

## **BBQ&A: Bob Kantor of Memphis Minnie's**

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Bob Kantor is one of the country's best known Jews who barbecues. Born in New York, in 1970 Bob moved to San Francisco where he attended the California Culinary Academy. He spent the next ten years as a chef in the high-end fine dining sector. Then he became obsessed with barbecue.

Kantor soon traded fine dining for a plenty fine BBQ joint and he's never looked back. He now describes himself as "not-quite-retired," and spends much of his time "on the on the road in my RV with the Fabulous Gail Wilson and a white Jeep Wrangler with black spots." Kantor's Jeep is nicknamed The Cowntess, and he cooks a mean beef brisket, but he knows a thing or two about pig too.

Recently we interviewed Kantor about surviving a BBQ-free youth in Brooklyn, his mid-life conversion to fundamentalist barbecue beliefs, and his predictions for the future of the world (at least when it comes to 'cue). We can't think of a better post to run as we celebrate the one-year anniversary of this website. Enjoy.

### **BBQ Jew: Where did you grow up? And while you're reminiscing, can you recall a fond childhood memory of food?**

Bob Kantor: I grew up as a chubby little Jewish kid in the Flatbush area of Brooklyn. I remember as a child our Rabbi coming to visit us – I don't recall why he was visiting us, but I have this very clear picture in my mind of my mother throwing open the kitchen window, and flapping her apron trying to rid the apartment of the wonderful aroma of the bacon sizzling on the stove.

### **BBQ Jew: Hmm, that ain't kosher. Speaking of which, when did you first encounter barbecue? Was it love at first bite?**

BK: Like most folks outside of the traditional barbecue regions, I had no idea what real barbecue was

for most of my life. My first experience with real barbecue came during the period I was travelling around the South researching the great American regional cuisine that barbecue is. It was absolutely love at first bite. Being an inveterate carnivore and growing up the son of a butcher, it was a revelation. Meat was good, but the slow smoking added a whole other dimension.

**BBQ Jew: What drew you to the barbecue business and why barbecue instead of some other food (not that we need any convincing)?**

BK: My discovery of barbecue was very serendipitous. It came as a result of some consulting that I was doing at the time for a restaurant owner who was looking for new menu items. He asked me what I thought about putting barbecue on the menu. I said, “Well let me see what I can come up with.”

That was the defining moment in my career as a Barbejew. During the course of the next several weeks I researched barbecue. I was immediately smitten by the long-standing tradition and the fact that this was truly one of the few American regional cuisines that we have. Guess I’m a sucker for tradition. I told my client, “No, you can’t do barbecue – it’s not something that one just puts on a menu.” And so began my journey over the next several years learning about BBQ. It was during this time that I asked myself, how is it possible that San Francisco, one of the food capitals of the world, has no true representation of this great cuisine?

**BBQ Jew: We’ll let you talk more about BBQ in San Francisco soon, but first... Cooking barbecue probably didn’t come natural for a yankee Jew like yourself – how’d you learn?**

BK: Being a trained chef, I knew how to cook. I knew how meat reacts to heat. The addition of smoke was another ingredient to add to my list. It was then mostly a matter of learning technique. I joined just about every barbecue organization around the country that I could. I got mailing lists from these organizations and would write to their membership asking if I could visit with them and talk barbecue. They were a huge help. I became a certified barbecue judge and spent a lot of time eating and talking about championship barbecue and developing a taste for what good BBQ was. I also took classes offered by various organizations and individuals to build on my technique.

Lastly, I listened to some of the old timers talk about the tradition and the lore of barbecue. There’s a great story told by an old timer about how they could judge the temperature of their pit by watching the height of the flies hovering over the meat. If they were able to land on the meat the pit was too cold, more than two feet above and it was too hot.

**BBQ Jew: The Rib Rabbi and I had lunch with you awhile back and you went on a pro-butter, anti-margarine diatribe at the sight of a container of margarine in the basket of hushpuppies. Care to share your thoughts on margarine and what it represents to you?**

BK: It’s not so much about butter versus margarine, but real versus ersatz and the all too pervasive, growing lack of appreciation for quality and food, not chemicals. No one who knows me would call me Mr. Natural, but the mindless substitution of chemical compounds, created in a laboratory for real food is appalling. How many times have you asked for butter in a restaurant situation and been given a butteresque substance? We need to demand or at least not let the substitution go unnoticed. Next time you ask for butter and they give you margarine, say, “This isn’t butter, do you have any real butter?” The butter/margarine story is also, of course, can easily be applied to real, versus ersatz barbecue.

**BBQ Jew: On a similar subject, you’ve said before that you are troubled by faux barbecue. What is your definition of “faux ‘cue” and what’s your beef (or pork) with it?**

BK: Barbeque has never been so popular as it is now, and there’s never been so little real barbecue. McDonald’s serves something they call barbecue. Almost every restaurant serves something they call barbecue – that’s how popular the word is. In many ways barbecue has been usurped to the point where it’s meaningless. Did you know the USDA has an actual definition of barbecue? Unfortunately it only regulates barbecue that is shipped interstate. It goes something like: barbecue is meat cooked by the

heat generated from burning hardwood or coals... notice that it does not say cooked by gas or electric. Right now the best selling commercial cooker is gas-fired with a 75,000 btu burner. It's really nothing more than an oven that you can add wood to.

Frequently we see the terms "barbecue" and "grilling" used interchangeably. To me this is roughly akin to interchanging techniques like boiling and frying. Barbeque and grilling are polar opposites. Grilling is cooking over high heat, quickly and BBQ is cooking at low heat for a long period of time. What's faux cue? If it's not cooked with wood, if it's not cooked low and slow, its faux cue. And not everything covered with red sauce is barbecue. More about sauce later.



**BBQ Jew: How did you come up with the name Memphis Minnie's for your barbecue restaurant? Did you consider any other names?**

BK: Memphis Minnie's is named after my mother, who was from Memphis and her name was Minnie. Early on I toyed with the name "Honky Bob's Brooklyn Jewboy BBQ" – I thought I'd get it all up front and right out there. My friends talked me out of it.

**BBQ Jew: I kind of wish your friends had lost that argument. How long has Minnie's been around, and why did you think a barbecue restaurant could succeed in San Francisco, which has a reputation as a foodie town but also a vegetarian/vegan haven?**

BK: Memphis Minnie's has something of a checkered past. Two attempts, going back to December of 1995, were cut short by landlord problems. We've been at our current location, 576 Haight Street, just over nine years now, and we're happy to be a part of this dynamic very diverse neighborhood. When I opened Memphis Minnie's in San Francisco I truly wasn't really thinking about business success. I was hoping that if I cooked the best barbecue that I could, people would come and enjoy it. We've been fortunate that that's been the case. Good BBQ crosses all demographics.

**BBQ Jew: What was your thought process for developing the Minnie's menu?**

BK: First, I'm a cook and I knew that whatever the menu items would be, they would reflect my background and all be made from scratch and in-house. Opening up a barbecue joint in a town that has no true BBQ tradition has its pros and cons. On the one hand we have to educate our customers about barbecue and build the market. On the other hand we are not constrained by deeply held regional preferences. Our menu reflects this. We feature beef brisket as well as pork shoulder. We've got St. Louis cut pork ribs, chicken, and andouille sausage. We have a large variety of sides and desserts all made by us in our kitchen.

**BBQ Jew: What would you hope a first-time visitor to Memphis Minnie's comes away impressed by?**

BK: The food! Served in an atmosphere conducive to enjoying it and by people who are happy to serve it.

**BBQ Jew: I understand you are semi-retired. What does a barbecue man like you do when you're not working at the restaurant?**

BK: I spend a lot of time trying to lose weight... When I'm not talking daily to my staff or frequently visiting Minnie's on a regular basis, my honey, Gail, and I are out in our RV in search of America. We're currently in Florida trying to get a line on the definitive Cuban sandwich and Key Lime pie, as well as always keeping an eye out for great barbecue.

**BBQ Jew: In your travels, which state's barbecue and barbeque culture has impressed you the most? What's your honest assessment of the state of BBQ in NC? [Editor's note: Thank you for noticing that we just incorporated all three of the most popular spellings of barbecue.]**

BK: For me, there is no short answer to this question. When I eat the pork shoulder at Memphis Minnie's, my benchmark, the taste that I'm comparing my pork barbecue to, has to be Keith Allen's at [Allen & Son](#) in Chapel Hill and [Honey Monk's](#) in Lexington, North Carolina. To my taste they represent the best of the best. When I taste the brisket at Minnie's, my gold standard always has been Louis Meuller's in Taylor, Texas and Smitty's in Lockhart, Texas. More recently I've discovered Snow's in Lexington, Texas. I don't think anybody's doing better brisket than they are.

As to barbecue culture, I'm not sure what culture is, especially when it comes to barbecue. I'm not even sure that culture and barbecue should be used in the same sentence! And I'm even less sure that I'm sufficiently knowledgeable to comment on it. Having said that, I'm going to stick my neck out. I think North Carolina possesses the longest and richest BBQ history. I would strongly recommend anybody interested in barbecue in general and North Carolina barbecue in particular, pick up a copy of John and Dale Reed's book "Holy Smoke". To my mind it is the definitive work on North Carolina barbecue and its lengthy history. In some ways it may be because of that lengthy history that some North Carolinians may in fact take their barbecue for granted. It's so deeply inured in their culture. I'm puzzled and deeply concerned at what appears to be a trend in North Carolina towards substituting gas and electric for wood. In essence moving from barbecue to faux cue.

For strongly held belliefs about barbecue I don't think that anyone can compare with Texans. I doubt very much if you could walk up to any individual in the entire state without them being able to direct you to the place that they think has the best barbecue. And if there were someone standing near enough to overhear them, there would undoubtedly be a difference of opinion. But such is the nature of Texas and Texans. In my travels I have not seen the wholesale abandonment of wood fired barbecue in Texas.

**BBQ Jew: You were quoted in the San Francisco Bay Guardian saying this about barbecue sauce: "I try to educate folks about sauce. I'm reacting to the forces of sauce, the forces of evil, the dark side... the capitalists are in the sauce market. They have co-opted the idea of barbecue and turned it into sauce." Are these just the unhinged rantings of an old hippie barbecue man or serious business? Please elaborate.**

BK: Yes and no. Of course I am a deranged 63-year old ex-hippie, and I take great pride in it. However, I am very serious about barbecue and the proper role that sauce plays. I've also been quoted, and correctly so, as saying that sauce is to barbecue what jewelry and furs are to a beautiful woman. They are accessories and accoutrements and no more. My sometimes vitriolic position on sauce is really a reaction to the onslaught of sauce manufacturers attempting to convince the general public that barbecue is all about sauce. And that of course is absurd.

It takes me 18 hours to cook a brisket – it takes me 18 minutes to make 10 gallons of barbecue sauce.

There's an awful lot more profit to be made in the sauce business and unfortunately the sauce industry is winning. Not a day goes by at Minnie's where a new customer doesn't walk in and the first words out of their mouth is "How's your sauce?" My usual reply is "I can save you a lot of money. If you think that sauce is what barbecue is about, I'll sell you a bottle of sauce and throw in a straw." At Minnie's we make four sauces and I'm very proud of those sauces. But we serve all our barbecue sauceless.

Let's bring this sauce discussion back to the earlier discussion of faux cue. The unfortunate growing inability of the general public to differentiate between what is and what is not barbecue, leads many "barbecue joints" to cook their meat by any method, from boiling, steaming or baking, to throwing it under the wheels of an 18-wheeler, no matter, and then anointing it with "barbecue sauce" and calling it barbecue. To them I say: "Have someone take a bucket of sauce, and throw it over your head, and Voila! YOU are now barbecue".

**BBQ Jew: What does the future of the American barbecue scene look like? Will traditional techniques make a comeback or are we doomed to a world of electric/gas-cooked, cheaper-and-quicker-is-better faux 'cue? Say it ain't so...**

BK: My crystal ball has been broken for a long time, but I do believe that the future is up to us and by "us" I mean those people who truly care about maintaining the traditions of this great American regional cuisine. Don't settle for Faux Q. Whenever confronted with it, let the powers that be know that you're not satisfied – take them to task. But remember it's not the server's fault – ask for the manager, ask for the owner. Try to educate those around you – friends don't let friends eat Faux Q.

People who are responsible for moulding the public's taste in food should be particularly held accountable and educated, when using the word "barbecue" to refer to food cooked by any method and with any fuel. Food writers and critics need to be educated. But we should recognize that we are truly up against the forces of evil. Those who are interested only in making a buck off barbecue's current popularity and not the continuation and preservation of a cuisine. Popularity can be a very destructive force where tradition is concerned. REMEMBER THE BAGEL! WIPE OUT FAUX 'CUE.!

**BBQ Jew: There are different theories about what Jesus ate for his last meal. Despite your Jewish roots, we know you can't settle that debate, but you can tell us what your last meal would be.**

BK: Not gefilte fish, though I do like a good gefilte fish (with fresh grated horseradish). Sitting here now I really can't even begin to choose what I would have for my last meal. There are so many wonderful cuisines, foods and dishes out there, but I do know this: I'd like it to be very long and shared with good friends.

**BBQ Jew: Amen to that!**