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VEGETABLES®

special report



Rancher Tim Righetti knows just how
barbecue the Santa Maria way.

Legendary barbecue

Santa Maria boasts a
savory culinary history

By Jim Morris

With blazing embers and the smoke, sizzle and tantalizing scent from a barbecue pit, it's easy to understand why this cooking style has almost universal appeal. You'll find one of the most famous and fervent interpretations of barbecue in Santa Maria, located in an alluring coastal valley in Santa Barbara County.

Santa Maria-style barbecue has a century and a half of history behind it, and it's as much of the region's foundation as are the cowboys, mighty oaks and scenic vistas that still dominate this unique part of California.

The region's barbecuing history began in the 19th century, when ranchers during cattle roundups needed a way to feed hundreds of vaqueros, the Spanish name for cowboy. In his book, "Santa Maria Style Barbecue," R.H. Tesene writes that among the first to savor this cooking style was the battalion of John Charles Fremont in 1846, as they traded 30 horses to a local rancher for 40 head of cattle that were used in a barbecue.

"I love Santa Maria-style barbecue for three reasons. It tastes good, it's so different and unusual, and there once was a time when it was totally regional—available just within a 20-mile radius," said Steven Raichlen, author of "The Barbecue Bible," "How to Grill" and "BBQ USA" and also host of "Barbecue University" on PBS.

"I like the story line. I love its intense regionality. It's very much a piece of history like all true barbecue is. That history is bound up in the original Spanish settlements of the area, the arrival of the Swiss-Italian workers who became landowners—and is now being reinterpreted by a different set of immigrants."

Santa Maria-style barbecue, hailed by Sunset magazine as "the best barbecue in the world," begins with heat from coastal red oak wood native to the region. Top sirloin, also known as top block, is seasoned simply with salt, pepper and garlic salt. The steak is often cooked via a long iron rod, placed fat side down over the fire. The finished product is served immediately, accompanied by a green salad, thick slices of sweet French bread, homemade salsa and pinto beans, which are native to

