



Gary Parker, Pit Master  
BBQ2U, Owner

Thriving Despite Adversity:  
BBQ2U During the Pandemic



### How COVID Improved our Business

The whole world panicked with the onset of COVID, BBQ2U figured out how to thrive. “Adversity is just Opportunity” hangs in our lobby and we had the opportunity to prove that. One thing at a time. First we experienced the increase in our phone in orders and pick up...then came the huge hit from no dine in. That was tough. So we were serving double the call in and pick up and no dine in.

The biggest challenge has been the increase in cost of goods – our meats especially. “Make Brisket \$1.97 a lb Again” donned my hat and my heart. I needed the prices to drop.

The following is how we adjusted our processes and approach to ensure our customer’s kept coming back and we kept making money!

### BBQ History and COVID

Hundreds of years ago, poor people in the southern portion of the United States would work hard during the day and be starved when they arrived home. They were hungry...and broke.

All they could afford were the tough cuts of meat. So their hunger drove them to make the best out of the worst. And for those of us who love barbecue, we take our hats off to them in gratitude.

The origin of barbecue serves as an apt background for our experience during the COVID season. When the shutdown threatened every business with worst-case scenarios, we chose to create best-case alternatives. This entry is a short overview of what we did and some practical tips to help you make the changes you need to make to turn your difficulties into competitive advantages. When the going gets tough, the tough start cooking and serving disadvantage people. And some how every one is fed.

### Early Issues

When COVID shut-downs happened, we had to make some dramatic changes QUICKLY. Like I said, the bad news was people couldn't sit in our restaurant. The good news was we could still sell our food. This meant that we had to become take-out experts immediately!

The first problem we faced was a problem before COVID hit. How do we make our ordering and delivery process more efficient? We hand-slice each brisket and turkey order, which makes for great food but a slow process. We had to become more process oriented in how we managed orders. And we learned to throttle our orders. Yes, we had to downshift our order volumes. Turn off the phone at times to keep up. It was strange to do that but we had to serve up fresh, hot food and we were over capacity. We regularly turn people away as we run out, this was a much more common occurrence and still is.

Then we had to address social-distancing in our small lobby. Having a line going out of our door was something we had before COVID. But now, we had to address that same number of people with six feet in between each other.

### **Streamling Processes**

We did streamline our call-in and online ordering process. This meant that when people arrived, we have their food sliced, hot and ready to go. Speeding up the ordering system also kept our lobby from being as packed with people. Two problems solved with one solution. And we were helping local businesses and artists that lost their opportunities to show case their items at local fairs and events that were cancelled due to COVID. That felt good.

### **Keeping our Food Top of Mind – Some Unique Marketing Finds**

My marketing coordinator, Lucy Rau had the idea to creatively use the lobby to help local businesses. We are Chamber members and have always served local business. We also take opportunities to serve hospital workers and are still serving seniors on Fridays – a hot chili meal.

Lucy's idea was to host businesses of all kinds and give them a chance to "show their wares" so to speak. And she had a heart for artists, being one herself. So in came oil painters, mixed media and water colors. It was quite a series of shows. We hosted a well known author, Larry Fowler and his books were popular and sold out quickly. This "Lobby Expo" as we called it became a way for people in line to occupy themselves and some even did some shopping. It was working.

### **And There's More**

We boldly maintained our digital and other advertising. Our social media because "famous" like our brisket and though it felt foolish to invest there, we did and I think it stabilized our store traffic and order volume. Our fall dip was a regular fall dip, nothing crazy as many of our neighboring restaurants were experiencing. We pay for social media, monthly simple offer emails, monthly Live Broadcast videos at the store – and it's been worth every dime. Our local TV station even include us in a spot about small business and COVID. That was free and fun!

### Our Technology Partners

We partner with technology providers – not all of them are as grand as our brisket, but all of them work. Being an ex-Intel guy (yes engineering meets meat and they make money together, it's a long story) I am picky but also a protector of my cash. I have chosen some tools that work but are not necessarily the brightest penny. But they work. Actually, the combination of tools we use has proven to be a secret sauce of success for us. We are two years in so we can't spend unlimited cash on tools, but we think we have some of the right ones in place.

**ChowNow** is a commission-free ordering platform that enabled us to receive online ordering. There are no pictures on the menu. Yes, you read that right. But it works and our traffic converts to order at high rates.

**DoorDash** is our food-delivery choice. The commission is astronomical but it gains us new audiences so we are in. We push our ChowNow ordering system on our site the most but DoorDash is preferred by some so we fulfill those orders too. (Did I mention I really need the price of brisket to normalize?)

**Heartland** is our point-of-sale provider. They offered us contact-less payment for our customers and streamlined information for our accountant. Have not done that yet but it's there when we need it.

**Beyond Brand Collective** remained and grew our social media voice. They handled all of our social posts, blog entries, and web design. We couldn't afford mass media, so social media became our marketing engine. It's Southern and sarcastic, a bit hokey, but it works and people engage with it. We need to add offers and coupons and keep integrating all of the efforts – we will get there.

### Good Problems

These changes enabled us to grow our take-out business to 800 orders a week! Despite...running out of food, supply shortages and price increases we were growing.

Running out of food and supplies meant we had to be more creative. We traveled greater distances to find what we needed, like sugar and plastic utensils, to keep things running smooth. For us, keeping the momentum up on our new streamlined processes was more important than the added expense and time to source our items.

Then, the price of beef brisket went up. We decided to keep on doing what was selling so well and explain to the customers that the wholesale price increased. Fortunately, the national news was talking about the meat shortage almost every day, so no one was too shocked.

Since the government banned home parties, our catering business was missing, which hurt. This created a great relationship with an Ale House in Tacoma. The importance of our Edison Ale House presence in Tacoma increased. Every weekend, we sell some popular items to the Ale House to sell to their customers. Our relationship keeps my staff busy, gives us some needed cash and gets our name out to a new group of customers who live in a neighboring city. Hopefully, if they like the pulled pork they had on a night out in Tacoma, they will make a plan to drive a half-hour to Gig Harbor to have the real experience...when the real experience becomes possible.

### **Didn't Justin Bieber Have a Song About This?**

Also increased our SWAG appeal – yes we have our logo on T Shirts, koozies, stuffed bears and more. And we launched a distributorship with Olalla Wines – a local winery – we are their exclusive retail presence in Gig Harbor, so we are honored and lucky to sell their quality products. It was such a direct hit to our income streams came when catering large parties were shut down by the governor – all of these new approaches helped. We decided to increase our merchandise sales to make up for the loss. Now while people stand in line (from a safe social distance of course) they can view the various logoed BBQ2U items we offer. An ecommerce presence to sell these goods is coming in the near future. We can only do so much at one time.



### Public Interaction

On the PR front, like I said, we have been very active in our community. For example, we brought food to the first responders at our local hospital during the first COVID push. We donate high-quality hamburger to the men's homeless shelter regularly. A local retirement home has a chili (mild) and cornbread lunch every month. And we are active with our local hospitals to partner with them on fundraising events.

And all of this gets published on the blog on our website. Now, I know some of you do not like the idea of posting the good things you do for others. I am the same way. But the bottom line is, if we get positive recognition from people about our helping those around us, we can grow and do more to help others. You can be demure and precise about your charitable work without seeming braggadocios. The battle for business is a battle for the mind. I want BBQ2U to be frequently and positively on customer's minds when they decide where to eat.

### What Didn't Change

All of the ideas above are how we changed to maximize our profit during the difficult COVID season. But let me also tell you what didn't change: Our commitment to fresh food, meticulous preparation and a well trained, high energy staff.

### **Be the Best**

While the competition amongst restaurants is always steep, one reality that will never change is the best food...usually...wins. If you keep your commitment to your craft, you will create customers who are passionate for your food and will stick with you through thick and thin. We sell a product that can become a legal addiction IF (and this is an important if) the quality stays high. While we streamlined some processes, we never took short-cuts that would affect flavor, texture and taste. With BBQ, time is of the essence...but we always look for ways to streamline the non-food part of our infrastructure.

This may be my last thought, but you could argue it's the most crucial point: Your staff is your lifeblood to your organization. Keeping morale high will keep your customer's stress lower. While COVID created a higher stress level, making sure our staff had a smile on their face, a joke in their banter and a spring to their step told our customers that BBQ2U could be counted on to be the high point to their day. We sell BBQ... we should be the happiest staff in the city!

### **Threats Are Boring**

Never stop improving and taking risks! There will always be a way to get the word out about your restaurant and what makes it unique – and more ways to be efficient. And getting the word out and more efficiency means more profit. And if adversity hits, see it as an opportunity for creativity and innovation. Not a threat. Threats are boring and fear is stressful. It's much more enjoyable to make lemonade. Well, you know that saying.

Thank you for taking the time to walk through this. If I can help with your situation, don't hesitate to contact me. I am Gary Parker, and I approve this message. [gparker@texasbbq2u.com](mailto:gparker@texasbbq2u.com).

And when you drive by, stop in for some brisket. You'll be glad you did.

# More BBQ History

## MORE BBQ HISTORY

What you and I call BBQ, our ancestors called survival. Barbecue is as varied as the people obsessing over temperature. But what is always in common? BBQ uses cheap meats and parts of the animal that our rich ancestral neighbors would avoid. Brisket, ribs, pork butt, yard bird (chicken) turkey and of course sausage are not rib eye, pork tenderloin or fillet mignon. So poor people did what poor people have done for millennia... they survived. They took these 'throw-away' cuts and said 'OH NO YOU DIDN'T' and figured out how to make these unwanted pieces the most-wanted delicacies. How did they do this? They marinated the pieces that didn't have much internal flavor and then cooked the fattier pieces over low heat for a LONG time Low and Slow...say it with me...Looooow and Sloooooow And they brought in the magic ingredient...smoke. Smoking was originally a form of food preservation, but after time, the pink-rim and distinct flavor became an element that couldn't be duplicated any other way. The long period of cooking times would create both a natural marinade as well as a tenderizer. Cheap, fatty, tough dry meat? No problem...no problem at all. So now, smoking food is a hobby for middle-age men and food all people love to eat. But we must remember to tip our hat to the people who went before us. They bought the cuts of meat they could afford and just said...' how do we make this good?' Their resilience teaches all of us that life can throw us curveballs, but if we put our minds to the issue, we can make something beautiful out of our fight for survival. I'm not saying ALL of us will come up with something as perfect as brisket... but we can always try. Until next time...see you in the smoke.

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