

BBQ&A: Anoop Desai, Barbecue Hero and American Idol

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University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill alumnus Anoop Desai is perhaps best known as the



author of an undergraduate honor's thesis in American Studies entitled *Why Barbecue Matters in the South*. The 60-page paper takes a scholarly look at southern culture through the grease-streaked lens of barbecue. "If one examines the Durkheimian paradigm in relation to North Carolina barbecue," Desai writes, "then North Carolinians are divided into two clans of the same ethnic group... there are clear divisions between the eastern and western styles." Heady stuff indeed, but amazingly Desai's work in the field of American Studies is not his only claim to fame.

It turns out that in 2009 Desai dropped out of graduate school to perform on [an obscure television show](#) called "American Idol." Desai was a finalist on this show but most academics still expected him to follow the money trail and get right back into American Studies. Instead, in a move as stunning as it was selfless, Desai gave up the glory and fame of barbecue research and released [All is Fair](#), his debut album.

Lucky for us, the 23 year old Cary, North Carolina native has not forgotten his barbecue roots. We caught up with Desai recently and asked him a series of questions designed to ensure that his barbecue knowledge remains as polished as his vocals. Here's what he had to say...

BBQJew: I understand that in addition to having written a honors thesis on, in your words, "barbecue as a folkloric art and tradition beloved by the people of North Carolina," you have achieved some success as a singer. Just in case someone sees this interview who knows you for your music rather than for your barbecue scholarship, please explain to the uninitiated what North Carolina barbecue is and why it interests you.

Anoop Desai: As well known as I am for my barbecue scholarship across the globe, yes, I am a singer as well. But North Carolina barbecue is, quite simply, smoked pork. There are differences in the "Eastern" and "Western" methods of preparation, but on the whole, the NC varieties stay true to the origins of barbacoa. Barbecue in my home state interests me precisely because "what" it is can be as much simple and definitive as complicated and contentious. It has a power to bring people together by evoking a shared experience that is accessible exclusively through one's immersion in a community. Eating your town's local barbecue (whether it be at a pig pickin' or

the oldest barbecue joint in town) is a rite of passage, a tradition, and a defended ritual. And it goes beyond region, really. Race, politics, and gender are all a part of this equation.

BBQJew: Okay, you are off to a good start with this interview but let's see just how sharp a swine scholar you are. Can you articulate any common ground between barbecue and pop music?

AD: Only in that we all have our own tastes. Pop music might not be a good lens through which to talk about this. After all pop music is such precisely because it lacks local discrimination. It's popular everywhere. But if we look at hip hop, there are parallels. Any hip hop fan can tell you that there are differences in production styles. The Houston "Chopped 'n' Skrewed" sound is different from the thumping 808s found in a track from the Dirty South/Atlanta. The origins of hip hop in New York City continue to affect that city's rap, which is different from the Midwestern sound. Production style and flow, like barbecue styles, are highly honed regional indicators.

BBQJew: Next time I order a plate of barbecue I may ask for it "Chopped 'n' Skrewed." Anyway, speaking of pop music, let's talk about your debut album, which was released recently. From listening to the lyrics, it strikes me that *All is Fair* is a none-too-subtle homage to North Carolina barbecue. Is that an accurate interpretation of lyrics like "If one day I get over you, I'd be surprised/I'll always come back to you, you drive me wild"?

AD: No, absolutely correct on that. A keen reading of the text.

BBQJew: What else can you tell me about the album?

AD: It's a reflection of me. My experiences, my love of pop music, and my need to get these songs in my head to the listening public. It's always great to hear that someone is a new fan, and I'm so thankful to have a lot more of them because of the music on this album. Their support spurs me on every day.

BBQJew: Now that the album is out, what's next for you career-wise?

AD: In the very near future, promotion and touring. I'm really excited to be bringing my live show to a number of different cities this fall. It's the first large scale tour I'll be doing with my own music, which is a huge first step for a new artist. The routing of the tour is of course barbecue-based.

BBQJew: It's good to hear you keep yourself as close to 'cue as possible at all times. If you ever get the chance to do more barbecue-related research, what would you like to study?

AD: I'd like to take a step back and do some mindless taste testing, actually.

BBQJew: How often do you get a chance to return to North Carolina for taste testing? Or do you have barbecue flown in before every concert no matter where you are performing? That little known Irish rock band [U2 has a taste for the stuff](#) so you're in pretty good company.

AD: So I hear. I'm in the Old North State often enough to satisfy my cravings, thankfully. Air freight pricing for a pint of barbecue can get a little outlandish.

BBQJew: New subject: Of the American Idol judges you worked with, which one do you think would be best at running a barbecue joint? Or maybe it'd be host Ryan Seacrest?

AD: Well, Ryan is the only native southerner of the bunch, so I think that gives him an automatic edge.

BBQJew: Now that we've settled that debate, what does it say about the modern south that a Jewish guy whose parents hail from New York (me) and a first-generation American with Indian parents (you) are having an intelligent (?) discussion about barbecue?

AD: A lot. Seriously. That's one of the reasons I started researching barbecue years ago. I thought of my identity as a southerner and how that makes sense. Which, if you look at it historically, makes none. I think part of it is my love of southern food.

BBQJew: Speaking of which, BBQJew.com is looking to create some franchises to drum up business. Any chance you want to claim the BBQHindu.com domain name? We'll sell it to you for a great price...

AD: OH...you know what...let me get back to you...

BBQJew: We'll wait for you call. In the meantime, will you at least use your good name to help make one of my dreams come true? I can only assume you have read this site's exciting [plans for a Museum of North Carolina Barbecue](#). Will you go on record today as the first celebrity supporter of the museum?

AD: An amazing idea. You have my full backing!

BBQJew: Great, and I assume a hefty check will follow. By the way, I noticed that you write with disdain about those who dwell on the feud between North Carolinians who favor Eastern-style barbecue and those who prefer Lexington-style. (Desai writes, "The fire is fed by newspaper, magazine, and television reporters who keep the 'debate' alive after most everyone else is ready to let it go.") Since you claim to be above the fray, I assume you won't hesitate to share your preferred style, right?

AD: As long as I can taste the smoke, I'm happy. But this isn't to take anything away from the folks who have legitimate reasons for defending their particular style of 'cue. I mentioned the gender, race, political and regional issues behind these differences. I was merely saying that I find the coverage of the "feud" in the press to be a gross oversimplification of the matter and in many cases, wayyyy overkill. And of course even though I don't have a favorite style, I have favorite places. But when the heart of the west and that of the east are both a quick drive away, that makes sense.

BBQJew: Anything else you want to say while we're on the subject of barbecue, since I'm guessing the PR team that advises you may make this your last BBQ-focused interview?

AD: It's been a while since I've ranted about pork. Thanks for the opportunity!

BBQJew: Thanks for taking the time to chew the 'cue with us, Anoop, we look forward to throwing hush puppies at you on stage next time you visit North Carolina.

[Editor's note: Desai performs at the Cat's Cradle in Carrboro on October 8th, 2010... be sure to bring some hush puppies.]