

FOOD FACT: In late 2007, Fooddemocracy.com reported that annual per capita consumption of soft drinks in the United States exceeds 150 quarts, which breaks down to about a can a day for each of us.

Cola-Barbecued Ribs

The Cola Taste Test

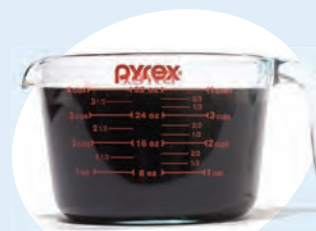
To see if it really made a difference what type of cola we used in the sauce for our Cola-Barbecued Ribs, we picked up all of the nationally available brands—Coke, Pepsi, Rally, and RC (as well as diet colas)—and put them to the test. After tasting barbecue sauce made with each cola, the winner was clear: Tasters preferred Coke for its “balanced sweetness” and “warm, vanilla” flavor. Rally and RC both fared well in this tasting, but tasters found Pepsi to be “flat” and “one-dimensional.” Diet sodas were not acceptable in this barbecue sauce.



OUR FAVORITE COLA

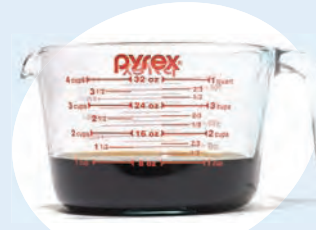
Secrets to BIG COLA FLAVOR

The key to adding rich cola flavor to our homemade barbecue sauce was to dramatically reduce the soda before building the sauce.



BEFORE

We start with a full quart of cola.



AFTER

For the boldest flavor, the quart of cola is reduced down to a single cup.

Cola ribs are becoming increasingly popular with backyard and even competition barbecuers. The premise for this dish is simple: pork ribs (usually baby backs) are marinated for a few hours in cola, slow-grilled until tender, and finished with a barbecue sauce flavored with more cola. The sweet, spicy flavor of cola is supposed to lend complexity to the meat and sauce. I eagerly rounded up a handful of recipes and headed outside to fire up the grills. What a disappointment! Like our reader Sean, I found that the sugary cola burned on the outside of the ribs (even with indirect heat), and the cola flavor was minimal.

I decided to skip the marinade and add cola flavor in other ways. I started with the test kitchen’s method for cooking ribs on the grill. I covered the ribs with a spice rub, smoked them with indirect heat on the grill, and then finished them wrapped in foil in the oven so they would become tender without further browning on the exterior.

Next, instead of using traditional barbecue rub spices like cumin and garlic powder, I wondered if I could identify ingredients that would mimic cola flavor. Through sampling various brands of cola, my tasters determined that cola flavor consists of caramel, vanilla, and warm spices such as cinnamon and cloves. A spice rub of cinnamon, cloves, salt, and pepper wasn’t complex enough; potent Chinese five-spice powder (a mixture of cinnamon, cloves, fennel seed, star anise, and spicy Sichuan peppercorns) perfectly married the warm flavors of cola with traditional barbecue heat.

I recently tried a recipe for cola-marinated barbecued ribs, but the outside burned and there was barely any cola flavor. Is there a better recipe for these ribs? —Sean Flynn, Tucson, Ariz.



The secret to harnessing cola flavor is to tame the soda’s sweetness and augment its base flavors with similar spices.

Simply adding cola to bottled barbecue sauce was a nonstarter. Instead I made an easy homemade sauce by mixing ketchup, mustard, vinegar, and a cup of cola with minced onion. Tasters liked the flavor of the onion but not

the texture, so I pureed raw onion with a little water and added this “onion juice” to the mix. A little savory, salty Worcestershire sauce rounded out the flavors.

This sauce tasted good, but it was still lacking the essence

of cola. I kept increasing the amount of soda, all the way up to 4 cups, but the sauce got too thin and the flavor was still wan. Cooking down the sauce never produced the clean, concentrated cola flavor I needed. Brainstorming ways

On the Side:

Cool and Creamy Green Bean Salad

Replacing potatoes with green beans sounds like a winning recipe for a light summer salad. So why are most creamy green bean salads mushy and bland?

The best creamy green bean salads combine crisp-tender beans with bits of sweet red onion, all coated with a bright and creamy mayonnaise-based dressing. But most of the recipes I tried just boiled the beans, let them cool, and dumped on the mayo. The results were bland, limp beans smothered in an unappealingly thick dressing.

I wanted a creamy dressing that would flavor, but not overpower, the beans. Most recipes use mayo as the sole creamy component, but I found that alone it is too heavy and rich. I tried combining the mayonnaise with sour cream and yogurt to brighten its flavor. The sour cream was still too heavy, but yogurt provided creamy texture and a welcome tang. A little salt, sugar, and white vinegar helped balance out the dressing.

Many of the test kitchen's recipes for potato salad dress

the hot potatoes with potent ingredients (like vinegar and mustard) and wait until they cool before adding the mayonnaise; the hot potatoes soak up flavors and become seasoned throughout. But that technique didn't work with green beans, because the carryover cooking made it too hard to get the perfect crisp-tender texture (which you don't need for potatoes), leaving the beans mushy and limp. To achieve that perfect crisp-tender texture, I boiled the beans for just a few minutes and then removed them to a bowl of ice water to immediately stop the cooking and lock in their texture and color. Unfortunately, the dressed beans were bland, because the dressing wasn't absorbed.

Wondering if I could cook the beans and season them at the same time, I added some of the noncreamy dressing ingredients to the cooking water. A little

salt and sugar paid immediate dividends, but the white vinegar was hard to detect. I increased the amount of vinegar from a tablespoon to a whole cup, which allowed the beans to soak up considerable seasoning while they cooked.

Finally, tasters liked red onion in this salad but thought its flavor was overpowering and its texture too crunchy. Briefly blanching the sliced onion with the beans solved both problems.

—Lynn Clark

COOL AND CREAMY GREEN BEAN SALAD

SERVES 8

We prefer the richness of whole-milk yogurt, but low-fat yogurt is acceptable here. Yellow wax beans may be substituted for all or some of the green beans.

- 1 cup plus 2 teaspoons white vinegar
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- Salt and pepper
- 2 pounds green beans, stem ends trimmed
- ½ small red onion, sliced thin
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- ¼ cup plain whole-milk yogurt
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 garlic clove, minced

1. Fill large bowl with ice water. Bring 4 quarts water and 1 cup vinegar to boil in large pot over high heat. Add sugar, 1 tablespoon salt, and beans and cook until beans are just tender, about 3 minutes. Add onion to pot and cook until just softened, about 30 seconds. Drain vegetables in colander and immediately transfer to ice water. Once beans and onion are cool, drain again and dry thoroughly with paper towels. (Cooked vegetables can be refrigerated in zipper-lock bag for 24 hours.)

2. Whisk mayonnaise, yogurt, oil, garlic, and remaining vinegar in large bowl. Add chilled beans and onions and toss until well coated. Season with salt and pepper. Serve. (Salad can be refrigerated in airtight container for 2 days.)



to get elemental cola flavor, I thought of the cola syrup used in fountain drinks. Since I couldn't get my hands on the actual syrup, I decided to make my own. I poured 2 cups of cola into a saucepan and reduced it by half, which was an improvement, but not as good as when I reduced a full quart of soda down to 1 cup. This created a sauce redolent of caramel and vanilla, and a little vanilla extract intensified the effect even more.

To bring the sauce and ribs together, I brushed a bit of sauce on the ribs before they finished in the oven. Safe from the flame of the grill, the sauce melted into the smoky ribs and carried the distinctive caramel cola flavor right to the bone.

—Adam Ried

COLA-BARBECUED RIBS

SERVES 4

Use a paring knife to loosen the membrane on the back of the ribs, grasp with a paper towel, and peel off in one piece. Chinese five-spice powder is available in the spice aisle of most supermarkets.

Spice Rub and Ribs

- 2½ tablespoons light brown sugar
- 1½ tablespoons paprika
- 1½ tablespoons pepper
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon Chinese five-spice powder
- 2 racks baby back ribs (about 1½ pounds each), membrane removed (see note)
- 2 cups wood chips, soaked for 15 minutes

Cola-Barbecue Sauce

- 4 cups cola
- ½ onion, cut into large chunks
- ¼ cup water
- 1¼ cups ketchup
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
- 2 teaspoons yellow mustard
- 1½ teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
- ¼ teaspoon vanilla extract

1. **For the spice rub and ribs:** Combine sugar, paprika, pepper, salt, and five-spice powder, breaking up any lumps. Reserve 2 tablespoons

for sauce. Dry ribs with paper towels and rub all over with remaining spice mixture. (Ribs can be wrapped tightly in plastic and refrigerated for 24 hours.)

2. Seal wood chips in foil packet and cut vent holes in top (see Kitchen Know-How, page 18). Open bottom vent on grill. Light 100 coals; when covered with fine gray ash, pour in pile on one side of grill. Arrange foil packet directly on coals. Set cooking grate in place and heat, covered, with lid vent open halfway, until wood chips begin to smoke heavily, about 5 minutes. (For gas grill, place foil packet directly on primary burner. Heat all burners on high, covered, until wood chips begin to smoke heavily, about 15 minutes. Leave primary burner on high and shut other burner[s] off.) Scrape and oil cooking grate. Arrange ribs on cool side of grill and barbecue, covered, flipping and rotating racks once, until ribs are deep red and smoky, about 2 hours.

3. **For the sauce:** While ribs are barbecuing, bring cola to boil in large saucepan. Reduce heat to medium and simmer until liquid is reduced to 1 cup, about 40 minutes. Meanwhile, process onion and water in food processor until finely ground. Transfer mixture to fine-mesh strainer set over bowl and press on solids to collect as much liquid as possible; discard solids. Whisk ¼ cup onion juice, ketchup, vinegar, mustard, Worcestershire, and reserved spice mixture into pot with reduced cola. Simmer until slightly thickened, about 10 minutes. Off heat, stir in vanilla.

4. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 250 degrees. Brush ribs liberally with sauce and wrap tightly with foil. Arrange foil-wrapped ribs on rimmed baking sheet and bake until ribs are completely tender, about 2 hours. Transfer ribs (still in foil) to cutting board and let rest 15 minutes. Unwrap ribs and serve, passing remaining sauce at table.