

Brisket

"Hi Mom."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Are the kids okay?"

"Yes, we are all fine."

I usually didn't phone my mother at 8:30 in the morning, so the first order of business was to quickly reassure her that this call did not betoken bad news. I knew that she wouldn't be truly assuaged by denials of misfortune; full relaxation required that I quickly provide the reason for the atypically early call.

"Mom, I wanted to catch you before you went out. I'm going to make a brisket today and I wanted your recipe."

Her immediate relief was supplemented by positive pleasure. Some rare people may be irritated by requests for advice, even from their grown sons, but my mother was among the great majority who are flattered by such requests, especially from a grown son. And, of course, the request for a recipe carries the implicit compliment that one's cooking is genuinely admired. What mother would not be pleased to be solicited for her brisket secrets?

"You have to buy a 'first cut'. Go to a kosher butcher, and get a first cut. "

"How many pounds do I buy per person?"

"I don't know 'per person.' You buy five pounds."

"Mom, I buy five pounds regardless of how many people I'm having for dinner?"

" I always make five pounds."

"How many people does that serve?"

"It is all according. If your brother Eric is there he can eat it all himself."

"Okay Mom, but approximately how much brisket do you figure you need to have for each guest."

"Let's say I'm going to Milt Goldberg's house for Rosh Hashone, I make five pounds."

"And if you are going to Artie's house for Passover?"

"Five pounds."

"Let's say Clinton invites you to the White House and you have to bring brisket for five hundred people at a state dinner?"

"I don't get invited to the White House."

"Mom, are you telling me it's like Jesus with the fish and the loaves? That five pounds of brisket is always enough to feed whatever multitudes you are feeding?"

"Well, I usually make chicken with it."

"I'm not making chicken."

"Richard, how many people are you having for dinner?"

Now even though there was going to be six adults and four kids at the meal, I decided to use her question as an opportunity to drive home the point that, obviously, the appropriate amount of brisket is determined by the number of people to be served.

"I'm just making it for me and Sue."

"Oh, then five pounds is too much."

I thought this was a conceptual breakthrough. The leverage I needed to get a per person estimate.

"Then how much should I make?"

"Five pounds. Freeze the leftovers."

I gave up on raw material and proceeded to processing.

"Okay, I buy five pounds of first cut brisket. Then what?"

"You rub in seasonings. With your hand, whatever you like. I use paprika, garlic powder, a little soy sauce. Whatever you like. Then you brown it in a pan. Not a lot. Just to get some fat off. Just till it is not pink on the outside. Don't forget to get the sides too."

"What do you put in the pan to brown it. Butter? Oil? that spray grease?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"You get some grease from the brisket fat."

"Doesn't it stick to the pan?"

"So, you wash the pan."

" Right. Then what?"

"College Inn Beef Broth. Three cans in a big pot. You should add more seasoning to the pot. Cook the brisket for about half an hour, then take it out to slice. It is important to slice it against the grain. Otherwise it falls apart."

"How do you know which way the grain goes?"

"Ask the butcher. Then you have to put it back in the pot to finish cooking."

"For how long?"

It turned out this was another question of quantity that resisted satisfactory answering. Although now, the irrational (to my mind) inflexible precision of the "five pounds" was replaced by the all too realistic recognition of the relativity of taste.

"I like it falling apart. When you touch it with a fork it should fall apart. Your brother Artie says I cook it too long. He likes to take it out sooner. But it should fall apart. You taste it. You take it out when you like it."

"So around how long do you cook it?"

"Three and a half, four hours."

"You cook it for three and a half to four hours?"

"Well with the rubbing in of the seasoning, the browning and the slicing it takes three and a half to four hours. Till it falls apart. You taste it. You take it out when you like it."

"But what about just the actual cooking time?"

"It depends how fast you work. The whole thing takes three and a half to four hours. Artie says I cook it too long."

The recipe discussion didn't cross all the "T"s or dot all the "I"s. But I felt I had a broad outline that I could work with. My limited amount of cooking experience had persuaded me that unless one was aiming at subtle, delicately balanced tastes, the sort of thing you only have a right to hope for in very fancy, big bucks restaurants, the key thing was to avoid a disaster, the mistake that made the dish inedible. Once you skirted disaster, it required only a little common sense, a

little knowledge of your culture's proclivities, a little awareness of the sort of thing you yourself liked, to add enough stuff lying around the kitchen to make a flavorful dish. You don't throw chocolate into the brisket pot. Mustard is probably safe. Something like maple syrup is a bold reach, possibly a daring and brilliant insight, but more probably a moronic move inviting catastrophe. If I reined in my bold, creative urges I was confident that Mom's sketch was all the map I needed.

"Thanks Mom. So how are you and Dad doin?"

"We're fine. Jean Fishman is up from Florida visiting for a week. She'd like to say hello to you."

Jean was an old friend of my parents with whom they'd had very sporadic contact for decades. I had seen her a fair amount as a kid, but it was probably thirty years since I last spoke with her.

"Hi Richard."

"Hi Jean. Hope my folks are making you comfortable. How are Jeff and Margie? And I understand you have grandchildren?"

"Jeff and Margie and all their kids are great."

I expected some proud grandmother talk, but now Jean lowered her voice in a clear attempt to keep the rest of the phone conversation *entre nous*.

"You know Richard, every one has their own way of making brisket, and I'm sure your mother's is very good, but...."

In hushed tones Jean made an impassioned speech for the virtues of marinating the brisket many hours prior to browning. She probably thought it too disrespectful to her hostess to come right

out and say, even if it was soto voce, that marinating was absolutely essential to decent brisket and that therefore my mother's non marinating advice was unsound, the implication was clear. Nonetheless she ended as she began, with the same pro forma politeness.

"Of course, I'm sure your mother's way is fine too. Do you want to speak to her again?"

"No, I don't need to. Nice hearing your voice Jean. Give my love to everyone. Thanks for the marinating tip. Bye."

"Wait a second Richard, your Dad wants to talk to you."

"Oh, I didn't think he'd be up yet."

In the background I hear my father say, "I'm going to take it in the other room. " A few seconds pause. "Got it Jean, you can hang up."

"hi Ritchie"

"Hi Dad, how ya doin?"

"I'm fine..... Ritchie, you know your mother hasn't been making the brisket for years. I make the brisket. You shouldn't go to a kosher butcher, it will cost you a fortune. Thirty five bucks. Go into Key Food [their local Supermarket. My parents both used a local specimen to stand for any genus. When they visited us in Boston, they were forever referring to South Station as "Penn Station"]; in Key Food the Brisket will be about fifteen bucks. Ask for a thin cut."

"Mom said I should get a first cut."

"That's what they call it in the kosher butcher. In Key Food it's a thin cut. And don't bother browning it. It's a pain in the ass, and you don't need to. Just cook it. A minimum of three hours."

"No browning, really?"

"Nah, waste of time."

"What about rubbing in the seasoning."

"I make a seasoning sauce. Mix everything together and rub that in. Don't rub in each individual thing. The important thing is to slice it against the grain. Take the electric knife and slice it thin."

We didn't own an electric knife, but I chose not to explore with him the consequences for my brisket of this deficiency. Nevertheless I felt a twinge of anxiety at taking on a job that apparently called for power tools. Cutting AGAINST the grain, while clearly an absolute necessity in the brisket dodge, began to sound ominously labor intensive. But at this point, I had bullshitted brisket too much to Sue, in the teeth of her poorly disguised skepticism, to back off; there could be no retreat to my standard salmon without loss of face. Not to mention the genuine disappointment a brisketless dinner would cause the children who felt fondly about "grandma's" brisket. True, I had left a loophole-- I wasn't going to do it if it was too much of a hassle or if the meat was outrageously expensive--but loophole use is more effective at saving your ass than saving your face. Nothing short of a force majeure would honorably excuse me from project brisket.

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I headed to Bread and Circus, the local "natural foods" chain grocer. One reason that brisket had not yet appeared on our table, after over ten years of hosting dinners, was my flexible commitment to vegetarianism. I had become convinced that animals, as they are currently raised and readied for our eating pleasure, probably suffer horribly, and one ought not to encourage the painful processing by purchasing its product. Animals had small sentimental hold on me, and I did savor meat, so my vegetarianism, such as it was, was motivated solely by my pride in being a

person capable of being motivated by pure moral reasoning. But I haven't really been much of a poster boy for Kantian Man. Not wanting to appear self-righteous or finicky, I partake silently, with no loss of pleasure or any introspectively perceptible guilt, in the various cows, lambs, chickens and pigs served up at friends' homes. At Chinese restaurants, I don't cramp the collective ordering by a need to witness to animal suffering. And so I eat meat regularly. But I do throw a sop to my self-image at home; there, whatever formerly conscious beings end up on the plates, did not pass through Purdue Purgatory, but rather had enjoyed the good life of the "free range." In contrast to the arguments against torturing the dumb brutes, I found the arguments against killing them just shaky enough to allow simultaneously clean conscience and fleshy fare. But the superego savings came at a financial cost. The free range dead made the rabbinically certified dead look like a bargain.

Bread and Circus sold a full array of body parts from luxuriously raised beasts. But the only brisket on display, large cellophane wrapped slabs of meat covered with a layer of fat, were labeled "flat cut." Mom, Dad and Jean may not have agreed on whether I should seek a "first" or "thin" cut, nor on whether these terms represented real or nominal distinctions. But with all the whispering, there had not been a whisper of a "flat" cut, and there was a strong consensus that getting the right cut was a sine qua non of successful brisket. Here I was to make my first, crucial choice as a brisketeer and I was already caught up in troubling uncertainty.

"Excuse me, do you have any 'first' or 'thin' cuts of brisket in back?"

"That's the only brisket we have."

"Is a flat cut the same as a 'first' or 'thin' cut?"

"It's the top cut."

Just what I needed, another designation. Perhaps the metric system has standard names for cuts of meat, and I was stuck buying brisket with traditional British Isles folk measures.

It's a little awkward to push the counter man in a large supermarket, albeit an organic one, on meat cut semantics, but I realized this was a foundational issue and that a little embarrassment, as I am forever telling my kids, can avoid a whole lot of regret. Goaded by visions of my guests gnawing interminably on leathery meat, on which I had lovingly, but futilely, lavished hours of wasted cooking skill, I pushed on.

"I was told to get a 'first' or 'thin' cut [as though I was a boy running an errand for his mother, which in a way I was]. Do you think this is the same thing?"

"Yeah, it's the top cut, the first cut on the top."

It wasn't the firm assurance I wanted, but in spite of my instructional slogans concerning embarrassment versus regret, I wasn't about to request a second opinion regarding the true identity of the flat cut.

"Can you give me, oh, about five pounds."

I had no idea what five pounds of brisket looked like. I wondered if it would be multiples of these identical looking packages or a fraction of a single package. The butcher took out one package, 4.8 pounds. The next, 5.23 pounds. The third package, grabbed at random, was 5.03 pounds, which the butcher figured was going to be close enough for me.

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Before going home, I was meeting Josh for lunch. Josh was a good friend, with whom I could discuss almost anything. But I knew this brisket business was a risky topic. Josh was enough of a soulmate to appreciate my bemused exasperation with my parents approach to brisket. Of that I was confident. But I knew there was also a corner of his soul quite alien to me, a corner which shared my parent's conviction that brisket was a serious matter. He might scoff along as I recounted my morning adventures, but I wondered if he could resist weighing in on the question himself. Josh's eye for irony was second to none, but brisket making was just the sort of thing

that would connect him to both the common folk and the gourmet cognoscenti. With a twofer like that, I anticipated at least a partial slip into earnestness. It turned out to be a headlong dive.

"Your mother is right. You make a brisket, not portions of brisket! Your concern is completely theoretical, and like our students [we were both teachers] your mother refuses to relate to these hypothetical issues she doesn't have to confront. She's giving you practical answers to real brisket problems. The brisket part of a normal cow is probably about five pounds, that is what stores sell and that's what people make. Too much become leftovers, too little you supplement with other dishes."

This defense of Mom was not without a whiff of irony, for of course Josh recognized some rational basis for my desire to know the right amount for the given number of diners. But when we got down to the recipe nitty gritty, Josh was speaking strictly from the heart.

"Your mother said not to put anything in the pan?"

"That's what she said. I questioned her particularly on this matter. No oil, no butter, no grease of any kind. Just put the seasoned meat in the pan as is and 'brown' it. She seemed to indicate that the fat from the meat would supply a sufficient frying environment."

"That's nuts. Fat doesn't melt. It will burn. It will be hell cleaning the pan You've got to use at least a little oil to sear it."

Another terminological shift. My folk's talked "browning" and Josh was calling this phase "searing." I wondered if the to grease or not to grease dispute was an upshot of a more basic disagreement. Maybe browning and searing were superficially similar but significantly different culinary processes, resulting in different briskets. Maybe you had to grease to sear but had to not grease to brown. What if the amalgam recipe I inferred from my Mom- Dad- Jean talk had to start with browning and could not be well born with a searing conception? Without committing myself, I led Josh to believe that I would certainly put some oil in the pan when I "seared" the brisket. Thus appeased, he cheerfully walked me to my car in the parking lot to inspect the brisket and tutor me on the direction of the grain, a lesson, after the "cut" inquiries, I had passed on procuring from the supermarket butcher. I was heartened by the unanimity among my

advisers about cutting against the grain, even if it did sound harder than cutting with the grain. And once Josh showed it to me through the cellophane, the grain direction looked to be something I'd be able to recognize a couple of hours later, when blade had to be put to flesh. But although I appeared pliable to Josh's brisket tutelage, I realized that the searing/browning question required further research.

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Home with the meat, about to commence, I call Sue at work pretending to seek information, but really fishing for a final word of encouragement to buck me up.

"Hi Sue. Hon, I'm gonna start making the brisket. Any thoughts on what pan I should use?"

" Oh, your going to start by braising it?"

Shit, I wanted to do this without resorting to cookbooks, and now it looked like I had to use to the O.E.D. To regain my equilibrium I shifted to a safer topic.

"Any ideas about how I should slice the meat?"

"You definitely have to slice it against the grain. Otherwise it will just fall apart."

Slicing brisket against the grain had become an eternal verity for me. A rock you could stand on as the storm waves of clashing brisket opinions buffeted you from all directions.

"Good. Against the grain. Got that."

"How much did you get?"

"Five pounds."

"Isn't that too much?"

"You think?"

"Well, between the soup, the salad, potatoes, there's going to be a lot of food."

"So, we'll have leftovers."

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I aspired to a memorable brisket. I fantasized my guests proclaiming it the best brisket they have ever had. They wouldn't be able to stop talking about it. I was like the character in Camus' *The Plague* who wanted the editorial board to say, upon reading the first sentence of his novel, "Gentlemen, hats off" . I wanted my guests to be thrilled and astonished at the first mouthful.

In the event, the brisket was praised, even with a degree of enthusiasm. But not quite enough enthusiasm to be sure that we were not dealing with a decent brisket receiving polite compliments, from kind hearted, well bred guests, who were informed this was my first brisket attempt.

Now, Sue and the kids are no flatterers, and my nine year old daughter especially would pull no punches in a brisket appraisal. The family all spoke well of the dish, so I believe it really was good. But they didn't go on about it. I certainly had not the least grounds for feeling that my brisket was unappreciated, but somehow I felt unfulfilled. Perhaps it was wrong, even idolatrous, to seek affirmation through brisket. I resolved to have no more to do with the making of brisket. That first brisket was to be my last.

But, the leftovers were really great.

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