

# THE MAN BEHIND THE FLAME AND HIS BURNING PASSION

BY SUSAN OH



Gary Wiviott is a gentle bear of a man, with close-cropped salt and pepper hair and droll, hound dog eyes that belie his other side: a man with a relentless, bawdy sense of humor and a firm grip on a hot set of tongs. With an easy charm, as nuanced as the flavors of his slow-cook barbecue, as unassuming as the neighborhood mom-and-pop gems he champions, Wiviott shows no obvious signs of his tendency for obsessive behavior, at least when it comes to the particulars of preparing and sharing food. (A trait that, ultimately, pays off at the dinner table.) Even the name of his famous barbecue rub—a secret blend of select, roasted hot peppers—seems straightforward. “Everyone’s got a gimmick...everything is Kick A—this or [other not-suited-for-print example],” says the Milwaukee native, “So I named it Gary Wiviott’s Barbecue Rub because that’s what it is.”

Wiviott, a 55-year-old leasing agent by day, is hailed by local press as a barbecue life coach who espouses the finer points distilled from a decade of trial and error and shares them with hundreds of newbie grillers. His free online course (Wiviott.com) is the basis of a book, co-authored with Chicago-based writer and fellow foodie Colleen Rush, called *Low and Slow: Master the Art of Barbecue in Five Easy Dinners* due out in Spring 2009 from Running Press.

A one-time “Hot Doug Celebrity Sausage,” he is among local newsmakers honored by the iconic gourmet eatery and “encased meat emporium” to have the day’s meat-encased special named after him. The Gary Wiviott was a gyro sausage with tzatziki, kalamata olives and feta cheese.

But foodies everywhere who know the man know him as “The

Grand Poobah of Local Foodies,” the founder of the 5,000-member culinary Web board, LTHForum.com. Or others know him through any of his dozen, active roles in food-related communities and projects, such as the Greater Chicago Food Depository Kids Café, which hosts teaching dinners at Corazon Community Center. Last year, he was honored with the Chicago Tribune’s Good Eating Award, for his contribution to the local food scene.

## OYSTERS AND TOTS

Amid the smoke of the extended family grill, Wiviott says his passion is a “hobby that’s gone out of control.” He fondly recalls his barbecue epiphany at the first bite of a “tender” but “toothsome” morsel at a Texas restaurant, where he fell tongs over grill in love with slow, smoke cookery. But he stops short—after describing the experience in explicit, unprintable terms. “Don’t write that,” he says, “I’m under strict orders from my wife not to swear.”

After multiple loops of digestion—on how freshly shucked oysters at the Evanston market go with Tater Tots, or how the famously shy Barbara Tropp (an icon in the Asian food world) gave him the teensiest of hugs on her tippy toes after he recounted the story of following her recipe for double broth—he gives up the goods on his life in a series of lateral skips, as is Wiviott’s habit of speaking.

The story goes like this: his wife of 20 years, Ellen, unintentionally changed their lives by presenting him with the perfect birthday present: a Weber Smokey Mountain cooker. He began barbecuing four to five times a week over the next five years, come rain or shine,

Gary Wiviott photographs: Ron Kaplan

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grilling under umbrellas and digging the smoker out of snow. He has grilled, by his own estimate, some three tons of meat out of the relatively small home smoker. “It’s like pulling 100 clowns out of a Volkswagen,” says Wiviott.

While still a neophyte barbequer, he spent lots of time looking for the magic bullet. “I was Mr. Magic sauce and Mr. Magic Rub,” he says. He would take the best of a recipe then create his own version. But then, on a trip to Texas hill country, he tasted with clarity what barbeque should be: distinctly smoky, succulent and with the integrity of meat intact, definitively not “meat Jell-O.”

“Barbeque is a method,” he says. “[It] isn’t about the pork. It isn’t about the sauce. It’s not about the equipment. It’s about the knowledge—after lots of trial and error, you find out it’s about the interaction between fire, smoke and meat.” He knew he got it right when others who tasted his barbeque asked him to show them how he did it.

“Gary is a barbeque magnet,” says Rush, his co-author who also writes for *Cosmopolitan* magazine. “He draws people to him—he’s managed to get people from all different types of life who would never cross paths, but get them to hang out and have beers together. That’s what he’s about—conviviality. He’s about bringing people together.”

Wiviott’s dual-pronged passion for local food and community makes him a winsome advocate who uses his enthusiasm for one to advance his sense of the other: To bring disparate groups of people and cuisines together to strengthen an appreciation of community and local food. His definition of local, he wants to be absolutely clear,

doesn’t strictly exclude anything not produced within a 100-mile radius. Rather, it refers to a sense of social geography. Sure, he frequents farmers markets, prefers his birds from Wettstein’s and recently had some lovely ducks’ eggs from Henry’s Farm, but Wiviott’s sense of local food also encompasses all the different ethnic cuisines and family-owned neighborhood shops and eateries throughout the greater Chicago area—from Pilsen to Chinatown and every culture in between.

## OF MINDS AND PALATES

His off-grill passion, the LTHForum.com, was a breakaway faction of the New York-based Chowhound, because the latter discouraged posting events where members could meet offline. For Wiviott and other Chicago food geeks, meeting offline was the point. “I love it because it’s so immediate,” says member Ron Kaplan. “I’ve learned so much about what’s around. I’m so grateful I found it.”

At one of many gatherings, often impromptu, hosted by the Wiviotts at their natty brick Sauganash Village townhouse in West Rogers Park, LTHForum.com members find a meeting of minds and palates. One, Wiviott’s neighbor, digital media editor Steve Zaransky, recalls when his wife pointed out a newspaper article about a Web forum for serious foodies. “I remember thinking, ‘These are people just like me,’” he says.

People who take food seriously are present, including Mike Sula, food editor of a local publication, and his partner, Elizabeth Gomez, founder of Chicago’s female roller derby league, along with Rush,

who once hosted a sausage-making party. Among the guests' contributions: cactus salad, pickled okra, pulled pork, chocolate-toffee matzoh, black bottom pie and apple cake. All made from scratch, these delicacies accompany Korean kimchi and garlic coleslaw, along with eight racks of ribs, 10 feet of hot links (from Peoria Packing, a local shop where, "you can find every part of the pig except the squeal under one roof," Wiviott says) and two whole chickens, along with multiple thighs. It is evidence of Wiviott's belief that "nothing says excess like excess."

He is a role model and, in the smoky haze of our barbeque exist-

tence, we can only hope our greatest grill victories are served up in the tradition of the man behind the flame, Chicago's only barbeque life coach, a man for all seasonings, Gary Wiviott.

**Susan Oh** has lived in and reported from places all over the world including Canada, Asia and across the U.S. but she has recently planted her roots right here in Chicago's South Loop. You might see her whizzing through downtown on her trusty bicycle, on her way to her next food-related story, no doubt.



## GARY'S HOT TIPS:

First, never soak wood, never, no matter how many damn times you read or hear one should soak wood. Wet wood on a fire causes smoldering, and overuse of wet wood chips can actually put out a small fire. A wood chip soaked wet smolders, kicks up ash filled steam, and does not burn clean. Have you ever had BBQ that tasted like a busy nightclub's ashtray at the end of the evening? That's creosote, the tarry substance that gives BBQ the light, oily coating of bitter, smoky taste, the ashtray taste.

In my New Braunfels Bandera Smoker I use a split of wood; for the Weber Smokey Mountain I use wood chunks. I *never* use wood chips because they burn up too fast to impart any realistic amount of smoke. Adding chips every time they burn up will add smoke, but it will slow your cooking as you are forced to constantly open and close the cooker.

I start the fire with Charcoal Chimney. Add fully engaged coals to unlit ones and wait a few minutes until the cooker stops billowing clouds of white smoke. I then add wood, let it catch, and then close the cooker. Although it seems counterintuitive, billowing white smoke is not what one wants in a fire for cooking meat on a smoker. A clean burning fire with clear, blue smoke is optimum.

It is very possible to over smoke meat and neophytes should work their way up until they find their desired level of meat/smoke. Initially, people have a tendency to overpower meat with smoke, trying to force as much smoke as possible. Smoke flavor is nuance, a compliment to meat, a partnership, and should not be the dominant flavor.

Different types of wood impart subtly different flavors. People tend to use what is available in their area. For example, mesquite or oak is used in Texas.

**Apple:** light, mildly sweet, hint of fruit, used for poultry, pork and trout

**Cherry:** light, hint of fruit, very dense smoke, tends to darken but not overpower meat

**Hickory:** classic BBQ flavor, multipurpose wood, good blended with other woods such as oak for accent and nuance

**Mesquite:** strong flavor, can easily dominate meats if not used in moderation, used in Texas with beef brisket

**Oak:** medium smoke flavor, a solid base for blending with fruits and/or hickory

**Walnut:** dense, aggressive smoke, should be blended or will overpower meats

**Pecan:** clear, flavored smoke, suggestive of hickory, but lighter

The key to good BBQ is a clean burning fire and finding your preference. You learn to cook good BBQ the same way you get to Carnegie Hall—practice, practice, practice.

—Gary Wiviott

For more information: [www.wiviott.com](http://www.wiviott.com)