

The Mesquite-Wood Industry in 1996

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During the past decade, the mesquite-wood industry has evolved from a fledgling collection of entrepreneurs, craftsmen, artists, ranchers, and haters or lovers of mesquite.

During the early 1980s the mesquite mystique took on a life of its own. Hundreds of entrepreneurs tried vainly to figure out how to use the seemingly unlimited supply of mesquite and turn it into successful commercial products. One of the most significant of these efforts was pursuing the use of mesquite for outdoor cooking. Many people who had lived in, or even passed through, Texas knew of or had experienced food cooked over mesquite. Most of the people who had a first-hand experience with it, whether it was eating food prepared on mesquite or actually preparing it themselves, were convinced of the significant difference this type of cooking provided.

Many people originated in rural areas of the Southwest where the traditional outdoor cooking device was a large open-air grill that allowed broken limbs, branches, and even stumps to be placed in the grill and cooked down to coals. However, as many of those Texas natives began to move to large cities with small back yards, few mesquite trees, and barbeque pits that were built for apartment balconies or small patios, the only real fuel for these grills was the charcoal briquets that were originally developed by Henry Ford and sold in local supermarkets. The tradition of cooking with mesquite at home, while still a part of our conscious memory, was no longer a reality.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, numerous pioneers attempted to develop a process for mesquite that would allow it to be used in small backyard grills. The original product used aged dry wood that had been cut or cleared and allowed to dry for two or more years. This accomplished two things: dry wood was easy to start and, after two years, most of the bug infestation was gone after the sap had dried out of the wood.

There were dozens of "Rube Goldberg" devices built to attempt to convert mesquite logs into some type of chunks that could be used for outdoor cooking. Sizing of the product was important in that you needed the small pieces to start the fire quickly and large pieces to achieve long burning times.

Most of the early producers envisioned the consumer using their mesquite as a flavor additive for charcoal. Packaging of the product ran the gauntlet, including paper, plastic, burlap, and bundles of logs tied together with string.

As some of the early producers with the typical zeal of a pioneer set out around the country to sell this hottest new craze from Texas, they oversold everything and the retailer bought into the craze without any concept of the problems that lay ahead. The orders began to materialize and producers chipped, chopped, and chunked any mesquite that was available. Unfortunately, no one really knew the importance of moisture content for the wood that would control how easy or difficult it was to light. Also the high moisture content could create the most awful looking and smelling mildew in a bag. Probably the worst consequence was the bug infestation of the green wood that still contained the sweet mesquite sap.

The retailers' first mistake was to assume that if this product was as good as everyone said, that surely it would sell in multiple truck load quantities, just like charcoal. They bought heavy and stood back to start counting their money. What happened for a while was nothing. The typical package did

nothing to tell people what the product was and how it was used. Other than maybe a little flurry of sales when it first arrived, the modern consumer did not have a clue about what to do with this product. The retailers began to become concerned when the product did not sell and then in many cases it began to mildew and grow little green things in the bag. That was when the dreaded powder post beetle began to show up on retail shelves with their tell-tale sign of yellow powder and, in some cases, the sounds of the beetles eating their way through the green wood.

All of these happenings began to take their toll on the early companies as they struggled to put the formula together for how to produce, dry, package, and, most import, sell all-natural mesquite wood. Eventually, the lessons were learned about most of the production problems that had kept productivity at low and unprofitable levels.

As the productivity improved, retail and wholesale prices began to drop from the niche level toward the commodity level. As this took place, the consumer began to take notice and sales began to grow steadily.

Hundreds of thousands of consumers were first introduced to cooking chunks by way of their smokers. These were great appliances that could be purchased for under \$30 and needed long-burning aromatic wood for flavor enhancement while using charcoal as fuel.

As the all-natural cooking-wood category developed more, consumers began to learn how to grill with these cooking chunks as their only fuel. Basically, the average outdoor cooking enthusiast learned by word of mouth. There was no significant advertisement to help educate the consumer. It became a long slow learning process as neighbor taught neighbor and families gathered around the barbeque pit and the kids picked up on what was becoming a slow trend toward the use of all-natural cooking-wood products.

Along the way toward this growing market, there were huge obstacles to overcome as the dwindling number of producers learned the lesson of marketing consumer products to a very sophisticated retail trade that, in many cases, had been burned by mesquite products in the 1980s. One of the keys to the retail distribution was to learn and understand the buying pattern of each class of trade. The grocery retailers reviewing process was different in many ways from the mass merchants, home centers, and convenience stores, etc. Each class of trade had to be learned and worked with from the standpoint of local broker representation to pricing and profit goals. Package size and price points had to be understood so that the product could be matched with the demographics of the particular retail customer.

As these various factors began to build the industry volume, the retail prices for the consumer continued to drop and sales began a long-term growth curve for mesquite all-natural cooking-wood products.

Today, many brands of cooking-wood products in both chip and chunks can be found in almost every major chain in the grocery, mass merchandising, and home-center retail trade in the United States (U.S.) Many areas of the country are still in the very early stages of development as to the size of the market, but indications are that there will be continued growth of this category.

There are currently eight producers in the U.S. Most of the producers are in the Southwest, with at least five of these producers in Texas. The Barbecue Industry Association reports that, in the year ending August 1996, 20,478,964 pounds of all-natural cooking-wood products were sold in the U.S.

Texas A&M University-Kingsville has estimated that there are more than 53,000,000 acres of mesquite in Texas. Today, less than 10,000 acres are being harvested into commercial products each

year. There are many acres being pushed and burned with no commercial value or economic benefit being derived for the landowner, processor, or the citizens of Texas.

Today, there are producers that are using everything harvested from the mesquite log, including the sawdust. During the past decade there has been a tremendous growth of successful new products including mesquite flooring, furniture, crafts, and art objects.

Landowners throughout Texas need to continually monitor the progress of the these products to know how their mesquite stands can best be optimized for commercial products.

The Texas Department of Agriculture can best assist the effort to maximize this segment of the Texas Wood Industry by promoting and helping to make the world market aware of this truly Texas product that provides the great sizzle for other outstanding Texas products such as our beef, poultry, pork, and wild game.

Texas mesquite cooking-wood products can now be found in markets throughout the U.S. All major chains such as K-Mart, Wal Mart, Sears, Home Depot, Builders Square, Lowe's, Kroger, Albertsons, and many, many more handle our great, all natural and renewable mesquite products.