

One thing I'm ready for this summer is an outdoor barbecue. I especially prefer when my friend Noah is in charge of the grilling duties. I mostly like it because I don't have to do anything other than stand near the meat while saying things like, "Let's throw another shrimp on the barbie!"

This got me wondering: is it "barbeque" or "barbecue"? Where does this strange word come from? How do they get Lay's Barbecue-flavored chips to taste so darn good?

Interestingly, Lay's prefers "barbecue" in its regular barbecue chips, yet its slightly-more-specific flavors are called "Hickory BBQ" and "Mesquite BBQ." "Hickory" and "Mesquite," of course, refer to the flavor derived from the wood chips from each respective tree. Let's rake the word "barbecue" over the coals for a few minutes, shall we?

Like many words in the English language, the word "barbecue" is an import from Spanish (specifically the Spanish-speaking people in Mexico). The word showed up on the scene in the eighteenth century, an Anglicized version of the word "barbacoa." The word "barbacoa" comes from the Arawak-speaking Taíno people in the Caribbean, who cooked meat over an open fire.

I imagine a group of Spanish Conquistadors landing on a beach in the Caribbean while a group of Taíno men stands around one guy slow-cooking a goat over a hole dug in the ground covered with agave leaves, saying the period equivalent of, "You know, the smoke is what really gives it its flavor." You see, this attractive form of cooking meats was notable enough for the Spanish to adopt the word as their own. Then the Americans came along and said, "I'll have what they're having," adapting the word into English as "barbecue."

Finding answers in a summer barbe-query

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Perhaps we'll never know whether or not this scene played out exactly like this, but I would consider this a “meat cute.” As they say, puns are a medium rarely well done.

For that matter, would a line of people waiting to get their grilled meats be considered a “barbecue queue”? When you think about it, the word “queue” is ironic; it's just a “q” with a bunch of silent letters waiting in line.

The “barbecue” spelling is significantly more common in English usage, while “barbeque” shows up more often when restaurants want to add a buck or two to the price of each item on its menu. I suppose “BBQ” fits more easily on neon signs and sauce bottles, and we all know what it means as a pseudo-abbreviation.

Plus, “BBC” was already taken. So, that's where “BBQ” shows up — in a classic American preference for the brevity of language and character count.

Now that we've grilled the word “barbecue,” AP style and I recommend using “barbecue” over “barbeque.” Feel free to recount this word history at your next summer backyard cookout.

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