgers

Yield: 6 burgers • Zest Factor: Mild

All that pepper and cheese takes these burgers beyond the everyday.

- 1 pound ground sirloin
- 1 pound ground chuck
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 teaspoon dry mustard
- salt
- 6 (1-inch) cubes extra-sharp cheddar cheese
- ¼ cup coarsely ground pepper
- 2 tablespoons butter, softened
- 6 hamburger buns
- 6 thin slices cheddar
- lettuce leaves and tomato slices, for garnish

In a large bowl, combine the sirloin and chuck. Season the meat with the Worcestershire sauce, dry mustard and 2 teaspoons salt, and mix until combined. Divide the meat into 6 equal portions and gently shape each into a patty around a cube of cheese. Set aside. Brush the patties all over with olive oil. Make an imprint in the center of each patty with your thumb. Spread the pepper on a shallow plate, and roll the edge of each burger in the pepper until coated.

Preheat a grill. Place the burgers on the cooking grate over direct medium heat, cover, and grill for 4 minutes. Turn, and continue grilling, until the meat is medium rare, 3 to 4 more minutes. Top each burger with a slice of cheddar. Butter both sides of the buns, and grill them over direct medium heat until lightly toasted, 1 to 2 minutes.

Serve burgers on rolls with lettuce and tomato.



## Lynne Wilkinson's Beer-Soaked Gorgonzola-Stuffed Bacon- Wrapped Filet Mignon

Yield: 4 servings • Zest Factor: Mild

Lynne is a great friend and a wonderful cook—our Patio Porkers team always had a ball at Barbecue. For this recipe, you'll need to presoak toothpicks.

- 4 (8-ounce) filets mignons, about 2 inches thick
- 1 (12-ounce) can beer
- 3 tablespoons crumbled gorgonzola cheese
- 4 slices bacon
- olive oil
- salt and freshly ground pepper

Place the filets in an airtight container, then pour the beer over them. Cover, and refrigerate for 1 hour, turning once.

Remove the filets from the beer, and pat dry. Insert a paring knife into the side of each filet, making an incision halfway in. With a spoon, stuff about 2 teaspoons of gorgonzola into the incision of each filet. Wrap a piece of bacon around the side of the filet, covering the edges, and secure with a wet toothpick. Brush filets lightly with olive oil and season with salt and pepper.

Place filets on the grill for 9 to 12 minutes, turning to mark all sides and make the bacon crisp. The filet will be medium rare, and the cheese will be melted inside.

Remove from grill, and let filets rest for 5 minutes before eating.



## Tequila Sunrise Chicken

Yield: 4 to 6 servings • Zest Factor: Mild

Note that the chicken will need several hours to marinate.

- 2 (3- to 4-pound) chickens
- 3 bunches scallions, ends trimmed

- 1½ cups fresh orange juice
- 1 cup tequila
- ½ cup grenadine
- 1 small white onion, roughly chopped
- 8 cloves garlic, roughly chopped
- 1 teaspoon salt, plus extra
- freshly ground pepper
- olive oil
- lime wedges

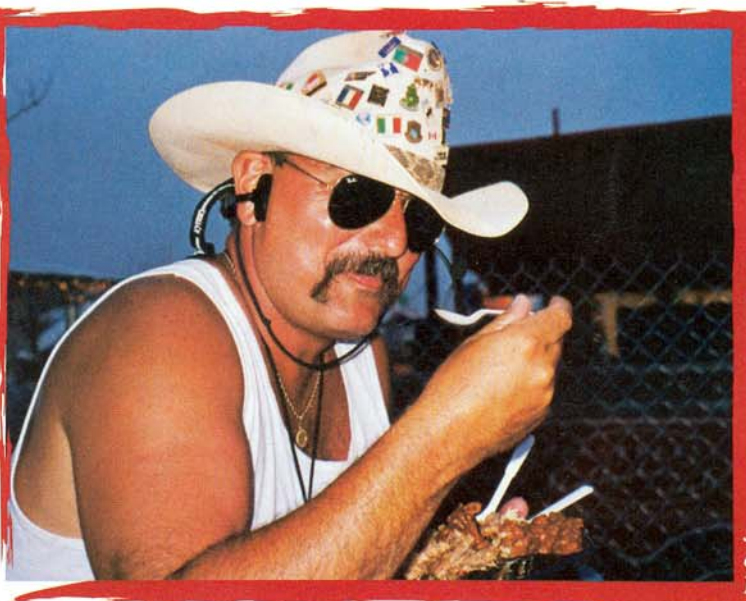
Use a large knife or poultry shears to split each chicken down the middle into 2 halves. Pat the chickens dry with paper towels, and place the chickens and scallions in a large bowl or 2 large resealable bags.

In a medium bowl, whisk together the orange juice, tequila, grenadine, onion, garlic, salt and pepper. Pour the marinade over the chickens and scallions, and turn them several times to coat. Cover the container, and refrigerate at least 4 hours or overnight, turning the chickens several times.

Build a charcoal fire, or preheat a gas grill. Remove the chickens and scallions from the marinade, and discard it. Lightly brush the chickens and scallions with oil, and season with salt.

Place chickens on the cooking grate, breast-side up over indirect medium heat. Cover, and grill for 30 to 45 minutes, or until they register 180° in the thickest part of the thigh and the juices run clear. Remove the chickens from the grill, and let them rest for 10 minutes.

While the chickens rest, grill the scallions over direct medium heat for 6 to 8 minutes, turning occasionally until browned in spots and wilted. Serve the chicken hot, garnished with scallions and lime wedges. CP



Elizabeth Karmel

Jimbo Billy Bob enjoys some 'cue at Memphis in May