

# Smoke It Low and Slow

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When Mobeen Hussain Butt tries to pin down exactly when his appreciation for smoked barbecued meat began, he recalls a joyous family party held during Eid in Pakistan when he was just a small boy.

As the sun set and the heat of the day receded, loved ones gathered to celebrate and feast together in the capital city of Islamabad. The smell of the charcoal and the heat from the barbecue are burned into his memory, as is the sweet taste of lamb skewers cooked on the flames.

Although he moved with his family to Canada in 2000, and then in 2005 to Ottawa, those early food memories from Pakistan set him on a path of culinary curiosity and exploration. He began to experiment with different barbecue techniques and watched hours and hours of YouTube tutorials, before purchasing a charcoal barbecue and retrofitting it to smoke meat.

Barbecue, and especially smoked foods, became a passion precisely because they reminded Hussain Butt of many of his early food experiences, including watching naan bread bake inside tandoor ovens.

“I really loved the local bread that was cooked in a charcoal clay oven under the ground,” he recalls. “They would put charcoal with fire in the middle and stick the bread to the sides. I remember going there and watching the process. Even at an early age, I would notice little things that I don’t think other kids would really notice.”

Photo 1: The brisket is delicious, with a smoky crust and sweet moist meat, but it’s the ribs that qualify as Moe’s signature dish. “We smoke low and slow, and the ribs may take four to five hours...” says chef and owner, Mobeen Hussain Butt, shown above.

Photo 2: Located at Towngate Shopping Plaza in South Keys, Hussain Butt has transformed the space into a modern casual eatery with lots of character and warmth.

All his research and trial-and-error testing came to fruition two years ago when he opened his own smoked meat barbecue restaurant, Moe’s BBQ, in the Towngate Shopping Plaza in Ottawa.

But this isn’t just any barbecue restaurant specializing in slow-cooked and smoked meats. Moe’s BBQ is a real rarity — it’s a halal barbecue restaurant. In fact, it’s the only fully halal smoked meat restaurant in Ottawa and one of only a handful in the country.





For many smoked-meat establishments, pulled pork is the signature dish. To be considered halal, not only must the animal be slaughtered in a specific way and inspected by a person, not a machine, it also must be the right type of animal. Some meats are forbidden, including pork.

The menu at Moe's BBQ includes beef brisket, burgers, beef ribs, smoked chicken and pulled beef in place of the more traditional pulled pork. But despite this small tweak, the low and slow cooking method, which takes up to 15 hours for a large brisket, ensures a perfect southern-inspired barbecue meal.

The restaurant is a casual, modern spot, with Edison bulbs, and a fun "Moe's BBQ" sign, made from copper pipes, on the wall. Stacks of logs line the counter, and TV sets above show a roaring fire.



Although everyone is welcome, it's important to Hussain Butt that members of the Muslim community have a place they can call their own and be confident that the food is fully halal.

Moving to Canada in his formative years wasn't an easy transition. Initially, his family lived in Montreal and later Cornwall and it wasn't until he moved to Ottawa that he really felt he belonged, made friends and became happier at school.

For Hussain Butt, the customer's experience is the most important part of his whole enterprise.

"It's all about the customer here. We try to make sure that people come and have a meal that they can't have anywhere else. They're going out to have an experience — not just fill their bellies," he says.

That experience includes the taste of maplewood smoke from the Texas-imported smoker and a few special ingredients in Moe's unique spice rub, which includes Canadian brown sugar, salt, black pepper and a little sumac.

“The main flavour comes from the maplewood smoke, but then there's a little twist, a flavour profile from Middle Eastern spices. This gives a little kick,” he says.

The blend and slow-cooking method are proving very popular as the restaurant tends to sell out daily. Although most customers are very satisfied, Moe has a rare open mind towards criticism and really takes customer suggestions for improvement seriously. His modesty has allowed him to make minor adjustments to the cooking and smoking process that have resulted in even better dishes. For instance, they now cook large and small briskets separately to ensure the meat is always moist and juicy.

Fresh daily deliveries of produce are an important quality-control measure. Some of Hussain Butt's favourite memories of Pakistan are eating naturally ripened fruits such as mango, pomegranates and watermelons sold from carts in the streets. His palate was developed before he knew much about food. On one occasion, at about seven years of age, he ate a handful of truffles and enjoyed their earthy flavour without realizing how rare or expensive they were in other parts of the world.









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Although the brisket is delicious, with a smoky crust and sweet moist meat, it’s the ribs that qualify as the signature dish and bring hungry visitors from afar. They usually judge it just right, so much so that they sometimes sell out of their most popular dish.

“We smoke low and slow, and ribs may take four to five hours — so it’s not something you can just whip up when you find you’re running out,” he says. He adds that as he learns more about managing the kitchen, he’s making more ribs so no hungry customer is disappointed.

Despite virtually no advertising, Moe’s BBQ has become popular by word of mouth, all part of creating a community restaurant. He’s more than happy to concentrate on one successful local restaurant rather than dream of owning multiple outlets.

“It just was never my plan or goal to have a franchise or multiple locations. I’m happy to have one good spot where I know the customers and I’m feeding them good food.”

His focus on treating customers well and creating an experience rather than just a meal has created a community of evangelical enthusiasm who promote the restaurant to their friends and family. Hussain Butt describes this as “old-fashioned advertising.”

“It’s the same way the food is cooked — old-fashioned. Everything is made in-house, from scratch. We don’t freeze any of our foods. It’s all simple — just a wood-fired oven, barbecue and all fresh ingredients.”

Cooking remains a strong passion for Hussain Butt and even after a long day at the restaurant, he relaxes at home by cooking for his wife. He'll whip up her favourite pulled beef stirfry, which he starts by sautéing onions in brisket fat. His little boy is also on hand, learning how to identify different vegetables and helping his dad stir the sauce.

It's refreshing to hear an ambitious young chef and restaurant owner talking about creating a special place for the community to gather, to enjoy food that has been prepared slowly and with care.

### **Moe's BBQ**

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